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Title: Cancer Activism: Motivation for health or the cause?

**About the
Author:**

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Abstract: My research project focuses on a particular group at the university, the Illini 4000 for Cancer. Because they have no specific fieldsite because the majority of the organization takes place all over the U.S., as they are biking across the country. My primary method of research is finding information from artifacts. Their website is an excellent artifact, as it provides a lot of critical details on the organization. Also, another main source of research will be from observations and interviews.

Initial Analysis/ Fieldworks:

Exercises:

1. website
2. interview
3. YouTube video
4. Documentary
5. Artifact: Information packet on Illini 4000

Research:

1. Interview
2. Observation: Illini 4000 annual meeting

Question: Biking across the country obviously requires physical stamina as well as overall physical shape. My question is, because anyone is able to join this group with little to no biking experience, do the members that join this organization have motivation for the cause (which is cancer) or just health? Furthermore, do they have previous biking experience, and are they joining to put their talents to good use?

Plan: Because the Illini 4000 have no specific fieldsite because the majority of the organization takes place all over the U.S., as they are biking across the country. My primary method of research is finding information from artifacts. Their website is an excellent artifact, as it provides a lot of critical details on the organization. Also, another main source of research will be from observations and interviews.

I analyzed the website along with an artifact involving a packet of

information on the organization.

I conducted one interview, and one observation. Further analysis on the members motives for joining were answered in a documentary discovered on YouTube.

Data: Interview: Current member of the Illini 4000 Team.
The interview took place on Thursday, April 9, 2009. I began my interview by asking him why he joined. He talked about how he has recently began cycling as a hobby and he wanted to put his new hobby to good use. A lot of my questions were answered during this interview, as well as reasons and motivations as to why someone would join.

Observation: Illini 4000 Annual Meeting
Tuesday, April 14, 2009.

I discovered a lot of information about the hardships the members face throughout the journey, as well as what they actually "signed" up for.

Discuss: There is no denying the impact that cancer has had on today's fast-paced world. Almost everyone you come across either knows someone affected by the disease, or has been personally affected by it in some way. According to the American Cancer Society's website, each day, 1,500 people in the United States die from cancer and 1.2 million cases are diagnosed yearly. In the United States, cancer is the second leading cause of death, second only to heart disease. Since the United States far surpasses other countries in the number of people with body mass indexes over 25, classifying them as overweight, and thus, are at a higher risk of heart disease, there is little question that cancer is far more common in other countries.

You may be asking yourself, if cancer is so common, then why isn't anyone doing anything about it? Although the answer to this question may be biased or vague, the truth is that many people are losing hope. For years, the American Cancer Society has held their Relay for Life in attempts to raise money for cancer research and there are countless other organizations that serve this similar purpose. As the statistics of deaths by cancer continue to rise, people are starting to lose faith.

However, this is not the case for the dedicated college students of the Illini 4000 for Cancer. The Illini 4000 is a registered student organization at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign devoted to spreading cancer awareness as well as

raising money for cancer research on a local and national scale. Since 2007, every summer, a group of approximately twenty students set out on an incredible journey to bike across the continental United States to promote the cause that is cancer research. As stated in the title of the organization, the Illini 4000 bikes approximately four-thousand miles each summer. The ride takes a little over two months and each day the riders will ride their bikes to a new location. Rain or shine, on an average day, they will bike approximately 80 miles.

Because the majority of the activities performed by the Illini 4000 take place all across the continental United States, their organization has no specific fieldsite. An adequate substitution was discovered on YouTube. This particular artifact is a slideshow of pictures titled: *Illini 40002008 Slideshow*. The slideshow is approximately four minutes and displays the Illini 4000 in all aspects of their journey and in various locations, whether it is in the country, the beach, the city, desert, etc. The majority of the pictures display the participants riding their bikes in different surroundings. One particular picture shows the Illini 4000 riding in their "line". In a single file line, the members are biking up a paved hill in the country with limited lighting from the setting sun. With a large number of people in the group, and because they are riding on busy roads, they need to take up as little space as possible, leading them to a single person line formation.

A series of photos display their visit to Chicago. In these pictures, they are either riding along the busy streets of the windy city, or standing around chatting with citizens and other members of the team. An interesting picture I discovered was of the team riding through pouring rain. When one thinks of a bike ride, you often think of the perfect sunny day, with perfect weather conditions. Over the course of two months, the members of the Illini 4000 will face every type of weather that can possibly be thrown their way. Rain or shine, they bike, everyday. There are no excuses to not fulfill their goal for the day.

Having to deal with bad weather conditions can sometime discourage the members of the team. I discovered this fact during my observation. Because the Illini 4000 have no fieldsite, I decided to observe one of their annual meetings. The group meets every other Tuesday night to see where everyone is as far as funding and training. They also talk about various aspects of the future ride and what they can or need to do to further prepare themselves for it.

As I entered the small classroom their meeting was taking place, I already felt like an outsider. The group is so small, and it was obvious that I did not belong. This did not stop them from welcoming me, however. I introduced myself and explained my purpose for being there, then quietly took a seat in the back of the classroom. Shortly after, the meeting began. The speaker presented a slideshow of the points he planned to cover during the meeting, which was very formal. He went over the basics: their current status as far as funding, the training process, and bike safety.

Starting to get off subject due to activity in the audience, the speaker says that he loves how well the group seems to be getting along. He then states that they need to work hard to continue this level of friendliness, because the ride isn't always going to be pleasant. He went further into explanation about how many days they are going to be extremely tired and hungry, because the organization only has a limited amount of funds to buy food. Furthermore, he explains to the group that it is important to stay motivated throughout the trip, because on those days when they are tired, or hungry, or it is down pouring, they need to keep going. They push themselves to the limit, and then they push themselves even further.

Obviously, a journey like this requires a lot of physical endurance as well as motivation, but where exactly does this motivation come from? The physical endurance to complete such a ride requires a highly dedicated and motivated individual in excellent physical condition. While contemplating exactly how physically capable the riders need to be to complete the ride, I stumbled across an article describing exercise intensity during a biking marathon. The article encompassed a study following amateur riders, obviously with some biking experience, participating in an eight day mountain biking marathon. The scientists intended to measure exercise intensity by recording the rider's heart rates during the race through the use of heart rate short telemetry systems. According to this article, thirty-five percent of the race took place in high intensity heart rate zones, meaning that their heart rate was very close to their target heart rate for a good proportion of the race. The study also showed that mountain biking is physiologically very demanding, heavily involving both the aerobic and anaerobic energy system. (Wirtnitzer, Kornexl 999-1005)

While the Illini 4000 are not technically partaking in a race,

they are biking for a significant amount of time, like the members of the study. This means that a substantial amount of their cross-country ride will be spent in high intensity heart rate zones. Over time, this can be very damaging to their health if they do train themselves to deal with these sorts of conditions. Furthermore, because they will be participating in excessive aerobic and anaerobic exercise, they will need to increase their caloric intake in order to allow their body to dispense the appropriate amount of energy. Unlike the members in the previously mentioned study, the Illini 4000 will be biking for approximately two months, not eight days. This means that their bodies will be put through much more than the members of the study, aerobically. Because of this, the participants in the Illini 4000 spend the year getting in shape and training for their ride. Furthermore, the team engages in a number of training rides in the spring to be sure that the members are in fact up to the four-thousand mile challenge.

Aside from physical endurance, the individuals also need mental endurance. They need to be able to stick to their commitment each day and do so in a professional way. Because of this, and the fact that such a small number of students are involved, I wondered why individuals got involved in this organization. Furthermore, did they have previous biking experience, and if so, did they join to put their talents to good use? Do they have a passion for health, or do they have a passion to find the cure?

While considering the possibilities of their reasoning for joining, I decided to take a look at their website. Because the organization is so new, there is little information about it, and the website is the best direct source. On the very first page of their website is the mission statement, which clearly states "We believe that everyone has a story to tell; from the truck driver in New York City to the Wheat farmer in Colorado, everyone has a story tell. The purpose of this project is to illustrate cancer's influence on American life, and how individuals respond to cancer according to their religious beliefs, location and socioeconomic status." When reading over this statement, one word in particular caught my attention, believe. Believe is a very strong word that can be closely associated with motivation and dedication. I found this particularly important because not only do these members have a personal reason for getting involved, whether that is health or cause, but they also have a belief that their work through his organization means something. As they said, everyone has a story to tell, and by getting involved with this organization, they are creating their own story.

In the story of life, there is a past, present, and future. The members of the Illini 4000 are joined as a subculture with a common interest: raising cancer awareness, but how they got there is the story of their past. In my research, I discovered a documentary about the Illini 4000 on YouTube titled “What People Do”. At the start of the video, a few of the past members stated the team’s reason for participating in the organization. A particular quote that stuck out to me was the following: “By us persevering and putting all of our effort into not knowing what is going to happen tomorrow or the next day… it helps the cancer patients to see us willing to give it our all even though we don’t know what is going to happen…” Collectively, as a team, they aim to inspire cancer patients through their dedication and hard work. Although the motivation for involvement may vary by individual, they all will share this common story and contribute their efforts to a good cause.

Individually, they have their own personal reasons, as well. Throughout the documentary different members of the team explain their reason for getting involved. To my surprise, many of the members had little to no biking experience. A participant even stated that she had no idea that there were different types of bikes! Another participant claimed that a majority of the team had not biked at all before the year they decided to get involved in the Illini 4000. Furthermore, a significant amount of the members stated that they got involved in the organization for personal reasons. In the video, the members are sitting in the grass in a semi-circle talking about their motivations for joining. They took turns speaking around the circle and they all spoke about a particular person that was affected by cancer. Each of them talked about someone different: an aunt, a teacher, grandparents, family, and childhood role models. All of these people inspired the members of the Illini 4000 to give back to the cause, for reasons that are both similar but different at the same time. They are different because each relationship is unique, but the same in the sense that this person’s life left an impact that motivated the participant to join the organization.

This is the same story for the people that get involved in similar organizations as well. “Friends and family members dealing with a loved one’s illness can feel helpless, inspiring them to participate…” With no cure in sight for cancer, the only thing left to do is aid the people that are trying to find the cure. Different organizations have sprung up all over the United States in attempts to raise money for cancer research. The first organization

that comes to mind is the American Cancer Society, that holds their annual Relay for Life in various locations throughout the country. As cancer slowly becomes more and more common, more people are becoming motivated to give back. “Nearly 5,000 communities nationwide conducted a Relay for Life event this year, a number that has grown from 3,500 five years ago.” (Lackey *USA Today*)

There is no doubt that people have been inspired by the cause, whether it is because of a specific individual, or individuals, or just the outrageous statistics. A story encompassing a personal motivation can be found among the students of Grove City High School. “When cancer struck, Grove City High School students discovered what they had to do offer”: reads the tagline of an article explaining their touching story. When four students at Grove City High School were simultaneously diagnosed with various forms of cancer, the students in their school decided to act, and not wallow. Instead of giving into defeat, they collected worked together to do all they can to aid their fellow students throughout their illnesses. There, just over one and a half thousand students at Grove City High School, some who knew the four individuals and ones that did not. Either way, the stories that the individuals had to share inspired every last one of them. On the very last day of school, the student body conducted a Relay for Life in their honor, donating their proceeds to the American Cancer Society. The shock and disbelief they first felt after hearing the horrid news slowly turned into motivation, which lead them to do everything they can to find the cure. (Schindehette, Sandler, Nelson 112–115)

The Illini 4000, just like the students from Grove City High School, had been touched by someone’s story, whether it was their own, or someone close to them. Others are motivated by friends that have shared their stories with them, and encourage them to get involved in the cause. Either way, these students are making a very large contribution to the cancer cause. Through this contribution, they are helping out millions of people, and not to mention inspiring others through their generosity.

Not only are the Illini 4000 generous through their fundraising and time commitment, so are the individuals that contribute to the cause as well as the sponsors of the event. An interesting artifact I come across in my research is a packet of information explaining everything about the Illini 4000 and how to make a donation to the cause. This packet is most commonly given to sponsors of the event, so they know exactly where their money is going and what

it will be used for. According to this packet, their goals for the year are to raise \$90,000 for the American Cancer Society and \$10,000 for Camp Kesem. According to this packet, the American Cancer Society is the largest, non-profit source of funding for cancer research. Likewise, Camp Kesem is an organization that runs local camps for children whose parents have, or have had cancer. I believe both of these organizations are good causes, and this money will be put to good use. In this packet, it goes into detail explaining exactly what each organization does, so sponsors know exactly where their money is going. Going along with donations, there is a page in the information packet that gives step by step directions on how to make a contribution to the organization. Donations can either be given online or through a form sent via mail. There are also directions on how to become a sponsor, as well.

Along with these directions and descriptions, there are also a couple letters enclosed in the packet, as well. These letters are to various groups of people, whether they are school officials or just the general public, encouraging them to support the cause. One particular finding I discovered was that all of these letters started in almost the same way. The first line of each letter reads somewhere along the lines of this: "Next summer, a group of ambitious and motivated students from the University of Illinois will once again raise donations for cancer research and support programs by cycling across the country.." I find this line to be particularly interesting and significant because it refers to its members as ambitious and motivated. This means that the participants obviously are passionate about the organization. The question is, and this relates directly back to one of my guiding questions, why are they so motivated? Are they motivated by the cause or the health aspects?

One last intriguing piece of information I found in this artifact is that it directly states what the Illini 4000 will be doing on their journey. They will be doing two things: Interacting with the communities they ride through in an effort to raise cancer awareness and act as advocates for the cause, and using the ride as a means to raise money for cancer research and cancer support programs. I find it interesting that the goal of the actual ride isn't necessarily to raise money for cancer, because most of the fundraising is done before their feet even touch the pedals. The real goal of the ride is to raise cancer awareness, because no matter where you are in the world, cancer affects us all.

Some of my questions were answered during an interview with

a current member of the Illini 4000 biking team. I was asked to meet my interviewee during his office hours at a building here on campus, and the interview took place in a staff lounge with just a few chairs and a table. As I approached my interviewee, I could already tell that he was obviously in good physical condition and would most likely have no problem completing the ride. He was dressed in khaki shorts and a hockey jersey, with a backwards baseball cap on, exposing his shoulder-length hair. He seemed very relaxed and comfortable with the situation. Just before I was about to begin, a group of older students walked by, in which he must have known because they addressed him by name. He responded to their remarks by saying “Guys, not now, I’m getting interviewed, pretty cool, huh?” It was apparent he was not used to being in a superior position, and was very humble to that fact.

I began my interview by asking him why he joined. Without any hesitation, he stated that he had previously taken up cycling as a hobby and wanted to put his talents to good use. He then explained that a friend of his has done something similar the previous summer and he was interested in contributing to a good cause. Because many people become involved in cancer activism due to personal reasons, usually involving a relative or friend that has cancer, I asked him if his life had been impacted by the disease in any way. He answered saying that his life had not been personally affected by cancer, and his motivations were directed more towards the cycling side of the organization. However, as he got more involved in the organization he began to see the importance of the cause more clearly, and sees the cause as more of an issue now than he did when he first signed up.

Besides previous biking experience, he is also a runner, and was preparing for Champaign’s first annual marathon the coming weekend. There is no doubt that he was up to the four-thousand mile biking challenge. While continuing my interview, he seemed very interested in promoting the organization because he felt “it is such a great cause”. As a member of the team, he was required to raise a minimum of \$2,500 and obviously do some training before the summer. Furthermore, no previous biking experience is necessary, just dedication and will power.

The training process isn’t as extensive as one might imagine, however. In my interview, the member explained that the team only just recently began “training rides” that take place every Saturday morning at ten o’clock. Aside from these rides, most of the training and preparation is up to the individual, but from his knowledge, members of the team frequently get together during

the week at the gyms to run together or use the stationary bikes. Although this training program may seem very lax, it has proven successful so far. In Illini 4000 history, all members have been able to complete the ride.

Obviously, the majority of the activities performed by the Illini 4000 take place all across the continental United States, leaving their organization with no specific fieldsite. An adequate substitution was discovered on YouTube. This particular artifact is a slideshow of pictures of the 2008 Illini 4000 ride. The slideshow depicts various members of the team in all sorts of locations and settings. The majority of the pictures display the participants riding their bikes in different surroundings. One particular picture shows the Illini 4000 riding in their "line". In a single file line, the members are biking up a paved hill in the country with limited lighting from the setting sun. With a large number of people in the group, and because they are riding on busy roads, they need to take up as little space as possible, leading them to a single person line formation. Not all the pictures depict them in country settings, however. A series of photos display their visit the Chicago. In these pictures, they are either riding along the busy streets of the windy city, or standing around chatting with citizens and other members of the team.

My interview briefly touched the topic of putting talents to good use. This brings me to an article I found in about an interview with Lance Armstrong, cancer survivor and famous cyclist. In this interview, it states that Armstrong was planning on returning to professional cycling to encourage cancer awareness. When talking about his involvement in the two different fields of cycling and cancer awareness, Armstrong states: "It's similar in that you pick the best team. One is more of a physical endeavor; the other is physical in that it takes a lot of energy to get around and make things happen, but you're not at *your* anaerobic threshold. The biggest key is that in cycling, you pick the best coach, the best teammates, the best equipment. Same with the foundation." Armstrong has established himself as an important link between cycling and cancer awareness. The Armstrong Foundation was created to aid in cancer funds. As a cancer survivor himself, he sees the importance in finding a cure. He also talks about leading by example, and how his courage through his disease has led other people to help support cause. (Hobson 53)

I believe that involvement in any type of activism requires more than just skill. Although lots of my research shows that there is a strong link between skill and participation, there is also a lot of

evidence leading up to the fact that participants genuinely care about the cause. As the Illini 4000 website states, everyone has a story to tell, and the activists in today's world go to drastic measures to make theirs heard. Whether it is promoting the cause, biking across America, or just simply participating in the local Relay for Life, your participation shows your dedication, and your dedication shows your motivation. Rain or shine, day or night, the participants of the Illini 4000 stand for their cause and they do honorably, and loyally.