

If You Build It, They Might Come:

TED Talks as a Student Engagement Opportunity for Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Academic libraries across the United States provide student engagement events for a diverse set of reasons. Like many academic libraries, the University Library of Columbus (ULC) strives to provide student engagement opportunities to increase the library's visibility and student involvement on campus. In the Fall 2017 semester, a TED Talks series was developed and implemented. The chosen format for the series was to present a TED talk each Tuesday, followed by a brief discussion and a short survey of attendees. This paper shares an overview of the series implementation, promotion, evaluation, and progression during the 2017-2018 academic year, including attendees' feedback and author's recommendations. It suggests that a weekly series such as TED Talks provide a unique venue for academic libraries to engage their academic community on an ongoing basis and build relationships with new and existing patrons. The series can enhance existing library programming or serve as a standalone engagement and outreach initiative.

Keywords: academic libraries; student engagement; outreach, programming; TED Talks

Introduction

Academic libraries across the United States provide student engagement events to bring new students into the library; familiarize students with the library space, resources and services; address misconceptions about librarians; and build relationships with the broader university or college community (Jalongo & McDevitt, 2015; Kuhlmann & Walker, 2019; Seeholzer, 2011; Womack, 2015). This paper examines the University Library of Columbus' experience with weekly TED Talks student engagement series of events during the 2017-2018 academic year.

The University Library of Columbus (ULC) is a joint-use library supporting students, faculty, and staff members from Indiana-University-Purdue University, Ivy Tech Community College and Purdue Polytechnic Institute in Columbus, Indiana. Established in 2005 through a long, multiyear planning process (Hommey, 2015), the library is a part of the Columbus Learning Center (CLC). CLC is a 130,000 square foot facility centrally-located between the three colleges and containing state of the art classroom spaces, a two-hundred-seat auditorium, student service facilities for all three colleges/universities as well as shared event and cafeteria space, and WorkOne (the state's employment and career exploration) office (Community Education Coalition, n.d.).

Like many academic libraries, ULC strives to provide student engagement opportunities, increase the library's visibility, and encourage student involvement on campus. The library hosted annual Banned Book discussion panels, Media Literacy Week events, Black History Month Read-ins, and Finals Week festivities. However, the hiring of the full-time librarian for a Reference and Instruction position came with an expectation of campus community re-engagement and innovative programming to strengthen and reinvigorate existing programs, engage patrons, and increase the library's visibility on campus. The author started working as a

new Reference and Instruction Librarian only a few weeks before the start of the academic year 2017-2018; therefore, the engagement initiative had to be easy to develop, implement, evaluate, and it had to appeal to diverse constituents.

After discussions with a few colleagues and consideration of multiple ongoing programming ideas, the TED Talks series was developed and implemented. The format of the TED Talks series was selected based on the broad appeal of the talks, diversity of topics covered, free access due to the creative commons licensing, and the talks' potential to engage, educate and entertain students, faculty, staff, and community members. While collaborating with library colleagues and campus partners, I served as the primary coordinator of the series. This role included the selection of the talks, development of an assessment instrument (a survey), facilitation of the discussions, and day to day responsibilities of running a weekly series. The chosen format for the TED Talks series was to present a talk each Tuesday, followed by a brief discussion and a short survey of the attendees.

TED stands for Technology, Entertainment, and Design. TED is a nonprofit organization with a mission to share transformational ideas. The TED website states that they: "... believe passionately in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives, and, ultimately, the world" (TED, n.d.). To spread ideas, TED records short (under 18 minutes) video talks from world-renowned speakers and shares them under Creative Commons license allowing for non-commercial use of the talks. As a result, TED Talks offer vetted, high quality, diverse content presented by speakers from around the globe at no expense to the viewer (TED, n.d.). The high quality of the presenters, along with the Creative Commons license and an extensive range of topics covered, made TED Talks an excellent choice for library programming. The broad selection allows

organizers flexibility to adjust the program as needed, and highlight issues and ideas most valuable to the talk attendees.

At ULC, the TED Talks series provided a valuable opportunity for student and faculty engagement. This paper shares an overview of the series implementation, promotion, evaluation, and progression during the 2017-2018 academic year.

Literature Review

Common motivations for academic library events include bringing new students into the library, familiarizing students with the library space, resources, and services, addressing misconceptions about librarians, and building relationships with the broader college community. (Jalongo & McDevitt, 2015; Kuhlmann & Walker, 2019; Seeholzer, 2011; H. D. S. Womack, Smith & Lock, 2015). For example, Womack et al. (2015) highlighted large-scale live-action gaming events as a vehicle for bringing new students into the library and engaging them with the library spaces and resources in an informal, non-threatening, and non-academic way. Jalongo and McDevitt (2015) described having therapy dogs in the library during Finals Week as an opportunity to build a "library use habit", and encourages them to use library resources and services (p.264).

The University of Tennessee and Wichita State University Libraries provided examples of library engagement events that elevated library's status and visibility on campus while challenging preconceived campus notions of libraries and librarians. The University of Tennessee Libraries hosted Big Orange STEM Saturday (BOSS). BOSS is a mini-conference developed for high school students to explore STEM careers and topics (Flash et al., 2017). Flash et al. (2017) noted that what librarians do is frequently misunderstood by the teaching faculty in other departments, and the BOSS model allowed the library to take the lead on a campus-wide

initiative and subsequently be seen as "a leader of student success and engagement" (p.888).

Wichita's State University Library's annual ComicFest event provided the library with an opportunity to share their unique collections, familiarize students with library space and services, and engage them in an unexpected and fun way (Womack et al., 2015).

While most academic library events aim to reach large numbers of students, librarians at Texas A&M University focused on building deep relationships with a small group of graduate students from two academic programs. They developed a pilot "Dinner with your librarian" program and invited graduate students to attend dinner with their subject librarian. The program goals included making a personal connection with the students, alleviating library anxiety, and decreasing reluctance to approach librarians in future encounters (Budzise-Weaver & Anders, 2016).

Although the previous section of the literature review focused on successful individual annual events or initiatives, most academic libraries provided engagement opportunities throughout the entire academic year. For example, Seeholzer (2011) outlined a year-long event series aimed at attracting students to the library, increasing gate count, and familiarizing them with the library space. The programming began with *The Late Night @ the Library* and included free food, games, and event music that garnered an attendance of over 1,500 students (Seeholzer, 2011). Additional events included Halloween festivities themed around the "Harry Potter" books and movies, a weekly read-aloud series, participation in an ice cream social for the alumni, and marching in the annual Homecoming parade (Seeholzer, 2011, p. 127). Clark, Hostetler, and Loehrlein's provided an overview of David. L. Rice Library's events aimed at student engagement and library outreach (Clark, Hostetler, & Loehrlein, 2014). The activities included a library stand at Welcome Week events, virtual read-outs by patrons, Halloween Jack-O-Lantern

contest, February Blind Date with a Book, a Great Library Scavenger Hunt, and "Movies in the Archives" (Clark, Hostetler, & Loehrlein, 2014, p.20).

Ongoing series similar in design to the TED Talks included faculty speaker events at Stony Brook University Libraries and a film series at Louisiana State University. Both the film and the faculty speaker programs were established to develop new relationships, highlight the library and librarian, and engage their communities. Blessinger et al. (2015) described a documentary film series at Louisiana State University, developed to build stronger relationships with faculty and students, and raise the library's profile and visibility on campus. The authors noted that the film series achieved its goals, specifically increasing the library's profile on campus, establishing stronger faculty-library ties, and engaging campus community (Blessinger et al.; 2015). Stony Brook University Libraries developed a faculty speaker series with the goals of placing the library at the center of scholarly conversation, campus research dissemination, and intellectual exchange of ideas on campus (Kasten, 2018). Kasten (2018) points out that the faculty speaker series position the library "as a forum for interdisciplinary exchange on campus and as a platform for faculty research" (p.406). Additionally, the author noted that the series helped to address misconceptions about librarians among teaching faculty while presenting librarians as active partners and potential collaborators in scholarship creation and dissemination (Kasten, 2018).

TED Talks or similar series can help academic libraries and librarians achieve common programming goals. They can serve as an ongoing, relatively inexpensive engagement opportunity and a bridge in-between large annual or semi-annual events. Such a series can help build a small community with deeper interpersonal relationships or serve as a tool for reaching and engaging larger groups of students. Versatility and diversity of the TED content allow

flexibility to fit the talks and discussions to issues in the news cycle, campus happenings, or topics relevant to the community at large. TED Talks have proven to be a valuable tool in higher education settings and have been successfully used in diverse areas such as teaching public speaking skills to English as a second language students, engaging Social Work students in critical discourse, and complementing self-directed learning for first-year students (Leopold, 2016; Loya & Klemm, 2016; Rubenstein, 2012). There is currently no literature on academic libraries' use of TED Talks for student engagement and learning. This paper examines the benefits and challenges of implementing TED Talks as a student engagement initiative at an academic library based on the experience of implementing such a series at ULC.

Planning and Implementing TED Talks Series at ULC

In their extensive report titled "What matters to student success," Kuh et al. (2006) mentioned engagement in extracurricular activities and student exposure to diversity as activities strongly correlated with student success. Additionally, IUPUC's strategic directions included engagement, diversity, and global citizenship, providing ULC an opportunity to align its activities and initiatives with the strategic priorities of its parent institution and engage in practices positively correlated with student success. At the time of the series, there were over 2000 (currently, there are over 3500) TED Talks available spanning a vast array of topics and featuring speakers from around the globe. Therefore little effort was required to ensure that the talks represented diverse speakers, issues, and viewpoints. Nevertheless, keeping diversity as a significant selection criterion further aligned the library's priorities with the priorities of its parent-institution and helped the series coordinator ensure inclusive programming.

TED Talks programming began with the start of the Fall 2017 semester. The first six weeks of the semester featured the following talks: "The dangers of a single story" by

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; "The power of introverts" by Susan Cain; "How to make stress your friend" by Kelly McGonigal; "Color blind or color brave" by Mellody Hopson; and "The Paradox of Choice" by Barry Schwartz. The events took place in the library's conference room on Tuesdays from 11:30 – 12 pm. Light snacks accompanied the talks.

During the two months of the series, the library employees received email and verbal compliments from multiple faculty, staff, and student members; however, the attendance continued to be inconsistent and often low. Attendance challenges are typical for commuter colleges. Kuh et al. (2001) noted that commuter students frequently have less contact with faculty members, and miss out on engagement in extracurricular activities, study abroad, and internship opportunities. Academic libraries struggle to attract attendees even at large, research residential colleges such as Texas A&M. For example, Budsize-Weaver's article mentions inviting 46 graduate students from the Communications Department to dinner with a librarian and receiving seven attendees. During the planning process, the ULC faculty and staff were aware of the commuter status of most of the students and the part-time status of many faculty. To accommodate a commuter community, ULC scheduled TED Talks in the middle of the day, between class times, and made it a 30-minute event.

In the article titled, "Does programming have a place in academic libraries?" Antoinette Giamalva strongly emphasized the importance of marketing for library programs and stated that marketing could make or break a program. Therefore, after inconsistent and often low attendance (2-5 participants), ULC increased its promotion efforts. The series coordinator worked closely with the University Marketing office to place TED Talks "ads" (**Appendix A**) on the digital screens in multiple buildings, write a press release about the series, and highlight the series on social media.

While increasing promotion and outreach efforts, a deliberate decision was made to align the talks with national celebrations and observances as well as campus happenings to attract community partners and integrate the library into campus activities, enhancing the library's visibility. For example, October is a national Domestic Violence awareness month. The October 2017 lineup included "Violence against Women - It is a Men's Issue" by Jackson Katz and "Why Domestic Violence Victims Don't Leave" by Leslie Morgan Steiner. These talks gained the attention and support from the campus Title IX Coordinator furthering library partnerships with non-academic campus units and soon with the Columbus community at large. Guest speakers from a local domestic violence shelter led several related talks and highlighted their services to attendees. Subsequently, domestic violence shelter staff collaborated with the library, the Student Life department, and the campus to organize a showing and discussion of *Audrey and Daisy* - a movie about sexual assault and subsequent online harassment of two high school girls from different towns in the United States. To celebrate Halloween, ULC selected a talk titled "Zombie roaches and other parasite tales" by a science writer Ed Young. As a final example, National Media Literacy Week in 2017 took place at the beginning of November, and the library had an established partnership with a communications professor, who was a regional coordinator of the National Association for Media Literacy Education, the organization that created Media Literacy Week. In 2017 library sponsored Media Literacy Week events included: How to seek truth in the era of fake news" TED talk; a fake news panel discussion; and a "guess an ad" contest.

In their extensive survey, Wainwright and Davidson (2017) found that librarians who collaborated with non-academic departments mention increased awareness of library services and programs as a number one benefit of partnerships. The ULC collaborated with the Student Life office to reach more students. The Student Life coordinator encouraged students to attend

the talks, added TED Talks flyers to the weekly student e-newsletter entitled 'What's Up?' and eventually suggested guest speakers and additional partners for the series.

The series coordinator implemented ongoing changes to the series based on both formal and informal feedback from the attendees and library colleagues. Fall 2017 tweaks included increased marketing and promotion along with the use of the national observations and campus happenings as a basis for the talk's selections. However, more substantial changes to the program were implemented in the Spring 2018 semester based on library staff observations, conversations with attendees, and comments from potential attendees regarding the time conflict. Spring semester changes included moving the series to a better, more visible location and changing the time to 30 minutes later to make the series akin to a Brown Bag lunch series. The library collaborated with the Ivy Tech Graphic Design Department to design and produce TED Talks passports. The passports allowed students to receive a free beverage of choice from a local coffee shop located across the hall from the library upon attending at least 10 TED Talks. Additionally, the event organizer used formal (surveys) and informal (conversational) feedback to find out topics of interest to the attendees.

At the beginning of the spring semester, one of the First-Year Seminar instructors inquired about the series and arranged for her students to attend the talks. The TED Talks series fell at the end of her class time, and she was eager to bring her students to them provided the topics would be relevant to her course themes of social issues, social justice, and global citizenship. At the same time, Ivy Tech's first-year students were encouraged and sometimes required to attend campus events and activities. Moreover, they had a booklet to be dated and signed by an event organizer. The TED Talks series was promoted to Ivy Tech's first-year students, and some of them found the 30-minutes length and entertainment value of the talks to

be an ideal event for them.

Due to small improvements to the series and interest in the series from the first-year experience office, the spring 2018 TED Talks series became well-organized, well-attended, and well-assessed library engagement events.

The TED Talks shown during the semester included a mix of social justice and global citizenship talks, along with funny and inspirational talks that students enjoy. The TED talks offered over the spring 2018 semester focused on social issues, global citizenship, and social justice topics. The videos discussed the trauma of human trafficking, systemic racism, and injustices of the U.S. justice system, the harmful effects of the culture of hate and toxic masculinity, the importance of intersectionality, and inspirational leadership.

Assessment

Beginning in the spring 2018 semester, the participants were asked to fill out an anonymous survey (**Appendix B**) at the end of each TED talk, resulting in 90 forms collected. The questions fell into three distinct categories, with questions designed to:

- 1) Measure satisfaction with TED Talks
- 2) Evaluate learning
- 3) Gather recommendations for improvements

The two figures below represent attendees' responses (N=90) to the questions regarding satisfaction with the talk that they've attended. It is important to note that many of the 90 responses are from the same attendees of different TED events. The feedback forms were distributed after each talk to evaluate attendees' satisfaction with the TED talks and the topics covered. The figures demonstrated high levels of satisfaction with the TED talks. Furthermore, they were willing to recommend the TED talk series to a classmate or a friend.

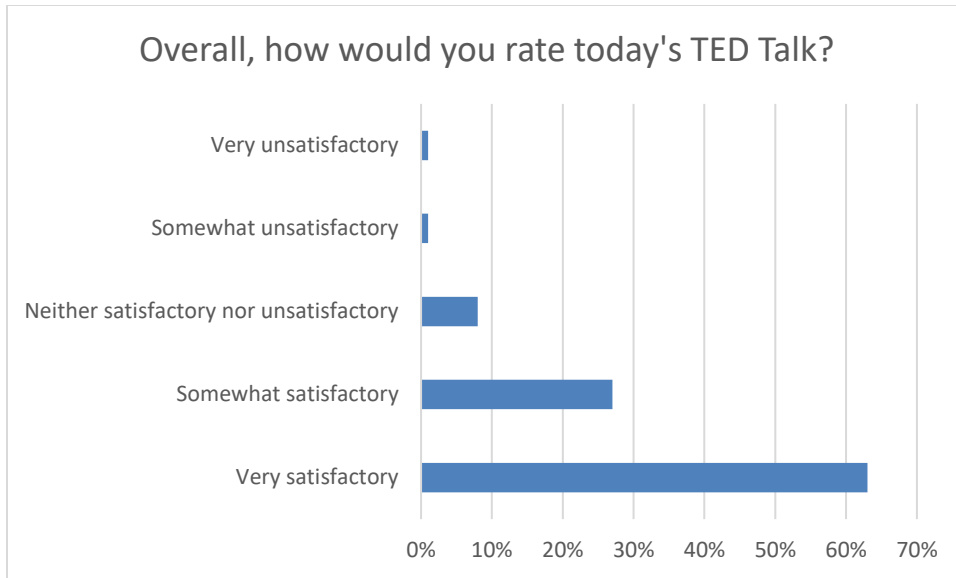


Figure 1.

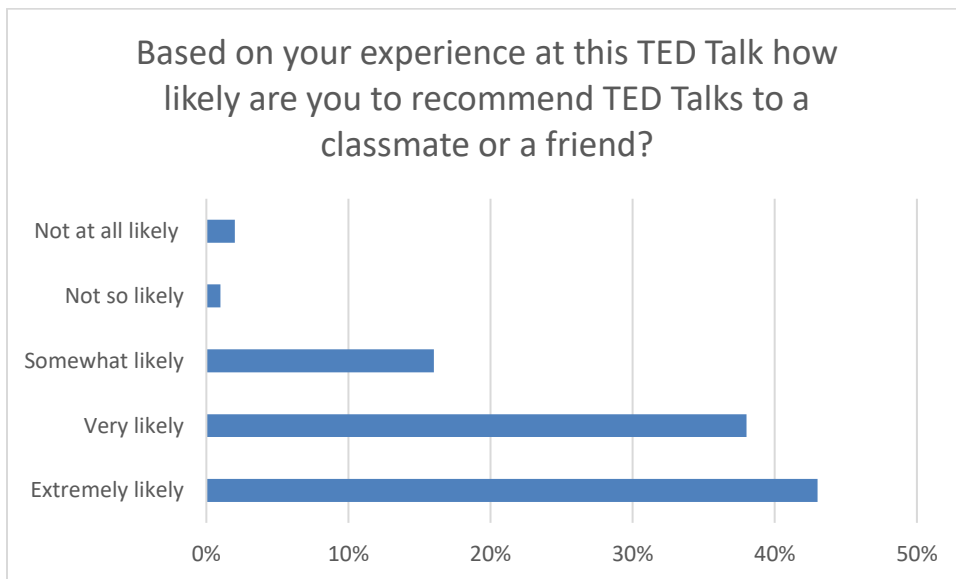


Figure 2.

While Likert scale questions and answers provided positive feedback and reassured the series organizers that the attendees liked the talks, the most interesting insights came from questions related to attendees' learning. For example, the Bryan Stevenson talk titled "We need to talk about an injustice" focused on the death penalty and legal inequities for people of color

and disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. The talk garnered a larger than usual number of attendees, and students' expressed deep and thoughtful insights on the issues discussed in the TED talk. One attendee reflected stated, "I walked in here PRO-death penalty, but I am an advocate for awareness for the struggles in marginalized communities; I realized I can't be both"; others observed the role of wealth and poverty in judicial outcomes, and the importance of seeing people as more than the worst thing they've done in their lives. The TED talks related to contemporary societal issues provided well-thought-out and insightful responses from the attendees, including calls for more in-depth conversation and societal change around topics of toxic masculinity, intersectionality, gender equality, and more.

The final section of the TED Talks series survey asked attendees to recommend specific talks or topics or disciplines that they'd like to see in the future and to provide suggestions for improvements to the series. The question regarding recommendations for improvement of the series was most often left blank. Frequently suggested topics and disciplines for the future TED Talks included gender and sexuality, business, inspirational talks. When planning for the fall 2018 semester, library staff members looked for and incorporated talks on the topics suggested by the attendees. The series continued through the fall 2018 semester and was suspended due to staffing shortages and decreasing attendance.

Recommendations for a successful implementation of TED Talks

Based on ULC's experience, the main advice for a successful student engagement series is to develop partnerships with academic and non-academic departments on campus. Marketing, outreach, and staying in touch with campus priorities helped ULC promote the series, and the TED Talks program at ULC would not have had any success without partnerships with faculty members, the communications and marketing department, the Student Life office, and others.

An old realtors' adage of "location, location, location" played a surprisingly important role in increasing the visibility and attendance of the TED Talks series. In the beginning of the spring 2018 semester, the series was moved to a room with a glass wall along a heavily trafficked hallway of the building. Additionally, the sign inviting people to join was posted in the hall next to the room. People merely passing by could come in and join the event.

Students enjoy both academic and non-academic incentives. When teaching faculty encouraged students to attend TED Talks for a few extra credit points or made the talks a part of the course, attendance increased. However, free snacks or a beverage of choice from a coffee shop was sufficient for enticing some students who would not have attended otherwise. Gathering student feedback, evaluating the series, and closing the feedback loop by implementing tweaks and changes to the events were essential for event continuity and success. Being in touch with current campus conversations, priorities, and happenings was important as well.

In retrospect, the author strongly recommends forming a workgroup or a committee as a part of any event series planning process and, when possible, including a non-library faculty or staff members in the group. A committee can help ensure continuity of the program and further assist with planning, implementation, and promotion of the event series.

Discussion and Conclusions

TED Talks helped ULC achieve common goals of library programming. Based on survey results, organizer's observations, and campus feedback, TED Talks or a similar series can serve as an effective way to bring patrons into the library, build campus and community partnerships, and increase the library's visibility.

On average, 80% of attendees rated each talk as very satisfactory or satisfactory, and 75%

said they were likely to recommend it to a friend or classmate. Students' responses to a question about the most important thing they learned from a talk demonstrated deep reflection and critical thinking about the content of the TED talks.

However, sustaining a weekly event series comes with its' challenges and requires a commitment of time, effort, and dedication to the project. At a library with only 3.5 FTE librarian, including the two full-time librarians who were the library directors' of their respective institutions, adequate time and staffing is an ongoing challenge. Therefore, in ULC's case, most of the groundwork for the development, implementation, and continuation of the series fell to one librarian. As an organizer and lead of the TED Talks series, the author received strong and continued support from her co-workers and her supervisor. For example, the Ivy Tech library director worked with a design professor and a group of students to create a TED Talks passport and digital poster for series advertisements. Staff members enthusiastically filled-in to play the talks and lead the discussion when necessary, and the library directors from both institutions attended select talks. However, if the author was to implement a similar series at her new institution, it would involve team-based planning and implementation. A team, committee, or workgroup does not have to be comprised of all library workers. Forming such a group can serve as an opportunity to engage students and potential partners in program planning and develop a stronger relationship.

As this article previously mentioned, attendance became the main challenge in maintaining a weekly event series; therefore, partnership building, outreach, and marketing proved to be a key to the success of the TED Talks series. The author would highly recommend building support for library programs by establishing partnerships. The library's benefits from establishing partnerships with the communications and marketing department, student life,

University Center, and local domestic violence shelter extended beyond the TED Talks series and led to collaboration on unrelated events and initiatives. The relationship proved to be mutually beneficial as partner-departments and individuals from these departments found a valuable ally in the library and turned to library staff for space and support for activities initiated or sponsored by them.

Weekly series such as TED Talks provide a unique venue for academic libraries to engage their academic community on an ongoing basis and build strong relationships with new and existing patrons. The series can enhance existing library programming or serve as standalone engagement and outreach initiatives.

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Appendix A



Watch compelling video presentations by world renowned thinkers on a variety of topics. Then join us for a post-TED talk discussion.

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University Library of Columbus

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Aug. 29 - Dec. 5
11:30 - 12:00 | CLC 1618

Snacks will be provided!

Appendix B

TED Talks Survey

1. Overall, how would you rate today's TED talk?

- Very satisfactory
- Somewhat satisfactory
- Neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory
- Somewhat unsatisfactory
- Very unsatisfactory

2. Based on your experience at this TED Talk how likely are you to recommend TED talks to a classmate or friend?

- Extremely likely
- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Not so likely
- Not at all likely

3. Please write any topics, ideas or disciplines that you'd like to be covered in upcoming TED talks. If you have a specific talk in mind feel free to write it down.

4. What was the most important or useful idea you've learned today?

5. What was the least important or useful idea you've learned today?

6. How do you think TED Talks series could be improved?