



## **State A Thon Research Report**

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### **Introduction and Problem Statement**

#### **Background**

State A Thon is South Dakota State University's annual Dance Marathon event dedicated to raising funds and awareness for Children's Miracle Network Hospitals. Through months of planning, fundraising, and community engagement, State A Thon unites SDSU students, organizations, and local businesses to support life-saving medical treatments and provide hope for children and families in need.

The goal of the project is not only to raise financial support but also to foster a spirit of compassion, leadership, and service within the student body. Participants engage in fundraising initiatives, promotional campaigns, and a culminating dance marathon event that celebrates the total impact made throughout the year.

#### **Situations Analysis**

##### *Strengths:*

State A Thon's greatest strength lies in its strong emotional connection to a meaningful cause, supporting local Miracle Families through Children's Miracle Network Hospitals. The event is entirely student-led, fostering leadership development and high campus involvement. The team's consistent branding, articles in the Collegian, effective storytelling, and creative use of social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok helped drive engagement and maintain visibility throughout the campaign. Additionally, the support from the SDSU community and the energy brought to the 12-hour dance marathon event itself created a memorable and impactful experience for all participants.

##### *Weaknesses:*

Despite its successes, the project faced several internal challenges. Volunteer recruitment and retention posed difficulties during planning phases, often leaving committees short-staffed at key points. Being a student-led organization, most volunteers only stay 3-4 years, which poses concerns with retention. Some fundraising teams lacked training or guidance on how to effectively use platforms like DonorDrive, resulting in underperformance. Time constraints, particularly with balancing event responsibilities alongside academic commitments, also

contributed to organizational fatigue and communication breakdowns during high-pressure moments. Limited post-event data collection and analysis further hindered the ability to measure long-term impact.

#### *Opportunities:*

Looking forward, State A Thon has several growth opportunities. Expanding partnerships with campus departments, alumni networks, and local influencers could significantly increase both financial support and visibility. Introducing new digital tools, like automated donor communication or gamified fundraising apps, could make participation more engaging and user-friendly. There is also an opportunity to build year-round programming that keeps students connected to the cause outside of the main event, fostering deeper engagement and donor retention. Finally, further investment in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts could expand participation across a broader range of student groups.

#### *Threats:*

Externally, the event is vulnerable to changes in student engagement culture, especially in an era where burnout and screen fatigue are common. Competing events and organizations on campus may also pull attention and resources away from State A Thon. Financial threats include declining sponsorship interest from local businesses due to economic downturns or budget cuts. Additionally, shifts in university policy or reduced administrative support could impact venue access, funding, or event approvals in the future.

Overall, while State A Thon demonstrates many strong characteristics and a successful impact model, continued innovation, internal efficiency, and broader engagement strategies will be essential for long-term sustainability and growth.

#### Research Objectives

1. Evaluate the Impact of State A Thon on Student Members  
Measure how participation in State A Thon has influenced students' college experiences, including personal development, networking opportunities, community engagement, and career readiness.
2. Analyze Donor Engagement and Motivation  
Identify the primary methods by which donors are reached, understand the factors that motivate them to contribute, and assess donors' awareness of the impact their contributions make.
3. Investigate Communication Platforms and Outreach Methods  
Determine the effectiveness of different communication platforms (email, social media, events, etc.) used to promote State A Thon among students and potential donors.
4. Provide Data-Driven Recommendations for Enhancing Member and Donor Retention  
Use findings to recommend strategies that will strengthen member engagement, improve

donor retention, and increase overall organizational effectiveness for future State A Thon events.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study involved a mixed-methods research design to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact and outreach strategies of State A Thon. By combining quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and content analysis, we sought to explore various aspects of the organization's operations, from student members' experiences and satisfaction levels to the ways donors engage with the cause. The quantitative approach involved collecting numerical data through surveys, which allowed us to assess satisfaction, awareness, and membership experiences. The content analysis focused on historical articles from the SDSU Collegian, analyzing the communication strategies employed by State A Thon in its fundraising efforts over time. Lastly, the qualitative interviews provided an in-depth look into the personal experiences of student members, offering detailed insights that cannot be captured through numerical data alone. This mixed-methods design enabled us to address our research questions from multiple angles, using both measurable trends and rich, contextual narratives.

### **Research Method**

Our research method utilized a quantitative survey, which was distributed to current SDSU students involved in the State A Thon. The survey was distributed by the State A Thon President to over 400 members, ensuring broad participation. We targeted a convenience sample of student members, ensuring the responses were representative of those directly engaged with the organization. The survey was hosted on the QuestionPro platform and contained a combination of nominal and interval questions. These questions addressed various aspects of involvement, including the students' major, length of membership, and their perceptions of State A Thon's impact, as well as their satisfaction with the benefits provided by the organization. To ensure validity and reliability, all researchers completed the CITI Research training, and the survey was pilot-tested on various devices to ensure ease of use and clarity. The data collection took place from February 24, 2025, to March 17, 2025, with a target of 30 completed surveys.

Additionally, a content analysis was conducted on four articles from the SDSU Collegian published in previous State A Thon years (2023, 2022, 2018, and 2017). These articles were selected based on their relevance to fundraising and communication efforts, which are central to understanding the strategies used by State A Thon. A structured codebook was created to categorize key elements such as student participation, donation goals, event mentions, leadership involvement, and the role of donors. The coding process was pilot-tested with an intercoder reliability score of 0.81, which was deemed acceptable but refined to 0.86 after adjustments were made. This analysis aimed to identify recurring strategies and trends used by State A Thon to reach its fundraising targets.

In parallel, qualitative interviews were conducted with two student members who volunteered to participate via the survey. These semi-structured, open-ended interviews were designed to gather personal, in-depth insights into the participants' experiences with State A Thon. By focusing on the personal and professional impacts of their involvement, as well as their awareness of donor contributions, the interviews aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the benefits for both students and donors. The interviews, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, were conducted via Zoom and recorded for accuracy. Notes were taken by two researchers during each session to capture non-verbal cues and key points. After all interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed, and the data were analyzed thematically, with a reflexivity summary to be included in the final report.

## **Findings**

### Data Insights

#### *Survey Insights*

To our surprise, 100% of our survey responses were females. Their majors however, differed. We had a few overlapping ones like human biology and nursing. A majority of the responses came from first year members of the organization, but there were a couple 2nd-4th year members as well. When asked about the impacts State A Thon has had on their views of childhood illness, these were their written responses:

Member 1	I have recently started state a thon so I have not yet had the ability to interact with the children. However, it has helped my realize all of the little expenses that we can help cover to do a small thing that makes a large impact
Member 2	State A Thon has opened my eyes that childhood illness is more prevalent than I originally thought and can have a great impact on the family members as well as the child.
Member 3	State-A-Thon has made me realize that there are more ways I can help kids who face childhood illness than I previously thought. It's also shown me that those children are so resilient and supported by so many people, which is really cool.
Member 4	I have seen first hand how many kids and families are impacted by childhood illness. While many grow up and you'd never know they were sick, there are some that continue to fight every day to be a normal kid. State A Thon has had a profound impact on my life. The kids we are fighting for are struggling to stay alive and healthy, but never fail to have a smile on their faces. They inspire me every day!!
Member 5	It has made me realize just how tough families have it trying to take care of their child and how much the child suffers when being sick.

Member 6	It has opened my eyes to how many kids are impacted and see how much our efforts impact there lives.
Member 7	It opened my eyes to the sizable amount of childhood illnesses out there and what they can look like from kid to kid. I feel like most of the childhood illnesses I ever thought about before State A Thon were predominantly cancer related, but there is so much more.
Member 8	Childhood illness can really damped a child happiness during such hard times, but it's important to raise awareness in order to support these kiddos.
Member 9	State A Thon has showed me that you do not need to wait until your doctor to make an impact on a child's life that is going through childhood illness.
Member 10	It has opened my eyes to all the families who are struggling. I realized all families have to worry about on top of their sick child.
Member 11	It has really opened my eyes to what is going on out there since I have no personal connection to the miracle network
Member 12	State A Thon has truly opened up my eyes to how strong these children are, yet they are constantly positive. They have such a special place in my heart. Their strength, determination, and courage inspire me every day.
Member 13	It has really opened my eyes to what is going on out there since I have no personal connection to the miracle network
Member 14	State A Thon has truly opened up my eyes to how strong these children are, yet they are constantly positive. They have such a special place in my heart. Their strength, determination, and courage inspire me every day.

### *Content Analysis Insights*

For the content analysis, our chosen form of media was articles published on The Collegian website, written about the State A Thon organization through the past 8 years. We selected 4 articles to code and analyze. Through this part of our study, we found that a majority of the articles covered topics like donation goals, student membership/leadership, the Dance Marathon event, and the Children's Miracle network.

### **Recommendations and Planning**

#### Interpretation of the Findings

Our research showed that the most successful ways State A Thon reaches its fundraising goals are by getting students involved, clearly sharing how much money they want to raise, and promoting the big dance marathon event. Students who took the survey said they enjoy being

part of the group because it helps them connect with others, build their resume, and grow as leaders. However, many donors don't fully understand where their money goes or how it helps. This was also mentioned in our interviews, where student leaders said they want to do a better job explaining the impact of donations. Overall, State A Thon does a great job involving students, but could improve by sharing more stories and information with donors to keep them engaged and supportive.

### Recommendations

We are recommending the “Why I Give Wednesday” testimonial series and enhanced communication strategies based on the findings from our research that highlight the importance of both donor education and the personal impact that State A Thon has on its student members. Our research found that students are highly motivated by the community and networking benefits they receive through State A Thon. In contrast, donors are encouraged by the tangible outcomes of their contributions, but are often not fully aware of the specific impacts of their donations. By showcasing testimonials from real donors and sharing their reasons for giving, we aim to increase donor awareness of how their contributions directly benefit the organization and the Miracle Families. This approach aligns with our research question, “How are donors of the State A Thon organization reached, and why are they motivated to continue to donate?” Our data suggests that donor retention can be improved by fostering a stronger emotional connection through storytelling, which we plan to achieve through the testimonial series.

Additionally, our research, especially our survey results, revealed that members of State A Thon are most satisfied with the benefits of community involvement, professional networking, and resume building. These findings support the need for continued engagement and recruitment strategies that emphasize the personal and professional growth members experience through their involvement. The testimonial series will also serve as a tool to highlight the broader community impact of State A Thon, not just for donors but also for members. This tactic connects directly to our research question about the benefits for students and their motivations for staying involved in the organization.

The decision to incorporate these recommendations stems directly from our research insights that pointed to a gap in donor awareness and member retention. By utilizing social media to amplify personal stories from donors and members, we can strengthen community ties, enhance understanding of the event's mission, and encourage more consistent involvement from both parties. This strategy is a response to the findings from both our quantitative data (survey ratings on satisfaction with benefits) and qualitative interviews (feedback on what keeps donors and members motivated to stay engaged with State A Thon). In conclusion, our recommendation is designed to bridge the identified gaps in donor awareness and member engagement, thereby enhancing the overall impact of State A Thon.

### Objectives

Our objective is to increase donor awareness through a 20% increase in social media engagement surrounding State A Thon's mission and fundraising events. This goal supports our larger mission by ensuring more potential donors understand the impact of their contributions and are inspired to get involved 4 months before the main fundraising event.

### Strategies

For the State A Thon organization, we suggest a social media strategy and content calendar. Our social media strategy focuses on increasing awareness, engagement, and participation by creating consistent, mission-driven content across Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Strategic hashtags, influencer partnerships with student leaders, and scheduled posting will ensure high visibility and reach. This approach is designed to strengthen emotional connections to the cause while encouraging donations, registrations, and social sharing.

### Tactics

The "Why I Give" donor testimonial series will be posted once per week on Wednesdays across our primary platforms: Instagram Reels, TikTok, and Facebook. Each post will feature a short (30–60 second) video or graphic with a quote and photo of the donor, paired with a caption that tells their story and links directly to our DonorDrive page. To maximize reach, we will schedule posts for early afternoon (around 1 PM CST) when engagement is typically higher. Stories will also be reshared on Instagram and Facebook Stories with donation stickers and countdown reminders to encourage interaction. This consistent, cross-platform approach helps maintain momentum, encourages peer-to-peer sharing, and reinforces our community's connection to the cause.

## References

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- State A Thon. (2025, May 4). Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/sdsustateathon/>

## Appendices

### Copies of the Survey/Interview Protocol/Focus Group Script

#### **Interview 2 Script: A female State A Thon leadership board member**

**Black Text:** Merissa

**Blue Text:** Interview Subject

So how long have you been a part of State A Thon?

I'm a junior so every year so far, so three years going on four.

Okay, perfect. And what's your role in the organization?

For the past two years, I've been on the executive board and I serve as the morale co-chair. um so this is kind of a person that is in charge of making the big dance for the day of. um and I lead all of the team captains. um so morale captains, we call them our team captains, and we have oh, a lot of them, like 30 some of them, I think. um and then like we have 444 people signed up for state I thought right now, so all those people are placed on teams. um and then I'm kind of I look over those team captains to make sure they're doing everything to the best of their ability.

Gotcha. Um So it kind of seems like you're pretty established within the organization now. Why did you originally join?

So I did the dance marathon, which is what State A thon is in high school. I did it one year. We didn't really do much of it because of COVID, but I did it one year and I kind of saw the impact it had and knew I wanted to keep doing it. I also was a NICU baby, which we do a lot with NICU kids. so I was in the NICU for a while because I was born two months early, so I was pretty healthy, thankfully, but I've met a lot of NICU babies that weren't as fortunate as I was. and I'm also in the healthcare field, so it kind of was a bunch of different reasons. I don't really have one specific person that has made me kind of keep going with the organization or like my why if you will. But um yeah, I kind of do it just because I love hanging out with kids and getting back to the hospital that I have done a lot with for nursing school.

Yeah, that's super cool, kind of a full circle moment. So you kind of touched on a little bit, but what impacts has Ston had on your professional and your student life?

Yeah, for sure. Um, It definitely is one of those things that you don't want to say it, but like it can be a resume builder for sure, especially if you're in health care. Um, when you say state of thought, a lot of people know what it means. a lot of people know what it is, even in the community, um and within the hospitals, just because it does have such a huge impact. But I think it has really impacted me in the way of gaining leadership skills. I don't want to go into pediatrics. I have no urgency to work with kids in the professional world. I actually want to work in an emergency, but it has definitely taught me great leadership skills. and kind of how to run an organization as a group of students and be super successful. um yeah, I would say team building is probably the biggest thing that it has taught me.

That's great. um do you feel that the donors are aware of their impacts that they're making on the organization and then kind of why do you feel that way?

I think there's some that are I think a lot of people truly don't know the impacts that they're making because, I mean, if you ask for a donation, so like if I ask my great aunt for a donation, it's not going to be like a full-out, like story time of what is state of thon. The people close the state of Thon definitely another impact, but once it gets to those like 450 people reaching out to all their people and kind of going further and further out, these people out here don't always know the impact they're making and that's what we're trying to kind of raise and do, which is through community outreach, um, really sharing what the true meaning of the state of on is behind the money. because when you look at an organization like that, you do one of the first things you see is the money because, I mean, it's a fundraising organization, but we're definitely trying harder to get more of the true meaning of state of thought out into the community.

Right, so in your organization's main message, you're definitely providing for the kids and for the college students. But what benefits do you think that State A Thon provides to the volunteers?

Yeah, so, um do you mean like volunteers as in the people donating or like the students that are participating? um, you can honestly answer that either way. Okay, um, I would say for the students, um those that are just like general participants that maybe were just like, oh, I just signed up for this because it looks cool or like my friends doing it, I should sign up for this. I think it does a lot for them once they are able to go to the main event in April and see the impact they make. It is it is difficult because it's a year long organization, so if you get involved in August, yes, there's events throughout the year to participate in, but like you truly don't see the big impact until April when we have all of the families and kids come down to SSU for a day and they show their stories. So I think once that day hits, a lot of people understand their why and understand the fact that they're making. So I think for them it pushes a lot of them to keep going forward and keep going within organizations or, um, other aspects of healthcare, especially because a lot of the organizations are healthcare majors. And then for the donor side of things, I would say, um I mean, once they really know what they're donating to and what the impact they are, um or like the impact they're creating, um I think it just like gives you a sense of like purpose as a human, just knowing that yes, maybe I only donated five dollars, but like that makes such a huge change.

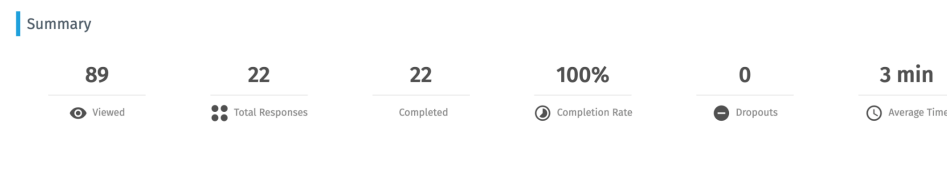
That's kind of all the questions that we had for you. We're definitely super thankful that you did this for us because it helps with our research for sure. We'd appreciate you.

Yeah, thank you guys.

### Details of Statistical Analysis

The individuals who took our survey were 100% female students. As stated in the chart below, their majors varied. One common factor we found from these stats is that a lot of the student participants are seeking grad school, and State-A-Thon is a great organization to give students volunteer hours and gain experience. We did not ask for age or ethnicity, as we felt these questions would not benefit our research. However, we did ask how long each member has been a part of the organization. After receiving our results, we discovered that a majority of the participants are in their first year of membership.

### Charts/Graphs/Figures



#### What is your major?

03/04/2025	160587674	human biology
03/02/2025	160213834	Nursing
02/27/2025	159917051	Nursing
02/27/2025	159870253	Human Biology
02/26/2025	159779108	Elementary Education
02/26/2025	159758311	Human Biology
02/26/2025	159692300	Advertising
02/26/2025	159681620	Horticulture
02/26/2025	159660949	Nutrition and Dietetics
02/26/2025	159639440	Pharmacy

Indicate your agreement with the following:

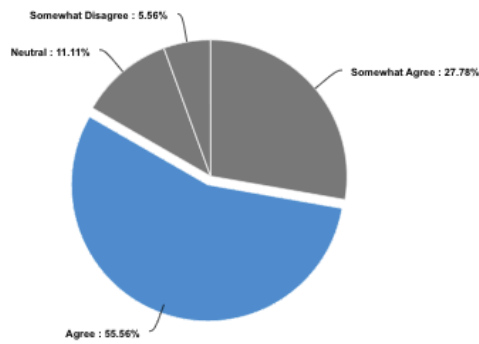


Statement	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Overall
I think most donors understand the direct impact of their donation (where the money goes + who benefits from their donation).	5 27.78%	10 55.56%	2 11.11%	1 5.56%	0 0%	18 100%



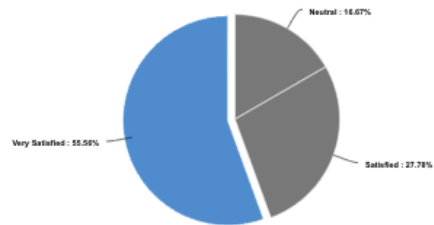
Question	Count	Score	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
I think most donors understand the direct impact of their donation (where the money goes + who benefits from their donation).	18	1.94					
<b>Average</b>		<b>1.94</b>					

I think most donors understand the direct impact of their donation (where the money goes + who benefits from their donation).



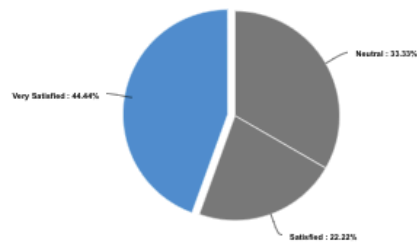
Answer	Count	Percent	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
Somewhat Agree	5	27.78%					
Agree	10	55.56%					
Neutral	2	11.11%					
Somewhat Disagree	1	5.56%					
Disagree	0	0%					
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100 %</b>					

## Volunteer Experience



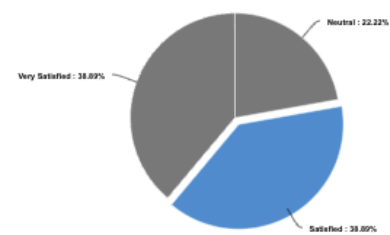
Answer	Count	Percent	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
Not Satisfied	0	0%					
Somewhat Satisfied	0	0%					
Neutral	3	16.67%					
Satisfied	5	27.78%					
Very Satisfied	10	55.56%					
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100 %</b>					

## Community Involvement



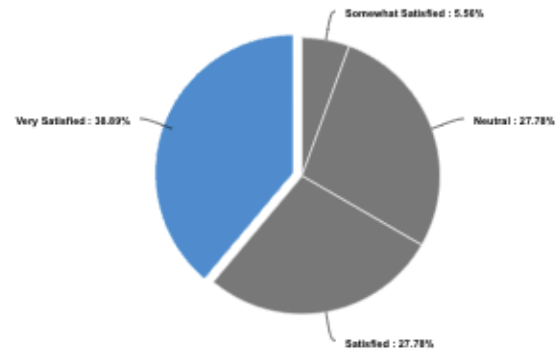
Answer	Count	Percent	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
Not Satisfied	0	0%					
Somewhat Satisfied	0	0%					
Neutral	6	33.33%					
Satisfied	4	22.22%					
Very Satisfied	8	44.44%					
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100 %</b>					

## Working With Children



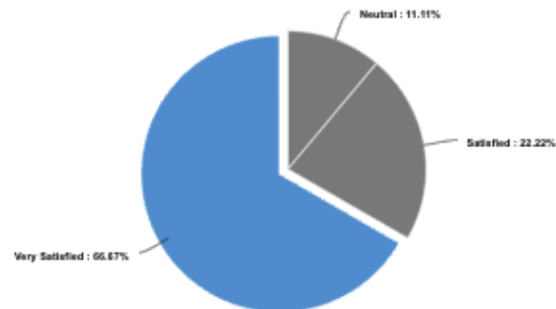
Answer	Count	Percent	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
Not Satisfied	0	0%					
Somewhat Satisfied	0	0%					
Neutral	4	22.22%					
Satisfied	7	38.89%					
Very Satisfied	7	38.89%					
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100 %</b>					

## Networking



Answer	Count	Percent	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
Not Satisfied	0	0%					
Somewhat Satisfied	1	5.56%					
Neutral	5	27.78%					
Satisfied	5	27.78%					
Very Satisfied	7	38.89%					
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100 %</b>					

## Resume Building Activity



Answer	Count	Percent	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
Not Satisfied	0	0%					
Somewhat Satisfied	0	0%					
Neutral	2	11.11%					
Satisfied	4	22.22%					
Very Satisfied	12	66.67%					
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100 %</b>					



## Copy of Our QuestionPro Survey

What is your gender?

1. Female
2. Male
3. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your major?

How long have you been a part of State A Thon?

1. Less than 1 year
2. 1-2 years
3. 3-4 years
4. 5+ years

Indicate your agreement with the following:

	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
I think most donors understand the direct impact of their donation (where the money goes + who benefits from their donation).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Rate your satisfaction with these benefits through State A Thon.

	Not Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
Volunteer Experience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Community Involvement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Working With Children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Networking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Resume Building Activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What platforms have you used to spread the word about State A Thon? Select all that apply.

1. Instagram
2. Facebook
3. Snapchat
4. Twitter/X
5. Going Door-to-Door
6. Friends/Family
7. Other

Why are donors motivated to donate to State A Thon?

1. Family of SDSU student involved
2. Supporter of the program
3. Community involvement
4. Other \_\_\_\_\_

How has State A Thon impacted your views on childhood illness?

### *Codebook*

Category	Description
A. Student participation	Mentioning student involvement or members of the State A Thon organization
B. Donors	Anyone who donates money or time towards the event/organization
C. Donation Goals/Money fundraised	A set amount of money that the organization aims to raise for the current donation year
D. Dance Marathon Event *on campus	Anything mentioning the annual State A Thon dance event on campus
E. General mention of SDSU	Talks about South Dakota State University, whether it be officials, students, campus, etc.
F. Children's Miracle Network	Anything mentioning the network, whether in

	correlation to State A Thon or just a general overview
G. General Activities	Other events the organization hosts either on or off campus to raise money. That does NOT include the annual dance event.
H. Organization board/Leadership	Anytime leadership within the State A Thon organization is mentioned
I. Donation Recipients *children	Mentions specifically the recipients of the donations made to State A Thon (Members of the Children's Miracle Network that receive donations)
J. Sanford Children's Castle of Care	Anytime the Sanford Children's Castle of Care is mentioned. Located in Sioux Falls
K. Other	Anything that is mentioned that does not directly fit into any of the above categories