

THE EFFECTS OF CUSTOMER ADVOCACY ON  
BRAND REPUTATION: A CASE STUDY  
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between customer advocacy and brand reputation in a non-profit context, specifically using Texas Christian University (TCU) as a case study. Customer advocacy is defined as the passionate endorsement of a company's products or services, typically in a forceful nature that implicitly defends an organization from its competitors. The creation of customer advocacy has long been viewed as a goal of the customer journey, for strong customer advocacy is linked to continued participation by a company's current customers as well as improved recruitment of new customers. Brand reputation, made up of customers' general attitudes about a brand, is another influential factor in a company's success but has not been heavily studied in conjunction with customer advocacy. Additionally, customer advocacy has not been heavily studied in a nonprofit context. This study aimed to bring awareness to the relationship between advocacy and reputation, the most influential drivers of advocacy, and differences in advocacy based on demographics. To achieve these objectives, a convenience sample of 103 undergraduate students attending TCU was surveyed. Holistic measures of advocacy and reputation were created from adapted scales and were compared using factor analysis and a linear regression. Results showed that there is a moderately positive relationship between advocacy and perceived reputation at the university, whereby increased student advocacy leads to an increase in students' perceived reputation of their university. Additionally, social media influencers are significantly influential in forming student attitudes. Finally, demographical information supplied by respondents indicated that there is an unequal distribution of the university's advocates across race, college of enrollment, and involvement in the university. Overall, the positive relationship between advocacy and reputation emphasizes the importance of forming and maintaining a strong advocate base to enhance the university's reputation. Social media influencers can be used at the forefront of the university's marketing strategy to improve the likelihood of student advocacy and thereby perceived reputation. The variation in the propensity to advocate based on demographics implies the need to shift marketing efforts toward those who have historically been less likely to advocate. The major limitation of this study was the sample used; the largely homogenous convenience sample of TCU students could be expanded and diversified to improve the accuracy of the findings herein. Specifically, students across TCU's colleges and classifications, as well as students from other universities, could be surveyed to understand if these relationships continue to exist in a larger, more diverse sample.

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## Introduction

Customers have always been at the center of marketing; without customers, businesses fail, and marketers have no jobs. However, the ways in which customers have been used as indicators of business success have varied considerably over time. Specifically, as the importance of a customer's holistic journey with a company has grown, so has the importance of customer advocacy. Companies are realizing that customers are more than simply profit generators; they can also be the conduit to new customers and can significantly affect long-term business success through their continued participation in the company. Customer advocacy has therefore become a growing field of study as companies seek to leverage the power of passionate customers for multifaceted benefits (Sweeney, Payne, Frow, & Liu, 2020).

To create and maintain strong customer advocacy, companies must first understand what drives it and then seek to align their offerings, processes, and employees with customer needs on each of these inputs. Over recent years, multiple factors have arisen as potential primers for advocates. However, to become a strong advocate one must become a satisfied customer; therefore, the drivers of advocacy are also drivers of purchase decisions. Some of these can be directly influenced by the brand, such as a company's unique marketing materials; today, many of these are found online, whether that be through a company's website, advertisements, or social media posts (Kartajaya, Kotler, & Setiawan, 2018). Brand-owned content is judged on the content's applicability and accessibility to the consumer, which influence purchase decisions and consumers' feelings toward a brand (Mathur, 2016). For example, if a brand uses its social media to showcase how it is giving back to the community with its products, customers may feel a stronger passion to advocate for the brand than if the brand used social media to simply advertise product features.

External forces also hold great weight in customer advocacy tendencies; people typically appreciate hearing from others who can provide a more relatable, authentic perspective and context to a brand through sharing their experiences and opinions. Specifically, customer advocacy is strongly driven by other advocates who are either compensated by the company for their advocacy or who are unaffiliated with the company but feel passionately enough to share their experiences freely. Because the most influential advocates are perceived as authentic, companies must be careful to ensure that they treat their compensated advocates with the respect and rewards necessary for them to genuinely want to continue supporting the company (Venzin, 2015). It is much more difficult for companies to control the remainder of their customer base who is not getting compensated for their statements; because these people have more freedom to share both positive and negative experiences, other marketing strategies designed to retain happy customers are necessary to limit negative word-of-mouth and maximize advocacy.

Internal and external advocacy drivers are joined by an individual's personal views to determine their likelihood of advocating. If an individual's background or past experiences primes them to hold negative beliefs or values that clash with a particular brand or product category, then that person may be less influenced by other marketing touchpoints to advocate, and vice versa (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). While their marketing strategy and the advocacy of their current customers are crucial to recruiting and retaining future advocates, companies cannot expect all their customers to turn into advocates. Instead of trying to please everyone, then, companies should focus their efforts on recruiting those who will most benefit from their offerings and whose personal characteristics align with what the company stands for; by doing so, the company will set itself up to have a pool of dedicated, passionate customers as its advocate base.

While much research has been done on the drivers of customer advocacy, less has been studied regarding the impact of customer advocacy on other indicators of company success. Customer advocacy has been shown to improve recruitment of new customers and continued participation by current customers, but specifics as to how this powerful form of marketing affects the company's overall reputation are lacking. Corporate reputation has been heavily studied for its impact on outcomes such as purchase decisions, brand loyalty, and trust; however, drivers of corporate reputation itself have been limited to a company's key attributes, performance, and behaviors (Burke, Dowling, & Wei, 2018). The impact of a company's current customers—specifically, its advocates—has not been studied for their effect on corporate reputation. With knowledge of how customer advocates impact the reputation of a company, brands can shift their resources and focus on their advocates to mold a more positive reputation—which ultimately improves profitability, brand loyalty, and long-term business success.

Therefore, this thesis will focus on understanding the effects of customer advocacy on corporate reputation to assist companies in their quest for a more positive reputation and the byproducts such reputation brings. The study will be limited to a population of students at Texas Christian University (TCU) and will focus on identifying student opinions regarding the effects of university advocates on various measures comprising university reputation. These findings can then be applied in a more general sense to understand the effects of customer advocacy on corporate reputation.

## Literary Review

### The Customer Journey

#### Customer Journey Defined

In recent years, more businesses have shifted toward a customer-centric business model to reach their goals of engaging new customers while retaining old ones. This shift has come in waves, starting with the customer relationship management era in the early 2000s and slowly broadening to a customer engagement model that is more heavily followed today; this framework recognizes the value of every interaction a customer has with the firm, differing from other models in its emphasis on nonpurchase interactions and addition of subjective measures to measure the customer experience across the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

The customer journey refers to the series of steps that customers undertake in their interactions with a company, from the moment they encounter the brand to their post-purchase behaviors. While a company's documented customer journey will vary based on the type of business and the steps necessary to understand customers' experiences, most businesses can broadly classify the customer journey into three parts: prepurchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

#### Steps in the Customer Journey

To more clearly define the different actions that customers take during the prepurchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages. One framework that can facilitate understanding of more specific customer actions is titled the "Five A's": aware, appeal, ask, act, and advocate (Kartajaya, Kotler, & Setiawan, 2018). The "aware" phase corresponds to customers' first encounters with a company; the "appeal" phase is when customers determine whether they like the brand; the "ask" phase is when they actively research the brand/product/service to obtain



more information; the “act” phase is when they make a purchase decision; and the “advocate” phase reflects retention, repurchase, and advocacy behavior—the focus of this paper.

## Customer Advocacy

### Customer Advocacy Defined

Customer advocacy has become an increasingly important business priority as technology continues building new outlets for customers to share their voices. However, the growing opportunity for advocates to share their voices also comes with the risk of negative word of mouth spreading more easily. Advocates are essential for companies to obtain, but the process for doing so can be challenging, which is why it is an under-researched step of the customer journey (Sweeney, Payne, Frow, & Liu, 2020). This is because customer advocacy goes further than general word of mouth, which describes simple recommendations and positive remarks about a company and its offerings. Customer advocacy describes the passionate endorsement of a company’s products or services, typically in a forceful nature that implicitly defends an organization from its competitors (Sweeney, Payne, Frow, & Liu, 2020). With that said, advocates are not blindly loyal to their favorite brands; their high engagement and tech-savviness tend to come with the propensity to heavily research and stay up to date with marketplace trends and competition (Gupta, Laddha, & Singh, 2017).

The motivation behind these customer advocacy behaviors is the potential of influencing others, unlike that of word of mouth or brand loyalty, in which a customer can think and talk positively about a brand without the intention of influencing decisions. While this core motivation remains the same for most advocates, not all advocates are created equal in how they go about influencing; CRM Magazine defines four distinct types of customer advocates that may shape an organization’s reputation and consumer buying decisions (Del Rowe, 2016).

“Educators” are said to be advocates who have extensive knowledge of a company’s products or services and are eager to share that with others, making them well-suited social media influencers. “Validators” focus less on teaching potential customers about a company’s offerings and more on validating the company’s reputation and sharing their fair experiences; they can be helpful resources for sales references, referrals, case studies, and product feedback. “Status seekers,” on the other hand, are focused on the role they play in an individual’s customer journey with a company. They are honest advocates and excellent public speakers, but they are committed to receiving recognition for their influence. Finally, “collaborators” leverage their networks to connect potential customers of a company with others that could help them. They influence by way of connection and grow their network in the process. It is also important to note that these definitions were developed in a business-to-business (B2B) context rather than the business-to-consumer (B2C) context that will be explored in this thesis. Therefore, the advocates studied in this thesis (students at TCU) may exhibit slightly different characteristics than those described above; this study will assist in developing a clearer typology of advocates at the B2C level.

Whether operating in the B2B space or the B2C space, a company can develop strong advocates by understanding the natural inclinations of its current customer base and developing a strategy that allows customers to advocate in ways that feel natural. This strategy is formed by controllable and uncontrollable touchpoints, or marketing actions, that reach customers at different stages in the customer journey.

### Drivers of Customer Advocacy

A common misconception is that companies should focus on the result of a customer’s experience when trying to create strong advocates. Often, organizations think that they have

customer advocacy when they drive positive reviews, references, or case studies from their current customers. Conversely, the most powerful customer advocates have been primed to advocate throughout their entire customer journey with a company, not just after they have bought a product or service (5 Reasons Your Customer Advocacy is Failing, 2020). Therefore, customer advocacy is driven by touchpoints and marketing actions that customers are exposed to starting in the prepurchase phase and extending through the post-purchase phase of their customer journey. These touchpoints can be broadly classified as brand-owned, social/external, and customer-owned (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

### *Brand-Owned Touchpoints*

When a customer is in the prepurchase stage of the customer journey, they are more likely to be influenced by brand-owned touchpoints—these are, as the name implies, controlled by the brand, and include brand-owned advertising as well as brand-controlled marketing mix elements used in a company’s products or services (Kartajaya, Kotler, & Setiawan, 2018). In today’s digital world, a company’s online presence has a particularly great influence on customer decisions ranging from purchasing to advocating (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

### *Social Media and Website Content*

The marketing content produced by companies has shifted considerably over recent years. Print and direct mail advertising has slowly been phased out by the internet; website and social media content now make up the bulk of many companies’ marketing content. When it comes to the content that a company shares online, the strength of content and customer engagement work together to determine customer advocacy (Mathur, 2016). If customers find value in a company’s social media posts, have a positive experience with an influencer, or can navigate a company’s website easily, for example, they are primed to be strong customer advocates from

the beginning of their customer journey. However, many companies mistakenly focus on telling customers how trustworthy and valuable they are through their posts, rather than showing their value (i.e., posting about differentiated product features, sharing positive customer reviews regarding how the product has solved a need, etc.). If companies focus too much on telling rather than showing through their online presence, customer advocacy is harder to obtain (Schultz, 2017).

### *External Touchpoints*

Once customers are made aware of a brand and establish their attitudes based on brand-owned touchpoints, they will become more swayed by external touchpoints before making a purchase decision (Kartajaya, Kotler, & Setiawan, 2018). These marketing actions are outside of the company's direct control and most often come from unpaid advocates who are not working with the company but freely share their experiences with those around them. Word of mouth from friends and family as well as anonymous opinions can heavily contribute to decisions made throughout the customer journey, including advocacy. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

### *Paid Advocates*

Beyond advertising through their own online content, companies can take advantage of their existing customer base to form strong advocates. A paid advocate is a distinctive type of advocate controlled by the company in the sense that they receive some form of compensation for their advocacy; they may or may not be customers of the company before becoming a paid advocate for that company. Compensation can include anything from money to free products/services to exclusive access to a company's newest offerings. Additionally, both direct and indirect forms of advocacy can be rewarded. For example, companies can partner with shopping sites that allow advocates to link a company's products to their own social media pages

and receive a commission every time a friend clicks their link, which is an indirect form of advocacy (Aquino, 2013). Alternatively, paid advocates can directly communicate with customers through sponsored social media content or live Q&As about a company's products.

Because paid advocates can vary in their familiarity with a company before working with them, companies can improve the perceived authenticity and engagement of customers by creating a brand ambassador program; brand ambassadors tend to be advocates who are already customers before receiving compensation. Brand ambassadors can have the same incentives and methods of advocacy as other paid advocates, but they can provide a more relatable perspective of what it looks like to be a customer; brand ambassador programs as a whole link a company's community to its mission (Venzin, 2015).

The effectiveness of paid advocates also depends on the number and variety of opportunities available to influence, as well as the flexibility and freedom of speech given to paid advocates; if paid advocates are limited in the methods and forms of speech they can use, they may appear less authentic and customer engagement will therefore not be as high (Venzin, 2015).

### Friends and Family

In one Nielsen report surveying over 28,000 consumers, 92% said that they trust earned media (i.e., recommendations and positive word-of-mouth from those they know) more than any other type of advertising (Aquino, 2013). In line with these statistics, a survey conducted by IBM shows that around 55% of customers surveyed do not engage with brands on social media at all due to privacy and spam concerns; instead, they rely on the people in their lives to help them make purchase decisions (Gupta, Laddha, & Singh, 2017). For these reasons, endorsements from friends and family can be a large influence for both potential and current customers to become strong advocates; potential customers will feel more inclined to trust a company before they

purchase, whereas current customers may feel more inspired to advocate due to the passionate community of advocates around them.

### *Anonymous Opinions*

Another important external touchpoint comes from strangers that share their experiences without being paid or controlled by the company; the same Nielson survey of customer attitudes showed that 70% of surveyed consumers were swayed by the opinions of strangers when forming their opinion of a brand (Aquino, 2013). These influencers can often be some of the most powerful because companies do not have control over what they say, therefore creating a greater opportunity for negative word-of-mouth—which is equally influential as the positive (Sweeney, Payne, Frow, & Liu, 2020). Additionally, there are several mediums in which the anonymous can stake their claim; online company reviews, social media comments, and customers' social media channels are just a few ways that word about a company can quickly spread and impact the purchase and future advocacy decisions of customers.

### *Customer-Owned Touchpoints*

Beyond all the brand-owned and customer-owned marketing actions that impact advocacy tendencies, a customer's likelihood of advocating significantly depends on their individual beliefs, values, and past experiences—all of which make up customer-owned touchpoints. These personal views are not always influenced directly by one brand or experience alone but can instead be a culmination of all the marketing actions that have influenced the customer in the past (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). For this reason, they can be strong enough to override any brand-owned or external touchpoints that work to turn customers into advocates. For example, if someone in the market for a new car has had multiple negative experiences with salespeople at various car dealerships in the past, then that person may have a personal bias that

is not altered even by the strongest emotional appeals used in a dealership's marketing. While it is inevitable that some customers will not be advocates simply due to bad experiences or personal beliefs, companies should still be aware of a customer's power in the advocacy creation process and should strive to impress even the most skeptical or uncertain customers; if successful, these can be some of the strongest advocates.

### *Consequences of Customer Advocacy*

Once customer advocacy is created by the drivers listed above, it can create a ripple effect of positive outcomes for a company. Specifically, strong customer advocates are likely to positively contribute to the brand's reputation through continued participation in the company and by driving new customers into the company.

### *Continued Participation*

Customers' advocacy toward a brand has been shown to create a more emotional relationship between them and the brand; their passion and trust compel them to participate more in the company's offerings (Loureiro, Sarmiento, & Galelo, 2018). If the company offers products or services, this could mean that customers repurchase; if the organization is a nonprofit, this may mean that customers volunteer more of their time toward the cause. Behavioral loyalty is another metric that has been shown to increase with high levels of customer advocacy, indicating that advocates are likely to align their actions with the brand as well as their words (Roy, 2013). However, behavioral loyalty's role in continued participation comes with a caveat: advocates are likely to continue participating in a company only given that the quality of offerings has not decreased relative to competitors. For this reason, it is crucial for companies to strong advocates and remain committed to providing high-quality products and services so that they can motivate continued participation. (Roy, 2013)

### *New Customers*

The goal of customer advocacy is to influence others, and this manifests itself in the form of increased purchases by new customers. To attain new customers, several variables must align: advocates must tell others about the company, the company must provide high-quality offerings that satisfy customer needs, and potential customers must find value in these offerings (and ultimately purchase). This creates the idea of advocacy has duality; when loyal advocates recommend a company to others, customer acquisition costs decline, and customer preference for a brand grows (Urban, 2005). Likewise, when companies advocate for customers, they open themselves up to providing more offerings that meet customer needs, which improves sales and profit margins as customers see even more value in the brand (Urban, 2005). This continuous positive cycle continues, allowing advocates to drive new customers into the company alongside the company's commitment to its offerings.

### *Brand Reputation*

Brand reputation has consistently been positively correlated with the success of a company. If a brand has a strong positive reputation, customers are less price-sensitive to that brand and are more likely to purchase from that brand, which therefore improves the company's performance (Burke, Dowling, & Wei, 2018). Additionally, brand reputation has been shown to increase as a company's performance increases. However, this is where the research on the composition of brand reputation largely ends. Less research has been done regarding the impact of a company's customers on brand reputation; some research suggests that brand loyalty and brand reputation are linked, but there is little research regarding the relationship between customer advocacy and brand reputation. Because customer advocacy affects several other measures of company performance, it has the potential to also affect brand reputation.



A second issue in the study of brand reputation involves the definition of the variable; it has been given many different definitions that suggest it is not a variable that can be measured on one metric alone. Even the scales used to measure brand reputation are inconsistent in what questions they use to measure this variable. Early research suggested that a brand's reputation should be measured less on metrics relating to its products/services and more on the ability of those products/services to meet customer needs (Andreasen, 1982). Today, while most marketers still agree that brand reputation consists of customers' attitudes toward the brand's ability to meet their needs, some marketers use customer loyalty metrics to measure this, while others use measures of customer cooperation or customers' trust in a brand (Petrokaite & Stravinskiene, 2013). Though similar, these measures can differ (i.e., customer cooperation with a brand does not always mean customers are loyal to that brand). A more consistent definition of brand reputation is needed to ensure that results from research are not misinterpreted or over-generalized.

Finally, brand reputation has been most heavily studied in the context of for-profit institutions. Less research has been done regarding the composition of and effects of brand reputation on non-profit organizations, which means that existing research may be inaccurate or incomplete when applied to a non-profit. For one, non-profits have significantly different measures of success than those that have been studied in conjunction with brand reputation; profits and stock values are not necessarily applicable. With that said, there is far less consistency in the measures of success used in non-profit research; many of these metrics are dependent on the type of non-profit in question.

In the context of higher education, brand reputation has traditionally been the primary measure of a university's uniqueness, but with new schools of thought emerging, the definition

and use of brand reputation as a measure have become blurred; several factors make it up, and this creates inconsistencies in how it is viewed by universities (Hemsley-Brown et. al, 2016).

Ultimately, brand reputation is a large piece of the puzzle affecting both business and customer outcomes. Specifically, more research is needed to link customer advocacy with this variable. By understanding the impact that a company's advocates can have on its reputation, any company can be better equipped to strengthen its advocate base and create a more positive name for itself. The remainder of this thesis will fill in the research gaps defined previously by determining the relationship between customer advocacy and brand reputation in a nonprofit setting.

## Research Objectives

There are three main objectives in conducting this study:

**Objective 1:** Determine the presence and magnitude of the relationship between TCU's student advocacy levels and its perceived reputation by its students.

- Achieving this objective will help the university understand the importance of forming and maintaining strong student advocates in shaping its reputation.

**Objective 2:** Understand whether the frequency of use and impact of TCU's social media/website content, paid student workers, social media influencers, students' friends/family, and online reviews/forums have an impact on student advocacy levels.

- Measuring these five common advocacy antecedents in the context of TCU will help the university prioritize specific platforms and marketing actions based on those that are shown to be significantly influential in shaping student advocacy levels.

**Objective 3:** Identify demographic patterns in the advocacy and reputation levels between Caucasian and minority students, those involved in Greek life and those not involved in Greek

life, as well as those enrolled in the Neeley School of Business and those not enrolled in the Neeley School of Business.

- Because Caucasian students, Neeley School of Business students, and those involved in Greek life are in the majority of TCU students, comparing these groups to those in the minority will shed light on any disparities in attitudes that should be further explored by TCU to improve the attitudes of minority groups.

## Methodology

### Survey Design

To carry out the study, a Qualtrics survey was developed to measure TCU students' attitudes specifically regarding their propensity to advocate for TCU and their perceived reputation of TCU. This survey received formal IRB approval to be used at TCU. The survey was split into three sections—one pertaining to advocacy, one pertaining to perceived reputation, and one measuring demographic factors. The estimated time to complete the survey was 10 minutes. The only prerequisite for taking the survey was that a respondent must currently be enrolled as a TCU undergraduate student. A convenience sample of 103 undergraduate students completed the survey.

### Measures of Advocacy

After obtaining consent from the survey participants, a series of questions were asked regarding students' attitudes toward their university. The first question in the advocacy section of the survey asked respondents to rate their personal experience as a TCU student; this question served as a benchmark against which the following advocacy-related questions could be measured. An existing, validated scale—the Online Brand Advocacy (OBA) Scale—was then

adapted to ask a series of questions regarding student attitudes toward their university; these attitudes holistically created an advocacy “score” that was used to measure a student’s relative level of advocacy for their university compared to other students. The OBA Scale measures advocacy levels by asking questions grouped into four distinct categories affecting advocacy: brand defense, brand positivity, brand information sharing, and virtual positive expression (Wilk, Soutar, & Harrigan, 2020). Six questions (with at least one from each category) were edited to fit the context of the survey and were measured on a 5-point Likert scale with values ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”. Specifically, two items from the OBA scale’s “brand defense” category, one item from the “brand positivity” category, two items from the “brand information sharing” category, and one item from the “virtual positive expression” category were used; the specific questions used to measure advocacy are below.

Construct	Item
<b>Brand Advocacy</b>	I defend TCU when others talk it down I try to convince others to attend TCU I consistently say positive things about TCU I provide others with details about what is going on at TCU I provide lengthy explanations as to why TCU is superior to other universities

Designing the survey using the scale of advocacy allowed for a more comprehensive outlook on student attitudes that are associated with advocacy, rather than directly asking for a respondent’s opinion regarding their advocacy level.

In addition to understanding students’ relative advocacy levels toward their university, it was necessary to gather data regarding the sources of this advocacy or lack of advocacy. The purpose of these questions was to find connections between student advocacy levels and the marketing materials that were most frequently used and most influential in forming attitudes. A matrix structure allowed respondents to identify how frequently they used five different sources

of information to stay up to date on their university, followed by a second matrix structure asking how influential each of these sources was in influencing respondents' attitudes.

### Measures of Reputation

Once student advocacy levels were determined, a series of questions were asked to uncover student perceptions of their university's reputation. After asking respondents to rate their perceived reputation of their university, an adapted version of the validated Customer-Based Corporate Reputation Scale was adapted to measure reputation holistically (Walsh, Beatty, & Shiu, 2009). This scale measures reputation as a combination of five categories: product and services, social responsibility, vision and leadership, financial performance, and emotional appeal (Chan & Mohd Hasn, 2019). Six questions spanning these categories were asked and brought together to form a composite reputation score for each student. Each question was measured on a 5-point Likert scale with values ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". Specifically, two questions came from the "product and services" category, two questions came from the "social responsibility" category, one question came from the "vision and leadership" category, and one question came from the "emotional appeal" category. The "financial performance" category was omitted from the survey, as the research at hand focuses on understanding the reputation of a nonprofit organization. The specific questions asked to measure reputation are below.

Construct	Item
<b>Brand Reputation</b>	TCU offers high-quality education/resources TCU is very innovative in its education/resources TCU treats people well through community service and appears to support good causes TCU seems to be environmentally friendly TCU's leadership is strong and has a clear vision I admire and respect TCU

In addition to measuring TCU's reputation, respondents were asked to compare their university's reputation to six competing universities in the state of Texas. This question was used to expand the scope of research and identify trends between TCU's perceived reputation on various factors and the perceived reputation of other universities.

### Demographics

Finally, five demographical variables were measured to categorize respondents: gender, race, classification, college of enrollment within TCU, and involvement at TCU. The responses from these questions were used to identify whether any relationship exists between the demographics of TCU students and their advocacy, their perceived reputation of TCU, or both. An in-depth breakdown of respondents' demographics is below.

Question	Statistics
Gender	Male: 36% Female: 64%
Race	Caucasian: 82% Hispanic: 7% Asian: 5% Black: 5% Other: 1%
Classification	Freshman: 1% Sophomore: 12% Junior: 50% Senior: 37%
College(s) of Enrollment	Neeley School of Business: 87% John V. Roach Honors College: 15% College of Science & Engineering: 10% AddRan College of Liberal Arts: 5% Bob Schieffer College of Communication: 4% College of Fine Arts: 2% College of Education: 1% (Numbers add to greater than 100% due to several students' enrollment in multiple colleges)
Involvement	Involved in at least 1 activity: 94% Involved in at least 2 activities: 45%

## Analysis Measures

First, the survey responses were analyzed to determine the presence, direction, and magnitude of the relationship between student advocacy and perceived reputation. SPSS (a statistics software) was used to complete two separate factor analyses—one using the six questions from the advocacy scale, and the other using the six questions from the reputation scale. These factor analyses allowed me to ensure that the questions comprising a respondent's advocacy level were correlated enough to altogether represent an accurate measure of advocacy for that respondent—and the same was true for the reputation-based questions. Because the goal was to plot all measures onto as few factors as possible, the Principal Components Analysis (PCA) factor analysis technique was used (Field, 2013).

After conducting two separate factor analyses on the advocacy and reputation variables in question, the KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA) was analyzed as a means of ensuring sufficient multicollinearity between the variables making up each factor. It was necessary for each MSA value to be above 0.5 to prove that the values of each variable could be sufficiently predicted by the others making up that factor (Field, 2013).

Finally, the reliabilities of each factor were measured to ensure the representativeness of all variables on each factor. A Cronbach's Alpha value greater than 0.7 was used to indicate that the variables on each factor were representative of that factor (Field, 2013).

Once the MSA and Cronbach's Alpha scores of each factor analysis were analyzed to ensure accurate and representative factors, the factor loadings of each variable making up the factors were analyzed to understand which variables are most influential in a respondent's overall advocacy/reputation level.

All variables from the advocacy factor analysis loaded onto one factor, and all variables from the reputation factor analysis loaded onto one factor as well. Therefore, the scores from each factor were saved under two new variables: one representing each respondent's overall advocacy level (called "Advocacy") and one representing each respondent's perceived reputation (called "Reputation"). These variables were used to run a simple linear regression in Excel, whereby it could be determined if there is a relationship between advocacy and reputation. Advocacy was used as the X-variable, while Reputation was used as the Y-variable since the goal of the analysis was to determine whether advocacy levels influence the perceived reputation of TCU. From the regression, the correlation between these two variables was first analyzed to determine if a relationship exists. The R squared value was used to measure the magnitude of this correlation. The F-test was another measure of validity used to ensure that advocacy significantly influenced reputation. Finally, the slope of the line of best fit (the "b" coefficient) was analyzed to understand to what extent increases in advocacy levels affect reputation levels.

While understanding the relationship between advocacy and reputation was the main goal of this research, subsequent analyses were performed on other variables in the survey to provide more meaning to and test the second and third research objectives. To understand the antecedents to advocacy, two multiple regressions were computed. The first regression assessed the impact of each source's frequency of use on students' advocacy levels. The second regression evaluated the influence of each source's impact on students' advocacy levels. After running each regression, the F-test metric determined whether at least one source significantly influences advocacy in either its frequency of use or impact of use.

Finally, to determine if significant patterns exist between majority and minority groups' advocacy/reputation levels, a series of two-means tests was run between advocacy/reputation of



Caucasian and minority students, those involved in Greek life and those not involved in Greek life, as well Neeley School of Business students and those outside of Neeley. The significance of any demographical differences was determined by the two-tail  $p$ -value of each test.

## Results and Interpretation

### Objective 1: Advocacy and Reputation Relationship

#### Advocacy and Reputation Factors

Completing two separate factor analyses on the advocacy and reputation variables, respectively, was the first step in satisfying the research objective of determining the relationship between advocacy and reputation. The first factor analysis that was conducted on the six questions in the advocacy scale plotted all six variables onto one factor. Therefore, all questions that were asked to measure students' advocacy levels exhibit enough multicollinearity to be representative of a student's overall advocacy level. Additionally, the MSA value (used to determine accuracy) and the Cronbach's Alpha value (used to determine reliability) are both sufficient to use this factor as a holistic representation of advocacy.

Advocacy Test	Value	Interpretation
Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA)	0.868	Sufficient correlation to proceed with factor analysis
Cronbach's Alpha	0.839	Sufficient correlation to proceed with factor analysis

Similarly, the factor analysis ran on the six questions in the reputation scale plotted all six variables onto one factor, and these variables show sufficient multicollinearity to be representative of a student's overall perceived reputation. The MSA value and the Cronbach's Alpha value are both sufficient to use this factor as a holistic representation of perceived reputation.

Reputation Test	Value	Interpretation
Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA)	0.816	Sufficient correlation to proceed with factor analysis
Cronbach's Alpha	0.824	Sufficient correlation to proceed with factor analysis

The Varimax rotation that was used to conduct each factor analysis allows for analysis of each variable's factor loading, and therefore significance, to its respective factor. In the advocacy factor, all questions have a factor loading greater than 0.5, showing that each question adapted from the advocacy scale contributes sufficiently to respondents' overall advocacy scores. It appears that the questions relating to students' willingness to share their attitudes/opinions toward TCU contribute more to advocacy than their willingness to speak about the facts and details of TCU; this is consistent with the idea that customer advocacy is heavily represented by customer attitudes. Specifically, the likelihood of a student trying to convince others to attend TCU is the most representative variable in a student's overall advocacy level.

Question	Factor Loading
I try to convince others to attend TCU.	0.847
I consistently say positive things about TCU.	0.829
I use positive exclamations when talking about TCU online.	0.805
I defend TCU when others talk it down.	0.800
I provide lengthy explanations as to why TCU is superior to other universities.	0.730
I provide others with details about what is going on at TCU.	0.505

Similarly, all questions on the reputation scale have factor loadings that contributed sufficiently to respondents' reputation scores. Innovation and strong leadership are key variables contributing toward perceived reputation, followed closely by admiration, environmental friendliness, and community service variables. Interestingly, high-quality education/resources contribute the least to perceived reputation, which suggests that students hold their university to

high standards and view its reputation as more than the quality of its education alone; this education must also be innovative and future-oriented to improve students' perceived reputation.

Question	Factor Loading
TCU is very innovative in its education/resources.	0.809
TCU's leadership is strong and has a clear vision.	0.803
I admire and respect TCU.	0.787
TCU seems to be environmentally friendly.	0.744
TCU treats people well through community service and appears to support good causes.	0.741
TCU offers high-quality education/resources.	0.562

### Advocacy and Reputation Relationship

After performing a linear regression between Advocacy (X) and Reputation (Y), a strong positive relationship was found between the two variables suggesting that advocacy strongly impacts reputation in a positive manner.

Test	Value	Interpretation
Correlation	0.5883	Moderate to strong positive correlation between advocacy and reputation; as advocacy increases, reputation increases to a smaller extent.
R Squared	0.3612	36.12% of the variation in perceived reputation can be explained by the level of student advocacy, so student advocacy is only one variable impacting students' perceived reputation.
F-Test Significance	$p: 0.0000$	Students' advocacy levels have a significant influence on students' perceived reputation of TCU.
"B" Coefficient	0.5849	When advocacy increases by 1 unit, perceived reputation increases by 0.5849 units; therefore, an increase in advocacy creates a smaller (but still significant) increase in perceived reputation.

## Objective 2: Advocacy Antecedents

### Frequency of Use

To satisfy the second research objective of determining significant antecedents to student advocacy levels, the first regression compared the frequency values of five marketing actions against advocacy scores; this regression shows that no single source's frequency of use significantly impacts advocacy.

Test	Value	Interpretation
Correlation	0.3054	Slightly positive relationship between the frequency of engagement and advocacy; as students use sources more frequently, advocacy increases to a smaller extent.
R Squared	0.0933	9.33% of the variation in advocacy can be explained by the frequency with which students use these sources.
F-Test Significance	$p$ : 0.1148	The frequency of use of no individual source has a strong influence on student advocacy levels.

### Impact of Use

The second regression computed using the impact values against students' advocacy levels illustrates a slightly more positive relationship than the previous regression. The F-test shows that at least one source influences student attitudes; specifically, the impact of social media influencers who attend TCU has a significant influence on student attitudes.

Test	Value	Interpretation
Multiple R	0.4068	Moderately positive relationship between the influence of sources and advocacy; as students are more influenced by these sources, advocacy increases to a smaller extent.
R Squared	0.1655	16.55% of the variation in advocacy can be explained by the influence of these five sources on student attitudes.
F-Test Significance	$p$ : <b>0.0059</b>	<b>At least one source's impact on student attitudes has a significant influence on student advocacy levels.</b>
Social media influencers	Slope: 0.1913 $p$ : <b>0.0403</b>	Advocacy levels increase by 19.13% of every 1-unit increase in impact of social media influencers on student attitudes. <b>- Significant <math>p</math></b>

### Objective 3: Demographical Differences in Advocacy and Reputation

#### Race: Caucasian vs. Minority

To understand whether there are significant differences between the advocacy and reputation levels of majority and minority groups on campus, the first two-means test compared both advocacy and perceived reputation of TCU by Caucasian students and minority students. The sample included 77 Caucasian students and 17 minority students. The two-means test shows a significant difference in advocacy and reputation averages. On average, minority students have a significantly lower advocacy score and perceived reputation of TCU than Caucasian students.

#### Advocacy: Caucasian vs. Minority

	Caucasian	Minority
Mean of Advocacy	0.1028	-0.5713
Variance of Advocacy	0.8504	1.4453

**Significance (two-tailed  $p$ ) = 0.02962**

#### Reputation: Caucasian vs. Minority

	Caucasian	Minority
Mean of Reputation	0.1155	-0.5231
Variance of Reputation	0.9012	1.17699

**Significance (two-tailed  $p$ ) = 0.02478**

#### Involvement: Greek Life vs. Other Activities

The two-means test comparing advocacy/perceived reputation of the 70 students involved in Greek life to that of the 33 not involved in Greek life shows a significant difference in averages. On average, students who are not involved in Greek life have a significantly lower advocacy score and perceived reputation of TCU than do those who are involved in Greek life.

#### Advocacy of Students in Greek Life vs. Students Not in Greek Life

	In Greek Life	Not in Greek Life
Mean of Advocacy	0.1608	-0.3585
Variance of Advocacy	0.9434	0.8800

**Significance (two-tail  $p$ ) = 0.0170**

### Perceived Reputation of Students in Greek Life vs. Students Not in Greek Life

	In Greek Life	Not in Greek Life
Mean of Reputation	0.1839	-0.5363
Variance of Reputation	0.9251	0.8650

**Significance (two-tailed  $p$ ) = 0.0012**

#### College Enrollment: Neeley School of Business vs. Other Colleges

The two-means test comparing the perceived reputation of 82 students in the Neeley School of Business to the perceived reputation of 12 students not in the business school shows a significant difference in averages. On average, students who are not enrolled in Neeley have a significantly lower perceived reputation of TCU than do those who are enrolled in Neeley.

### Perceived Reputation of Students Enrolled in Neeley vs. Students Not Enrolled in Neeley

	Enrolled in Neeley	Not Enrolled in Neeley
Mean of Reputation	0.0630	-0.4078
Variance of Reputation	1.0550	0.3157

**Significance (two-tailed  $p$ ) = 0.0054**

## Conclusions and Implications

### Objective 1: Advocacy and Reputation Relationship

The positive relationship between student advocacy levels and perceived university reputation emphasizes that TCU should focus on forming and maintaining a strong advocate base to improve its reputational rankings. A university's students are one of its most influential marketing tools and can greatly affect the opinions of others, from family and friends to potential new students and alumni—all of which have an important role in creating TCU's legacy. Creating new advocates, while more challenging, will have the largest positive effect on TCU's reputation and should be prioritized. At the same time, it is important to keep TCU's current advocates happy, as these students are the foundation of TCU's current reputation. While it is no question that TCU should focus on maintaining and improving advocacy levels, the question

remains of *how* to improve advocacy in these groups; this is where the advocacy drivers come into play.

### Objective 2: Advocacy Antecedents

Social media influencers who attend TCU comprise the one source of advocacy that significantly impacts student attitudes; as these influencers are students at TCU, their student identity likely makes up a large part of their brand, so their attitudes toward TCU will be reflected in their content. TCU needs to keep these influencers happy since their content significantly impacts the attitudes of other TCU students.

Specific ideas to engage with social media influencers include sending these influencers free products (i.e., TCU clothing or other branded items) and asking them to participate in university-wide campaigns, events, or content that highlights TCU students. This type of engagement would highlight the influencers' platforms, thus promoting their brand; this promotion would likely improve influencers' attitudes toward TCU and their likelihood of sharing these attitudes online, which would positively impact other students. However, TCU should avoid creating contracts with influencers in which the influencers are compensated for their marketing of TCU; this would turn the influencers into paid advocates for TCU, which is a source that was shown to be nonsignificant in shaping student attitudes.

### Objective 3: Demographical Differences in Advocacy and Reputation

TCU's overall advocacy and reputation levels are negatively impacted by minority students; if the university wants to improve its ratings on these variables, emphasis should be placed on improving minorities' attitudes toward TCU. To understand why minorities tend to view their university more negatively, TCU should directly engage with these students; this engagement will largely determine the direction of marketing that the university should take. In

the meantime, ensuring that diversity is represented across TCU's social media platforms and through on-campus events can help in making students feel seen by their university. TCU could also highlight individual students from a variety of backgrounds to show its appreciation of diversity in its student population.

The differences in advocacy/reputation levels between those involved in Greek life and those not involved in Greek life are also important to address. A large percentage of students are involved in Greek life at TCU, which means that Greek life students' high average advocacy and reputation scores have the potential to span a much larger sample than what was surveyed. On the contrary, the heavy presence of Greek life on campus could be even more of a reason for those not involved in Greek life to view the university negatively. By improving the attitudes of students who are not involved in Greek life, TCU can therefore hedge against this potential threat to its reputation. As for other groups, TCU should first seek to understand why these students feel less connected to their university; do these feelings arise from not being part of a sorority/fraternity, or are there other factors that should be explored? In addition, supporting organizations outside of Greek life (both through marketing and funding) is important in allowing these organizations to succeed and bringing awareness to students who may not be aware of the opportunities to get involved and find a community outside Greek life.

Finally, the differences in attitudes between students in TCU's business school and other colleges on-campus are crucial to address; though TCU is known for having a strong business school, with a large portion of TCU students enrolled in Neeley, there are thousands of students enrolled across TCU's other seven colleges. By failing to improve the attitudes of students in these colleges, the university is missing a large segment of its student population. Not only does this negatively impact current students' attitudes toward the university, but this could also cause



prospective students to view the university negatively if their major/school of interest is filled with students who do not view TCU highly. Again, this creates a call to action for TCU to better understand the reasoning behind student attitudes and take necessary steps to make students outside Neeley feel connected to the university. Some ideas would be to set aside funding and innovative resources for other colleges (career resources, networking opportunities, new class offerings, building redesign, etc.), highlight these colleges more through social media, or simply create more awareness of these colleges on-campus so that students across the university can appreciate all that TCU has to offer and be proud of their education.

## Limitations and Future Directions

The largest limitation in this study was the convenience sample used; most respondents are enrolled in the Neeley School of Business at TCU and identify as Caucasian. While this is consistent with the largely homogenous nature of TCU's student body, the lack of diversity may create results that vary from those of a more diverse student body. Similarly, the somewhat small sample size is a limitation, and more representative results could be gained through an expanded sample. Another limitation of this study was the use of only one university. TCU is a private, medium-sized institution, and these characteristics could impact student attitudes differently than a public university or a significantly larger/smaller university might.

In the future, this study could be expanded to include a more diverse sample at TCU. For example, efforts could be made to survey more students across all of TCU's colleges, rather than focusing on Neeley students. Additionally, recruiting more underclassmen into the study would be helpful in improving sample diversity. Even efforts to include legacies and first-generation students in the research could improve the variety in results, as these students may view TCU and college differently due to their background. With increased sample diversity would come the

opportunity to compare advocacy and reputation levels between groups of students within TCU on factors beyond the demographics used in this study. For example, advocacy and reputation levels between underclassmen and upperclassmen, legacies and first-generation students, and specific colleges could be analyzed to give TCU even greater insight into groups it can target with its marketing efforts.

Beyond TCU, this study could be expanded to include multiple universities; this would be a way to determine whether the relationships found in this research apply to a wide range of universities. Specifically, it would be interesting to analyze the levels of student advocacy/perceived reputation toward public versus private universities, universities of different sizes and makeups of undergraduate/graduate students, and even universities located in different parts of the United States and world. This research could also be used to find specific comparisons that universities are looking to make with their peer institutions; for example, it could be used to see whether students tend to hold private universities in higher esteem than public universities, if universities that have a lower acceptance rate tend to have a greater reputation, or if universities that are known for their school spirit have stronger advocates. Ultimately, expanding this study to reach a larger and more diverse sample—whether that be within TCU’s student population or across multiple universities—would make the results of this research even more impactful in helping universities and non-profits refine their marketing strategies to improve customer advocacy and improve the reputation that their customers assign to them. Fortunately, there are so many ways to achieve this; these ideas represent only a small handful of the questions that could be explored based on a university’s goals.

All the research completed herein has the upmost goal of helping TCU and other universities understand the impact that their current student population has on their success, and

to provide tangible results that can be used to start improving current students' attitudes. As current student advocacy and perceived reputation increases, universities set themselves up for future success; they build the foundation for a strong alumni base while simultaneously increasing their appeal to prospective students and families who are looking for a positive college experience at a well-regarded institution. Marketing drives results, and as research shows, customers can be the strongest form of marketing that a company has at its disposal. A university's students can create its success—but only if they are given the chance to love the institution that shapes them.

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## Appendix

### IRB Approval

Date: 4-7-2022

**IRB #:** IRB#2022-42

**Title:** The Effects of Customer Advocacy on Brand Reputation: A Case Study in Higher Education

**Creation Date:** 2-1-2022

**End Date:**

**Status:** Approved

**Principal Investigator:** Susan Kleiser

**Review Board:** TCU IRB-1

**Sponsor:**

#### Study History

<b>Submission Type</b>	Initial	<b>Review Type</b>	Expedited	<b>Decision</b>	<span style="color: red;">Approved</span>
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#### Key Study Contacts

<b>Member</b>	Meredith Mistrot	<b>Role</b>	Co-Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b>	m.mistrot@tcu.edu
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<b>Member</b>	Meredith Mistrot	<b>Role</b>	Primary Contact	<b>Contact</b>	m.mistrot@tcu.edu

## Survey Questions

### TCU Student Advocacy

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#### Start of Block: Consent

I understand that this research involves gaining an understanding of how Texas Christian University students' advocacy levels affect the university's reputation. I will be provided with a series of questions regarding my attitudes toward Texas Christian University. This task will take me on average 10 minutes to complete. I have the opportunity to telephone the researcher with any questions that I may have. No discomfort is anticipated except for possible boredom with the task. The major benefits I will receive from participation in this research are increased awareness of my attitudes toward my university, as well as an increased understanding of various measures making up brand advocacy and reputation. There will be no compensation for participating in this research. I understand that my answers will be held strictly confidential. Responses will be anonymous and presented only in aggregate form. I understand that this task is completely voluntary, and I can leave the study at any time by closing the browser. This research is under the supervision of Dr. Susan Kleiser. Dr. Kleiser's office is room 3342 in Hays Hall at Texas Christian University. Her phone number is (817) 257-5485. Please feel free to contact Dr. Kleiser if you have any questions.

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I hereby consent to participate in this research and understand the above procedure.

Yes

No

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Are you currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at Texas Christian University?

Yes

No

#### End of Block: Consent

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#### Start of Block: Measurements of Advocacy

Please rate your personal experience as a TCU student so far.

0

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10



Please rate your agreement with each of the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I defend TCU when others talk it down					
I try to convince others to attend TCU					
I consistently say positive things about TCU					
I provide others with details about what is going on at TCU					
I provide lengthy explanations as to why TCU is superior to other universities					
I use positive exclamations when talking about TCU online					

End of Block: Measurements of Advocacy

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Start of Block: Sources of Advocacy

Please indicate how frequently you use the following sources to stay up-to-date on what is happening at TCU.

	Never	Rarely (Less than once a year)	Occasionally (Once a month - once a year)	Sometimes (Once a week - once a month)	Frequently (Multiple times per week - daily)
TCU's social media/website content					
Paid student ambassadors (tour guides, student workers, etc.)					
Social media influencers who attend TCU					
Friends and family					
Online reviews/forums					



Please rate the extent to which the following sources influence your attitude toward TCU (if you never engage with a source, select N/A).

	None at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal	N/A
TCU's social media/website content						
Paid student ambassadors (tour guides, student workers, etc.)						
Social media influencers who attend TCU						
Friends and family						
Online reviews/forums						

End of Block: Sources of Advocacy

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Start of Block: Measures of Reputation

Please rate your perception of TCU's reputation.

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

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Please rate your perceived reputation of the following universities in comparison to TCU.

	Worse reputation than TCU	Equal reputation to TCU	Better reputation than TCU
Southern Methodist University (SMU)			
Baylor University			
University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin)			
University of Texas at Dallas (UT Dallas)			
Texas A&M University			
University of North Texas (UNT)			



Please rate your agreement with each of the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
TCU offers high-quality education/resources					
TCU is very innovative in its education/resources					
TCU treats people well through community service and appears to support good causes					
TCU seems to be environmentally friendly					
TCU's leadership is strong and has a clear vision					
I admire and respect TCU					

End of Block: Measures of Reputation

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Start of Block: Demographics

What gender do you identify with?

Male

Female

Non-binary / third gender

Prefer not to say

---

Which race do you identify with?

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African American

Hispanic

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White or Caucasian

Other

---

What is your classification at TCU?

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

---

What college(s) are you enrolled in at TCU?

- Neeley School of Business
  - AddRan College of Liberal Arts
  - Bob Schieffer College of Communication
  - College of Education
  - College of Fine Arts
  - College of Science & Engineering
  - Harris College of Nursing & Health Sciences
  - John V. Roach Honors College
  - School of Interdisciplinary Studies
-

Which of the following activities are you engaged with at TCU? (Check all that apply)

- Greek life
  - Student Government Association (SGA)
  - Athletics
  - Academic organization (i.e., Neeley Fellows, Neeley Leadership Program, Chancellor's Leadership Program)
  - Faith community
  - Other (please specify)
- 

End of Block: Demographics

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