RESEARCH Brief

APRIL 2006

Linking research and practice to change lives, neighborhoods, and communities

What Is a Think Tank?

JULIE KIBLER, MLS
RESEARCH & EDITING CONSULTANT
TERI WESSON
RESEARCH & EDITING CONSULTANT

The J. McDonald Williams Institute, research arm of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, is dedicated to conducting non-partisan outcomes research and public policy evaluation related to comprehensive community revitalization of low-income urban areas.

FCE

THE J. MCDONALD WILLIAMS INSTITUTE

A Project of the J. McDonald Williams Institute and the Foundation for Community Empowerment

To a great extent, today's think tank needs to be both generalized and specialized in nature, well-balanced in its research scope and activities according to the circumstances, and must dare to take the right action at the right time—no matter where it is located—in a struggle for survival.[1]

— National Institute for Research Advancement

The Foundation for Community Empowerment (FCE) was established in 1995 with the goal of revitalizing low-income neighborhoods in Dallas. FCE formally announced the creation of a research arm, the J. McDonald Williams Institute, at the October 2005 inaugural annual conference of the Institute. The Institute's long-term vision is to become the premiere think tank in the country for high impact, public policy relevant, applied research on how best to revitalize low-income neighborhoods (e.g., community development). This paper provides a general definition and history of think tanks, identifies their basic purposes and roles, and introduces a sense of best practices in how newer and smaller think tanks manage knowledge and disseminate research findings.

BACKGROUND

Definition of *Think Tank*

In the simplest terms, Merriam-Webster Online has given a basic definition of the term *think tank* as "an institute, corporation, or group organized for interdisciplinary research (as in technological and social problems)."[2] Others, however, have concluded that defining the concept is difficult, especially in "establishing clear boundaries as to which organizations fit within the category."[3] Weaver and McGann wrote that, while broadly "think tanks are institutions that provide public policy research, analysis, and advice," there are many other groups that have a similar function, including university research centers, government agencies, special interest groups, and political parties.[4]

Weaver and McGann identified what they considered a middle-ground definition of think tanks, while still qualifying the definition with a caution that the characteristics may vary, especially depending on where the think tank is located. They wrote that think tanks are:

> *[P]olicy research organizations that have significant autonomy from government and from societal interests such as firms, interest groups, and political parties. However,...autonomy is a relative rather than an absolute term, and...the operational definition of think tanks must differ from region to region.*[5]

History

The National Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA), an independent policy research institute in Japan, has created an international directory of think tanks. In his introduction to the 2002 edition, Nakamura outlined briefly the known history of the think tank as a formal institution. He wrote that think tanks are usually identified as an "invention of the twentieth century." Nakamura referred to three think tanks generally accepted as the oldest—the Russel Sage Foundation (1907, United States), the Fabian Society (1884, United Kingdom), and the Hamburg Institute for Economic Research (1908, Germany). He wrote that the number has proliferated, particularly in the decade following the end of the cold war.[6] Nakamura, like Weaver and McGann, noted that think tanks have had to develop their own unique characteristics and frameworks to deal effectively with the issues in their own countries.[7]

Current Trends

Nakamura stated that the community of think tanks would grow in the 21st century, especially in the midst of the "information and knowledge age."[8] Saito's introduction to the 2005 directory described a post-9/11 shift in think tank research in the Unit-

ed States to security-related issues, and worldwide to a focus on specific topics and regions, which is counter to the "ongoing surge of globalization" in most other arenas. He noted, however, that while individual think tanks may be more focused in this way, there is a trend toward higher levels of collaboration among them both regionally and globally.[9]

ROLES AND PURPOSES OF THINK TANKS

While think tanks may have many and varied individual goals, two stood out in the literature studied for this paper as vital.

Think Tanks as Major Players in Democratic Societies

Nakamura described think tanks as "one of the main policy actors in democratic societies."[10] From an economics standpoint, he equated think tanks to a kind of "soft infrastructure," intellectual and knowledge-based, and "assuring a pluralistic, open and accountable process of policy analysis, research, decision-making and evaluation."[11]

Nakamura further defined the role of think tanks in a democratic society. His introduction stated that think tanks should support and encourage:

- policy pluralism;
- broad participation and involvement of policy actors;
- citizen empowerment; and
- a diverse range of ideas and alternative policy proposals.[12]

Sally C. Pipes, President and CEO of the Pacific Research Institute, a San Francisco–based think tank, emphatically stated that think tanks are important because "government will always be a follower, not a leader."[13] She described how government is the single largest special interest group, whereby politicians respond to the desires of their constituents, or the public.

Pipes stated that think tanks are tasked with first convincing the public that the research they generate is valid and useful for positive public policy change. The public in turn must convince the government. Pipes also noted that research generated by think tanks is a necessary and viable alternative to ideas generated by mainstream academia, in keeping with the principles of a free-market economy.[14]

Think Tanks as Networks

NIRA's 2002 directory introduction described in depth another critical role of think tanks as being *bridges* between *policy ideas* and *knowledge of other researchers and institutions*, even when ideological and background differences are present. Nakamura envisioned think tanks as having the potential to develop local, domestic, regional, and global networks, relatively independent of actual policymaking powers, which do not "severely restrict their participants or members." [15]

Nakamura asserted that such networks promote characteristics that should be present in think tanks—*transparency*, *diversification*, and *pluralism*. Freedom in networking allows for transparency and diversity in ideas, methods, and areas of research. This leads to accumulation of knowledge and opinion that truly promotes policy debate. Networking, by nature, increases pluralism (which is defined as the presence of different political, religious, and ethnic backgrounds in the same society[16]).[17]

Nakamura cautioned against thinking of networks as simply virtual or Internet-based groups, citing that often face-to-face discussion is more productive, while technology is a support. He wrote, "Knowledge will not be generated by ICT networks [Information and Communication Technology], but by networks of people."[18]

Allen Hepner, Executive Director of the New Millennium Research Council, indicated that smaller think tanks may often be even more productive than larger ones because of the likelihood of having a "nationwide panel of experts" resulting from networks and peer partnerships between think tank experts from "both sides of the political aisle."[19] He wrote:

> *Next Generation Think Tanks often have extremely small administrative staffs but very large stringer networks of loosely affiliated and diverse academic and policy experts bridging various policy disciplines. "Tiger teams" of experts from across the country can be brought together at a moment's notice.*[20]

Dissemination of efforts

The most critical task facing a think tank is the appropriate dissemination of findings. Several concerns must be addressed in this process, some of which preferably should occur even before findings are formally compiled for dissemination.

Knowledge management

Capozzi and Lowell reported in a *McKinsey Quarterly* article that many philanthropic organizations, which are often umbrella organizations over think tanks, view various types of internal expenditures as wasteful, not understanding the importance of knowledge management and the fact that everything they do "depends on the use of human and intellectual capital."[21] As a result, they may lack the organization and systems needed to manage knowledge appropriately. The writers claimed that if a philanthropic organization takes the right approach, they can "tap into their knowledge to improve the long-term effectiveness of their grants, to lower the cost of administration, and to invest in more effective strategies for social change."[22]

Capozzi and Lowell noted in this article that reorganization without comprehensive exploration of knowledge management may result in problems. They illustrated this concept with the example of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In 1999, the Casey Foundation hired 20 new staff members because of a reorganization leading to a new social strategies initiative and a strategic-consulting arm. Additionally, roles changed for many existing staff members.

Problems resulted in that staff members were working in areas beyond their expertise. They needed information from their colleagues and were unsure how to obtain it. New staff members had a lack of knowledge about the history of the foundation and best practices. Most of the needed information was "in people's heads"—it had not been written down. Existing knowledge management was also neglected and diminishing in the midst of the other changes occurring.

The foundation soon recognized the problems and tasked a small team with classifying previously learned information. They also realized that little of this information had been captured and set about creating processes to capture future findings. Simple templates were developed that associates used to identify and record findings, on the premise that these might shape ideas in other areas.[23]

Capozzi and Lowell found that of 20 leading foundations they interviewed, most of the executives believed knowledge management was critical, but most had pursued it in isolated instances without considering the process or strategy. They described the Casey Foundation's monetary investment in a comprehensive approach to knowledge management as enhancing its productivity, rather than detracting from it.[24]

Next Generation think tanks and dissemination of findings

Hepner described the methods newer, or "Next Generation," think tanks must use to survive and succeed. He claimed that newer, smaller think tanks should be able to "thrive in a superfast Internet world"[25]; in the past, usually only established or larger think tanks with access to traditional publishing avenues could do so.

He thus stated that "speed to the marketplace of ideas and public policy is crucial to carve out a niche in which to compete."[26] He strongly advocated the following best practices for nascent or smaller think tanks:

1) ***Seeding issues***—getting out first and "seeding" the debate on emerging issues, resulting in the ability to mold and define the issues in the media

2) ***Differentiation***—"standing out among one's peers and presenting information that is noteworthy and newsworthy"

3) ***Speed to the marketplace***—often ahead of one's peers; especially with the Internet, which invites an environment for innovation

4) ***Working both sides of the "political aisle" and issue***—being labeled can damage credibility of the author or entity and can "get in the way of how the news media and policymakers perceive work products"; needs and agenda, not labels, should drive the experts[27]

Deliverables

Hepner lists the following as essential products, or "deliverables," of think tanks:

1) Scholarly reports
2) Targeted, issue-oriented white papers
3) Public panel discussions with key political and/or media notables
4) Talk show discussions[28]

He suggests other, more unconventional services a think tank may offer, such as radio media tours, telephone-based media events, and expansive scholarly blogs.[29]

CONCLUSION

A think tank, as demonstrated in this paper, may not be easily defined by a certain set of characteristics, with the exception, as NIRA suggested, that each should strive toward transparency, diversification, and pluralism.

The J. McDonald Williams Institute's vision is to be a public policy change agent with the ultimate goal of increasing social justice. The Institute has six major research areas—Education, Crime and Safety, Health, Housing and Economic Development, Social Capital, and Urban Revitalization.

In its inaugural years, it is critical for the Institute to position itself as an organization with a reputation for groundbreaking contributions to the body of knowledge supporting this endeavor and the timely and strategically targeted dissemination of its research findings.

NOTES

1. Nakamura, M. (2002). Introduction. *NIRA's world directory of think tanks 2002 directory*. Retrieved March 16, 2006, from http://www.nira.go.jp/ice/nwdtt/2005/intro/intro2002.html

2. *Merriam-Webster Online*. (2006). Definition of "think tank." Retrieved March 16, 2006, from http://m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=think+tank

3. Weaver, R. K., & McGann, J. (Eds.). (2000). *Think tanks & civil societies: Catalysts for ideas and action*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers. pp. 4–5. As quoted in: Think tanks. (n.d.) Solent University. Retrieved March 16, 2006 from http://www.solent.ac.uk/library/subject/page111.stm

4. Ibid

5. Ibid

6. Nakamura, M.

7. Ibid

8. Ibid

9. Saito, T. (2005). Introduction: September 11, globalization, and think tanks. *NIRA's world directory of think tanks 2005 directory*. Retrieved April 2, 2005, from http://www.nira.go.jp/ice/nwdtt/2005/intro/intro2005.html

10. Nakamura, M.

11. Ibid

12. Ibid

13. Pipes, S. C. (2001). The role and importance of think tanks. From Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy Web site. Retrieved March 16, 2006, from http://www.pacificresearch.org/pub/sab/entrep/think_tanks.pdf

14. Ibid

15. Nakamura, M.

16. *MSN Encarta Dictionary*. (2006). Definition of "pluralism." Retrieved March 16, 2006, from http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_/pluralism.html

17. Nakamura, M.

18. Ibid

19. Hepner, A. (2004, October). 'Next Generation' think-tank techniques can bolster issues management results. *Impact*. Retrieved March 16, 2006, from http://www.pac.org/pages/impact/2004_10.pdf

20. Ibid, p. 3

21. Capozzi, M., & Lowell, S. (2005, June 15). Knowledge management comes to philanthropy. *The McKinsey Quarterly.* Available at http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/article_page.aspx?ar=1310&L2=33

22. Ibid, p. 2

23. Ibid

24. Ibid

25. Hepner, A., p. 2

26. Ibid, p. 2

27. Ibid, p. 3–4

28. Ibid, p. 3

29. Ibid, p. 3

For more information about The J. McDonald Williams Institute, FCE, or Analyze Dallas, contact Marcus Martin, PhD, MPH, MA, or Timothy Bray, PhD, at:

Foundation for Community Empowerment
2001 Ross Avenue
Suite 3350
Dallas, Texas 75201
469.221.0700 phone
469.221.0701 fax
mmartin@fcedallas.org
tbray@fcedallas.org

THE J. MCDONALD WILLIAMS INSTITUTE

The J. McDonald Williams Institute, the research arm of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, is dedicated to conducting non-partisan outcomes research and public policy evaluation related to comprehensive community revitalization of low-income urban areas.

FCE, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, was founded in 1995 by J. McDonald "Don" Williams, Chairman Emeritus of the Trammell Crow Company. FCE is a catalyst for the revitalization of low-income neighborhoods in Dallas through the empowerment of individuals, community- and faith-based organizations, and entire communities. FCE seeks to build bridges of opportunity, and to foster relationships where investments of money, time, people, and resources should be made.

FCE

EMPOWERING

INDIVIDUALS • ORGANIZATIONS • COMMUNITIES

2001 Ross Avenue, Suite 3350 • Dallas, Texas 75201

www.fcedallas.org • phone 469.221.0700 • fax 469.221.0701

Analyze Dallas seeks to become a catalyst toward real progress and change in the city of Dallas and is based on the philosophy that measurement is followed by impact.

ANALYZE DALLAS

Detailed sub-city level data is presented for Dallas across eight categories: Civic Health, Crime, Economy, Education, Environment, Health, Housing, and Transportation.

www.analyzedallas.org

Analyze Dallas seeks to democratize information by making it widely available to all citizens and making it understandable to non-researchers and non-statisticians.