

Think Tanks and Economic Development

By Jeremy Liles

I. Introduction and Background

“Think tanks” are typically defined as organizations that perform independent research on public policy.¹ Under this broad umbrella, think tanks may differ along certain dimensions. Modern think tanks have different areas of focus (e.g., social policy and foreign policy), governance, structure, funding models, levels of outreach, and political affiliations.

Think tanks arose in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century. Their trajectory has been correlated with major events and unique concerns of different historical periods.² Although there is some disagreement about when the first think tanks were created, many trace the development of the modern think tank to the establishment of the Brookings Institution (“Brookings”) in 1916.³ Regardless of the exact genesis, forces such as World War I, the Great Depression and New Deal, and the advent of scientific management principles combined to create an environment in which institutions focused on studying foreign policy, domestic social programs, and economics began to emerge.⁴

The next phase of think tank development occurred in conjunction with the post-World War II rise of the military-industrial complex, and included organizations such as the Rand Corporation, the Hudson Institute, and the American Enterprise Institute.⁵ These new think tanks were, by and large, more conservative and national-security focused than their earlier brethren.⁶ The rate of formation of think tanks began to increase dramatically after this period; over 90% of the think tanks currently in existence were formed after 1951.⁷

As the “Great Society” of the late 1960s and early 1970s brought an increased focus on domestic poverty, the think tank world responded by generating organizations devoted to research on

¹ See THINK TANKS & CIVIL SOCIETIES PROGRAM, ABOUT US, <http://gotothinktank.com/about-us/>; Merriam-Webster Online, “Think Tank” Definition, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/think%20tank>;

BusinessDictionary.com, “Think Tank” Definition, <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/think-tank.html>.

² James G. McGann, *Academics to Ideologues: A Brief History of the Public Policy Research Industry*, 25 POLITICAL SCIENCE AND POLITICS 733 (Dec. 1992). See also DIANE STONE, THINK TANKS AND POLICY ADVICE IN COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION (2005), <http://www.adbi.org/book/2005/12/01/1686.policy.research.vietnam/think.tanks.and.policy.advice.in.countries.in.tran.sition/>.

³ McGann, *supra* note 2. See also BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, BROOKINGS INSTITUTION HISTORY, <http://www.brookings.edu/about/history>.

⁴ McGann, *supra* note 2.

⁵ *Id.* at 735.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ James G. McGann, 2012 Global Go To Think Tanks Report and Policy Advice 15 (2013), http://gotothinktank.com/dev1/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2012_Global_Go_To_Think_Tank_Report_-_FINAL-1.28.13.pdf.

poverty, urban issues, and even environmental policy.⁸ Since then, the major trends in think tank development have been proliferation, specialization, politicization, globalization, and increased interrelationships with government and academia.⁹ While larger broad-purpose, politically-independent think tanks such as Brookings remain active and powerful, many newer think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation (“Heritage”) have a narrower focus, a particular ideology, and even (if only implicitly) a party affiliation. At least one recent study has found that trends in funding, partisanship, and media coverage have “erode[d] the quality of policy research” traditionally performed by think tanks.¹⁰ In addition, the growth of think tanks appears to have peaked in the 1990s, with the annual rate of formation declining by about half from the 1990s to the 2000s.¹¹

Although the quality and influence of think tanks are difficult to rate scientifically, observers have attempted to quantify these characteristics. One survey categorizes and ranks think tanks, rating (in order) Brookings, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Rand, and Heritage as the top five think tanks.¹² A study of media citations of think tanks, which may be a rough proxy for influence, lists (in order) Brookings, Heritage, the American Enterprise Institute, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Council on Foreign Relations as the most cited think tanks.¹³

II. Purpose

As noted above, the original purpose of think tanks was to provide broad public policy research, but today’s think tanks cover an array of purposes including analysis, education, and even advocacy. Comparing the missions of several exemplars, Brookings, Heritage, the Washington Center for Economic Growth (“WCEG”), and the Bell Policy Center (“Bell”) is illustrative.

Brookings’ 2011 Form 990 describes the organization’s mission:

The Brookings Institution (Brookings) is a private, non-profit, independent policy research organization. Brookings’s mission is to conduct high-quality *independent* research and, based on that research, to advance innovative, practical recommendations that advance three broad goals: strengthen American democracy, foster the economic and social welfare, security and opportunity of all Americans, and secure a more open, safe, prosperous and cooperative international system.¹⁴

⁸ McGann, *supra* note 2, at 736.

⁹ *Id.* With respect to interrelatedness McCann describes think tanks as the fifth “arm of government.” *Id.* at 739. See also Tevi Troy, *Devaluing the Think Tank*, NATIONAL AFFAIRS (Winter 2012), <http://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/devaluing-the-think-tank>.

¹⁰ JAMES G. MCGANN, SCHOLARS, DOLLARS, AND POLICY ADVICE 4–5 (Aug. 2004), <http://www.social-sciences-and-humanities.com/PDF/scholars-dollars.PDF>.

¹¹ McGann, *supra* note 7, at 15.

¹² See James McGann, *The Think Tank Index*, 170 FOREIGN POLICY 82 (2009), available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25462385>.

¹³ FAIR, CITATIONS OF THINK TANKS IN MEDIA (2013), <http://fair.org/new/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/TTChartA.jpg>. In 2012, Brookings had 70% more citations than Heritage.

¹⁴ BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, 2011 FORM 990, available at <http://www.guidestar.org/FinDocuments/2012/530/196/2012-530196577-090761db-9.pdf>.

(italics mine)

Brookings' mission is broad in scope and includes domestic democracy, welfare, security, opportunity, and international relations. It also lacks a specific ideology.

In contrast, the Heritage Foundation describes its mission as follows: "To formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense."¹⁵ Where Brookings defines end-goals and seeks policies to achieve them, Heritage instead defines the ideological character of its policies and first-principles.

The relatively new WCEG offers an example of a modern narrowly-focused think tank. Its mission is to "accelerate cutting-edge analysis into whether and how structural changes in the U.S. economy, particularly related to economic inequality, affect economic growth."¹⁶ Compared to the broad missions of Brookings, Heritage, and Cato, which could arguably encompass almost any policy research, the WCEG's mission is limited to studying issues related to inequality and growth.

Bell offers an example of a regional-focused think tank. Its mission: "[M]aking Colorado a state of opportunity for all. We seek to reinvigorate the debate on issues affecting the well-being of Coloradans and to promote policies that open gateways to opportunity." The purpose itself is broad from a policy standpoint, but is limited to the state of Colorado.

III. Structure and Governance

Organization

Think tanks may be organized as independent entities, or as part of a larger organization such as a university.¹⁷ Generally they are either tax-exempt non-profits under IRC 501(c)(3) or are part of a tax-exempt non-profit.¹⁸ This allows them to support themselves through tax-exempt donations. Even when legally independent, think tanks are often closely affiliated with universities; in fact, more than half of all think tanks are university affiliated.¹⁹ University affiliations offer think tanks a stamp of intellectual rigor as well as access to faculty; the

¹⁵ HERITAGE FOUNDATION, 2011 FORM 990, *available at* <http://www.guidestar.org/FinDocuments/2011/237/327/2011-237327730-088884a6-9.pdf>.

¹⁶ WASHINGTON CENTER FOR EQUITABLE GROWTH, HOME PAGE, <http://equitablegrowth.org/>

¹⁷ Scholar Diane Stone posits five distinct geneses for think tanks:

1. Independent civil society think tanks established as non-profit organizations;
2. Policy research institutes located in or affiliated with a university;
3. Governmentally created or state sponsored think tanks;
4. Corporate created or business affiliated think tanks;
5. Political party (or candidate) think tanks.

DIANE STONE, *supra* note 2.

¹⁸ Brookings is registered as a 501(c)(3) public charity. *See* BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, *supra* note 14. <http://www.guidestar.org/FinDocuments/2012/530/196/2012-530196577-090761db-9.pdf>.

¹⁹ McGann, *supra* note 7, at 15.

university (and its faculty) gains publicity, relationships with donors, and financial resources that can augment faculty compensation.²⁰

Many think tanks are closely affiliated with separate advocacy organizations. For example, the Heritage Foundation works closely with Heritage Action, a 501(c)(4) organization, while the Center for American Progress is similarly linked to the Center for American Progress Action Fund.²¹ In some cases, the think tank generates the advocacy arm; while in others, the advocacy arm generates the think tank.²² Some observers have expressed concern that in cases where the advocacy activities drive the policy research activities, the quality of the latter may suffer.²³

Universities may also directly house smaller programs that perform public policy analysis, and thus could be considered “mini think tanks.” They are funded from university budgets, targeted donations, or targeted grants. University faculty typically serve as directors, and an executive director may also be hired if the scope of operations warrants it.²⁴ Scholarship may be produced by a combination of faculty directors, student research fellows, and visiting fellows.²⁵

Governance Structure

²⁰ See MERCATUS CENTER, ABOUT, <http://mercatus.org/content/about>. The Mercatus Center is based at George Mason University, but is a legally and financially independent 501(c)(3). A number of Mercatus’ scholars are drawn directly from the ranks of George Mason faculty. Tyler Cowen, who chairs Mercatus, has noted “The existence of think tanks, and related entities, makes being an academic more attractive. I mean the fun and exposure, not the money (think tanks don’t pay so well, relative to consulting). Think tanks can make academics more productive, and can make academics more interested in addressing real world concerns.” Tyler Cowen, *The Debate over Think Tanks*, MARGINAL REVOLUTION (Sep. 16, 2005), http://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2005/09/the_debate_over.html.

²¹ CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS ACTION FUND, ABOUT THE CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS ACTION FUND, <http://www.americanprogressaction.org/about/capaf-mission/>.

²² See Tevi Troy, *supra* note 9 (“Politicians on both sides of the aisle have found these advocacy-based successors to the original staid Washington think tanks increasingly useful. After Democratic losses in the presidential elections of 1980 and ’84, for example, a group of moderate Democrats founded the Democratic Leadership Council — not a think tank but an advocacy organization, expressly designated as such under section 501(c)(4) of the tax code, meaning that donations to it were not tax exempt. The DLC was designed to pull the party in a more centrist direction; Bill Clinton was part of the organization from the beginning, and eventually became its chairman. In 1989, the DLC created the Progressive Policy Institute, a tax-exempt think tank, to generate ideas for DLC-affiliated politicians.”).

²³ In the case of Heritage, the advocacy organization has arguably damaged the scholarship and reputation of the think tank. See Julia Ioffe, *A 31-Year-Old Is Tearing Apart the Heritage Foundation*, NEW REPUBLIC (Nov. 24, 2013), <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/115688/heritage-foundations-michael-needham-tears-apart-right-wing> (“As a result [of Heritage Action’s activities], the Heritage Foundation has gone from august conservative think tank revered by Washington’s Republicans to the party’s loathed ideological commissar.”).

²⁴ See, e.g., GEORGETOWN LAW CENTER ON POVERTY, INEQUALITY & PUBLIC POLICY, OUR TEAM, <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/poverty-inequality/our-team.cfm>.

²⁵ See e.g., GEORGETOWN LAW CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE RULE OF LAW IN THE AMERICAS, CAROLA PEOPLE, <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/carola/people/index.cfm>; GEORGETOWN LAW CENTER FOR THE CONSTITUTION, OUR TEAM, <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/constitution/our-team.cfm>.

Like most tax-exempt non-profits, think tanks are typically governed by a board of directors that appoints an executive team to handle day-to-day operations.²⁶ Boards often contain significant donors or fundraisers, and the size of the board varies.²⁷ Internal structures also vary, but generally include administrative staff such as an executive director or president and executives in charge of communications, fundraising, legal affairs, and finance. Research areas are often operated as independent “business units” with their own directors, project managers, fellows, scholars, and interns.

IV. Operations and activities

Think tanks generally share a set of core activities: research and analysis, publishing, and communications. There are, however variations. For example, Brookings lists an executive education program,²⁸ Heritage lists “media and government relations,”²⁹ and RAND operates its own graduate school.³⁰ Even among the basic activities, different think tanks emphasize different factors. Brookings produces “book-length studies marketed to policy makers and academics,” Heritage produces “non-technical policy analysis . . . policy digests . . . and prescriptions for policy makers,” and RAND produces “technical reports for government agencies.”³¹

At a high level, research activities are often separated into programs or divisions. For example, Brookings operates five major programs: Foreign Policy, Governance Studies, Metropolitan Policy Program, Global Economy and Development, and Economic Studies.³² Residing within those programs are various centers (which have a permanent presence) and projects (which have a temporary presence).³³ These centers and projects are led by resident fellows who manage the research activities of other resident fellows, nonresident fellows, research associates, and research assistants.³⁴ Similarly, Heritage operates two major research divisions: Foreign and

²⁶ See Andrea Moncada, *Think Tank Boards: Composition and Practices*, ON THINK TANKS (March 25, 2013), <http://onthinktanks.org/2013/03/25/think-tank-boards-composition-and-practices/> (reviewing different board composition choices).

²⁷ Board size does not necessarily correlate with budget. Heritage, with a 2008 budget of \$48.4 million, has 24 trustees. HERITAGE FOUNDATION, BOARD OF TRUSTEES, <http://www.heritage.org/about/board-of-trustees>. Brookings with a 2008 budget of \$60.7 million, has 54. BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, BOARD OF TRUSTEES <http://www.brookings.edu/about/leadership/trustees>. RAND with a 2008 budget of \$251 million, has 20. RAND CORPORATION, RAND CORPORATION BOARD OF TRUSTEES, <http://www.rand.org/about/organization/randtrustees.html>.

²⁸ See BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, 2011 FORM 990, *supra* note 14.

²⁹ See HERITAGE FOUNDATION, 2011 FORM 990, *supra* note 15.

³⁰ PARDEE RAND GRADUATE SCHOOL, HOME PAGE, <http://www.prgs.edu/>.

³¹ James G. McGann, *Academics to Ideologues: A Brief History of the Public Policy Research Industry*, 25 POLITICAL SCIENCE AND POLITICS 733, 738 (Dec. 1992).

³² BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, ABOUT: RESEARCH PROGRAMS, <http://www.brookings.edu/about#research-programs/>.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ See BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, JOBS AND INTERNSHIPS, <http://www.brookings.edu/about/employment>. The best way to get a sense of the roles and responsibilities is to examine individual job descriptions.

Defense Policy Studies and Domestic and Economic Policy; within these divisions are various centers employing research fellows (resident and visiting) and policy analysts.³⁵

V. Funding

As 501(c)(3) organizations, think tanks must be funded by the general public or the government. Practically speaking, think tanks obtain their funding from government grants, private grants from foundations, corporate donations, and individual donations. Board members are often donors or people with access to networks of donors.

Funding sources have received more scrutiny lately as observers question think tank independence.³⁶ Although 501(c)(3) organizations must meet the public support test, they do not have to reveal donor information to the public. What is clear, however, is that think tank donors include individuals and entities, including financial, energy, and defense firms, that would benefit financially from specific policy positions.³⁷

VI. Think Tanks and Community Economic Development

The United States Department of Health & Human Services defines “community economic development” as “[a] process by which a community uses resources to attract capital and increase physical, commercial, and business development and job opportunities for its residents.”³⁸ While many think tanks include an economic development component, only a few purport to focus on community economic development.³⁹ Brookings’ Metropolitan Policy Program has produced a number of reports related to the topic,⁴⁰ as have the Urban Institute⁴¹

³⁵ See HERITAGE FOUNDATION, TEAM, <http://www.heritage.org/about/staff>.

³⁶ See, e.g., Holly Yeager, *Center for American Progress releases donor list*, THE WASHINGTON POST: POST POLITICS (Dec. 13, 2013), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2013/12/13/center-for-american-progress-releases-donor-list/>; Elias Isquith, *Third Way senior vice president admits majority of think tank’s funding comes from Wall Street*, SALON.COM (Dec. 12, 2013), http://www.salon.com/2013/12/12/third_way_senior_vice_president_admits_majority_of_think_tanks_funding_comes_from_wall_street/.

³⁷ See Rick Carp, *Who Pays for Think Tanks?*, FAIR (July 01, 2013), <http://fair.org/extra-online-articles/who-pays-for-think-tanks/>.

³⁸ UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES: OFFICE OF COMMUNITY SERVICES, CED DATA DEFINITION OF TERMS, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/resource/community-economic-development-definition-of-terms>.

³⁹ See POVERTY & RACE RESEARCH ACTION COUNCIL, AN INTERNET RESEARCH GUIDE TO ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, http://www.pprac.org/full_text.php?text_id=1090&item_id=9882&newsletter_id=0&header=Economic+%2F+Community+Development.

⁴⁰ BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, SEARCH, <http://www.brookings.edu/search?start=1&q=community+economic+development>.

⁴¹ URBAN INSTITUTE, SEARCH, <http://search.urban.org/taxis/search?mode=&opts=&pr=wwwurban&dropXSL=html&prox=page&rorder=500&rprox=500&rdfreq=500&rwfreq=750&rlead=750&sufs=0&order=r&query=%22community+economic+development%22&submit=Submit>.

and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.⁴² The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, housed at Northwestern University, focuses on foundational development programs related to community education and health.⁴³

Although there is ample funding for direct community economic development corporations and programs, funding sources for research appear more limited. Large family foundations such as the Ford Foundation⁴⁴, Rockefeller Foundation⁴⁵, and Surdna Foundation⁴⁶ have provided grants to community development initiatives in the past, and might be open to funding a think tank, or a particular project at a think tank.

VII. Colorado Think Tanks

Although most large think tanks are concentrated in the coasts, particularly Washington, D.C., a few are based in Colorado. The following is a sample of Colorado-based think tanks:

The Bell Policy Center is a progressive think tank that performs research and advocacy related to education, economic opportunity, health, retirement, immigration, and fiscal policy. It is very involved in tracking and influencing the Colorado legislative agenda.⁴⁷ Its work product consists of legislative status reports, legislative testimony, and short “email notes” that cover policy issues.⁴⁸

- The Colorado Center on Law and Policy (“CCLP”) engages in research, advocacy, and litigation related to progressive issues.⁴⁹ CCLP has produced long-form research papers related to poverty and “self-sufficiency” as well as guides to help impoverished citizens navigate assistance programs.⁵⁰ It also produces fact sheets for Colorado legislation and referenda.⁵¹
- The Aspen Institute is headquartered in Washington, D.C., but maintains a strong presence in Aspen, CO. The institute has two community development-related programs:

⁴² MANHATTAN INSTITUTE FOR POLICY RESEARCH, SEARCH, http://www.manhattan-institute.org/search_results.htm?q=%22community+development%22&cx=012929630536156000265%3A0-gaju8gm0q&cof=FORID%3A9&ie=UTF-8.

⁴³ THE ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE, RESEARCH, <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/research/>.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., FORD FOUNDATION, GRANTS: COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT VENTURE CAPITAL ALLIANCE, <http://www.fordfoundation.org/grants/grantdetails?grantid=120212>.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION, GRANTS: LIVING CITIES, INC.: THE NATIONAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE, <http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/grants/grants-and-grantees/84b5852b-6d6e-4fca-8bd1-a434c1d03725>.

⁴⁶ See SURDNA FOUNDATION, STRONG LOCAL ECONOMIES, <http://www.surdna.org/what-we-fund/strong-local-economies.html>. Surdna appears to favor an approach that combines research with on-the-ground proofs of concept.

⁴⁷ THE BELL POLICY CENTER, HOME PAGE, <http://bellpolicy.org/>.

⁴⁸ <http://bellpolicy.org/research-publications>.

⁴⁹ COLORADO CENTER ON LAW & POLICY, HOME PAGE, <http://cclponline.org/>.

⁵⁰ http://cclponline.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Self-Sufficiency_Standard_for_Colorado_2011.pdf; http://cclponline.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/TANF_HANDBOOK_July_26.pdf.

⁵¹ <http://cclponline.org/publications/>.

the Community Strategies Group,⁵² and the Economic Opportunities Program.⁵³ Its main activities are hosting of conferences and seminars, publication of papers, and hosting of leadership programs.⁵⁴

- The Independence Institute is a conservative policy research institute that advocates limited government and appears to have little interest in community economic development.⁵⁵
- The Centennial Institute, part of Colorado Christian University, appears to disseminate policy briefs on a grab bag of conservative pet issues that support “faith, family, and freedom.”⁵⁶
- The Rocky Mountain Institute focuses on energy policy based on free market principles.⁵⁷

None of these organizations is focused specifically on regional economic development issues. The Aspen Institute and the Bell Policy Center appear to have at least some interest in the issue, but Bell focuses on Colorado legislative issues and referenda, while Aspen focuses on access to capital and skills improvement. Aspen is also engaged in a project that touches on community economic development: the Community Development Innovation and Infrastructure initiative examines the impact to community development of changes and trends in financial services and infrastructure.⁵⁸

Arguably, there is a need for a Front Range, Colorado, or Mountain West-focused think tank that targets community economic development. Such an organization could produce guides for stakeholders (e.g., business and legal guides), produce policy analysis, and advocate for local or statewide policies related to community economic development issues such as enterprise zones, tax incentives, and infrastructure initiatives. A legal, as opposed to economic focus may also be a key differentiating factor. Because Bell and CCLP already have expertise in legislative action and advocacy, a new organization might want to partner with them in those areas.

VIII. Criticism of, and Questions About, Think Tanks

Despite the popularity of think tanks, a number of observers question their value to society. Some question the quality of the research produced by think tanks. Others question think tanks’ independence, given the conflicts of interest under which they may operate.

⁵² THE ASPEN INSTITUTE, COMMUNITY STRATEGIES GROUP, <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/community-strategies>.

⁵³ THE ASPEN INSTITUTE, ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM, <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/economic-opportunities>.

⁵⁴ <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/what-we-do>.

⁵⁵ INDEPENDENCE INSTITUTE, HOME PAGE, <http://www.i2i.org/>.

⁵⁶ CENTENNIAL INSTITUTE, ABOUT US, <http://www.ccu.edu/centennial/aboutus/>.

⁵⁷ ROCKY MOUNTAIN INSTITUTE, GUIDING PRINCIPLES, <http://www.rmi.org/Guiding%20Principles>.

⁵⁸ See <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/economic-opportunities/access-capital-credit/community-development-innovation-infrastru?c=huLWJeMRKpH&b=613663>.

Research Quality

The quality of think tank research has been questioned, especially as think tanks proliferate and become more ideological, leading some to wonder if ideological preconceptions are driving research rather than vice versa.⁵⁹ As one observer asserted:

The “truth” produced by think-tank denizens lies somewhere between that of journalism and academia. The research these organizations produce tends to be footnoted, but the footnotes themselves are often questionable, and ideological counterarguments are rarely entertained except in mocking tones. Truth is considered to be self-evident if it matches the belief of the author, though footnotes are nice, too, if only for the patina of authority they tend to lend one’s arguments.⁶⁰

In addition, with some measuring think tank influence by quantity of media appearances, original research may be subsumed by the creation of “simple sound bites.”⁶¹

Conflicts and Independence

Because think tanks often rely upon donations from firms and wealthy individuals that may benefit from specific think tank policy conclusions, the impartiality of think tank research is often questioned.⁶² One web site even maps the connections between think tanks, their stakeholders, and private corporations.⁶³ At the same time, many think tanks serve as “revolving doors” or “parking spots” for past and future government employees, which creates the potential for conflicts of interest as these employees rotate between private-sector for-profit work, government work, and “independent” policy research.⁶⁴ One possible solution to this would be disclosure of such conflicts by the authors of research.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ See, e.g., NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER, NEPC THINK TWICE THINK TANK REVIEWS, <http://nepc.colorado.edu/think-tank-reviews>, which assesses the quality of educational research and analysis produced by other think tanks.

⁶⁰ Eric Alterman, *The Professors, The Press, The Think Tanks—And Their Problems*, AAUP (May-June 2011), <http://www.aaup.org/article/professors-press-think-tanks%E2%80%94and-their-problems>.

⁶¹ See Virginia Postrel, What’s Wrong with Think Tanks?, Dynamist Blog (Sept. 15, 2005), <http://vpostrel.com/blog/what-wrong-with-think-tanks>; JAMES G. MCGANN *supra* note 10, at 4-5.

⁶² See, e.g., Ken Silverstein, *The Secret Donors Behind the Center for American Progress and Other Think Tanks*, THE NATION (May 21, 2013), <http://www.thenation.com/article/174437/secret-donors-behind-center-american-progress-and-other-think-tanks-updated-524#> (asserting that staffers at the Center for American Progress were “clearly instructed to check with the . . . development team before writing anything that might upset contributors.”). CAP disputed this characterization. Id.

⁶³ MUCKETY, CATEGORY: THINK TANKS, <http://news.muckety.com/topics/think-tanks>.

⁶⁴ *The Revolving Door of Think Tanks*, THINK TANK WATCH (Mar. 9, 2012), <http://www.thinktankwatch.com/2012/03/state-department-study-of-think-tanks.html> (noting that “US think tanks are full of former Administration officials, and the current Administration is full of former think tankers.”). The debate here tends to mirror that of regulatory capture and the tradeoff between qualifications and potential conflicts.

⁶⁵ See *The Political Activity of Think Tanks: The Case for Mandatory Contributor Disclosure*, 115 *Harvard Law Review* 1502 (2002) (arguing that 501(c)(3) think tanks “should be required to disclose their contributors.”); Christopher A. Preble, *The Revolving Door, Think Tanks, and the MIC*, THE NATIONAL INTEREST (Dec. 29, 2010), <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/the-revolving-door-think-tanks-the-mic-4646> (opining that research consumers “should consider whether and how financial support might have factored into a scholar’s conclusions” but stopping short of advocating disclosure requirements).

IX. Establishing a New Think Tank

This section outlines steps that the organizer of a new think tank might take. Each subsection describes the goal of the step and provides examples in a document draft format.

Define Vision

Goal

Establish the vision of the think tank in one or two sentences (like a mission statement). Getting the vision correct up front will help with marketing and communications. If the organization plans to be tax-exempt, use wording that is tied to a tax-exempt purpose (e.g., education). The vision should properly capture the subject-matter scope of the think tank.

Example

The Organization will be dedicated to research and analysis related to community economic development policy. Although the Organization will have a regional focus, its work product will likely have relevance beyond the region.

The Organization will work closely with the Community Economic Development Clinic (“CEDC”) inasmuch as the latter pursues legislative advocacy.

Define Scope of Activities

Goal

Establish what activities the think tank will undertake (e.g., original research, policy analysis, advocacy, education, workshops, influencing legislation, etc.) Again, keep in mind the rules surrounding tax exemption, especially if considering legislative advocacy.

Example

[The Organization will perform original research and analysis related to community economic development, with an emphasis on policy issues affecting small businesses, community groups, public-private partnerships, and other entities involved in the economic development of sustainable communities. Such research and analysis may involve both economic and legal issues, and may advocate certain policy positions.]

[Scholarship produced by the Organization may be published in a variety of different fora, including the Organization’s own website, journals, and SSRN. It may also be used as a source of materials for CEDC legislative advocacy, community education, and internal discussion.]

[When appropriate, Organization scholars may collaborate with other organizations that have similar or complementary missions.]

[When appropriate, the Organization may conduct conferences, symposia, and other events that help it fulfill its mission and disseminate its research and analysis.]

Identify Legal Structure

Goal

Identify the legal structure of the organization, including any legal relationships with existing entities.

Example

[The Organization will operate as a separate department within the [University of Denver] [Sturm College of Law] [Student Law Office]].

[The Organization will operate as a separate legal entity. It will be incorporated as a Colorado nonprofit corporation with an educational mission and will seek federal tax exempt status.]

Define Organizational Structure

Goal

Define the organizational structure of the think tank, including executive leadership, board structure and governance, and internal structures that optimize the organization's activities.

Example

[The Organization will be directed by [a dedicated permanent director] [the CEDC Director] [rotating faculty] [a fellow]].

[The Organization's director will supervise ____ [fellow[s]] [student researcher assistant[s]] to produce research and analysis and organize such activities as are necessary to disseminate that research and analysis.]

[The Organization will have a board of [directors] [advisors], consisting of ____ members. The role of the board will be to...]

[Administrative support, such as finance, accounting, and office management, will be provided by the [University of Denver] [Sturm College of Law] [Student Law Office]].

[When the Organization conducts multiple research projects simultaneously, it may organize these projects according to research groups consisting of at least one group leader and one researcher.]

Define Operations

Goal

Identify operational and administrative processes that will maximize the organization's effectiveness.

Example

[Quality control.]

[Peer review.]

[Human resources.]

[Finance/audit.]

Define Funding Sources and Strategy

Goal

Identify sources of funding, including direct donations, funding from parent entities, and funding from grantors. Identify the ideal mix of funding sources and the funding strategy's effect on legal status, tax-exempt status, and independence of research and activities.

Example

[The Organization will receive funding from [the University of Denver] [Sturm College of Law] [Student Law Office] [dedicated fundraising efforts] [endowed fellowships] [other organizations] [Such funding will be tax-exempt.]]

[Funding will be on an ongoing basis.] [Funding will be for specific research projects.]

Analyze the Competitive Landscape and "Ecosystem"

Goal

It is important for a think tank to understand its "competitive landscape": the set of other organizations competing with it for attention, influence, scholars, managers, and funding. Ideally, its vision and strategy will fit in a niche within this landscape rather than being redundant to existing organizations.

The "ecosystem" in which a think tank operates may include entities such as countries, government agencies, NGOs, universities, other think tanks, lobbying firms, PACs, other nonprofit organizations, corporations, legislatures, and donors. It may be useful to diagram or map this ecosystem.

Example

[The Organization's activities and funding sources are similar to . . .]

[The Organization differentiates itself by focusing on . . .]

[The Organization complements the activities of _____ and will seek to work closely with _____ by providing _____.]

[ECOSYSTEM DIAGRAM HERE]

Appendix B: Selected Longer-Form Bibliography

1. JAMES G. MCGANN, GLOBAL THINK TANKS REPORT (http://gotothinktank.com/dev1/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2012_Global_Go_To_Think_Tank_Report_-_FINAL-1.28.13.pdf).

The Global Think Tanks Report is an annual report produced by James G. McGann of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. Based on surveys, the Report provides rankings of think tanks in various categories as well as an analysis of trends.

2. JAMES G. MCGANN, BEST PRACTICES FOR FUNDING AND EVALUATING THINK TANKS & POLICY RESEARCH (<http://www.hewlett.org/uploads/files/BestPracticesforFundingandEvaluatingThinkTanks.pdf>).
3. RAYMOND J. STRUYK, MANAGING THINK TANKS: PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR MATURING ORGANIZATIONS, THE URBAN INSTITUTE (2006).

Managing Think Tanks provides best practices for think tanks, including quality control and organizational structure issues.

4. THOMAS MEDVETZ, THINK TANKS IN AMERICA (2012).
Takes a sociological approach to analyzing the rise of think tanks, Medvetz argues that they are best understood as occupying a space between more established fields such as academics, politics, and media.