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Public policy centers and institutes are a growing and visible part of many universities. They appear to be a cross between a think tank and an academic unit that provides public service. Such centers and institutes focus on policy research and facilitation of public discourse. A national survey reveals the faculty role in their work, the applied multidisciplinary nature of their activities, and the impact they have on public policy-making.

University Policy Centers and Institutes: The Think Tank as Public Service Function

There is considerable literature on the development and role of nonprofit public policy research organizations in the United States, our so-called "think tanks" (Dickson, 1971; Smith, 1991; Hollings, 1993; McGann, 1995). In contrast, information on university-based units that conduct similar multidisciplinary intellectual tasks addressing public issues is scarce, even though these units have clearly become an important, visible, and growing part of metropolitan and other universities.

The research presented herein offers new information on these university-based public policy institutes and centers and analyzes them as a mechanism by which the academy provides the think tank function as a form of public service. It presents a brief history of the development of these units and a description of their functions, structure, impact, and evaluation. In doing so, they are distinguished from like organizations that exist outside the academy and from traditional units within academia. Finally, the article presents an analysis of the challenges—both internal and external—that they face.

Antecedents

Our nation's first think tanks appeared around the turn of the century in response to the economic and social issues of the day. However, hardly any of them were associated with universities at this time (a notable exception is the University of Wisconsin, Madison). Distinctly different from government research bureaus, they

were private institutions that gave "public intellectuals" the opportunity to analyze these issues and develop potential policy solutions to them, independent of political influence and teaching demands. The earliest of these organizations (e.g., the Russell Sage Foundation and the Brookings Institution) offered their insights and recommendations to foundations, local government officials, state legislators, and this era's growing number of federal bureaucrats.

Further growth and development of think tanks was stimulated by World War II. Following the war, the U.S. Air Force wanted an independent, intellectual resource to advise it on strategic issues. This decision was manifest in a significant federal investment in what ultimately became the renowned think tank, the RAND Corporation. Thus the substantial interest in national security and military technology that characterized the cold war helped initiate RAND and to launch other national think tanks as well. It also led the federal government to make available substantial new funding to universities for conducting basic research on strategic military matters. In response to this opportunity, many universities started new scientific research centers, laboratories, and institutes.

Another major era of development occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. According to Smith, this was a response to the "ideological combat and policy confusion" of those decades in American history (p. xv). Many new not-for-profit policy research organizations were begun because of growing interest in public policy (Hollings, 1993). University-based policy research organizations grew prolifically because so many universities realized it was an opportune time to get into the act on public policy issues and because financial constraints were forcing them to create new ways of capturing the "soft money" necessary to conduct what was mostly social science research.

Presently there are about 1000 authentic think tanks in the United States, including many that are university-based. However, an accurate count of such organizations is confounded by problems of definition. What can be said with some certainty about those that are university-based, though, is that they are generally a more recent and less chronicled phenomenon than private, nonprofit think tanks, and that they, too, conduct policy research and other activities in the public interest.

The Search for Definition

There are numerous explanations of what a think tank is and does. The term itself was once used as a nickname for the brain, but a more agreed-upon genesis seems to be a World War II expression for a secure place or room where military strategy was discussed. Over time, the moniker has taken on many connotations, most of them in reference to intellectual activities and research intended to influence public policy decisions.

A literature review of descriptions and definitions of think tanks yields frequent mention of phrases and concepts such as "linking knowledge and power," "policy planning and advice," "multidisciplinary," and "politically influential" (Smith, 1991, p. xv; Yehezkel in Weiss and Banton, 1980, p.141; Dickson, 1971, p. 28). Yet, James McGann, who has written extensively on public policy research institutes, concluded that "it has been impossible to arrive at a shared definition of them" (McGann, 1995, p. 23). In fact, one chapter in a book he wrote on public policy research organizations is called "Think Tanks: I Know One When I See One." Nevertheless, the following descrip-

tions—which apply to both nonprofit think tanks and to most university policy centers and institutes—clarify what these organizations are and what they do:

> ...independent organizations that provide analytic assistance to government agencies in the resolution of public policy issues.
>
> —*Levien, 1969, p. 4231*

> ...planning and advisory institutions that operate on the margins of this nation's formal political process.
>
> —*Smith, 1991, p. xiii*

> ...organizations that generate policy-oriented research, ideas, analysis, formulations and recommendations on domestic and international issues...these institutions often act as a bridge between academic and policy communities, translating applied and basic research into language and form that meets the needs of busy policy makers.
>
> —*McGann, 1995, pp. 25, 32*

Analysis of the work of such organizations reveals similarities and differences between ones that are part of a university and ones that are not. Both types of organizations conduct research studies and facilitate meetings that are *meant to be applied* in crafting solutions to public problems and in formulating public policy. However, many nonprofit think tanks subscribe to a particular political, social, or economic ideology and, as such, conduct activities that advocate for public policies consistent with their research or orientation. In contrast, university policy centers—especially ones funded by state appropriations—are not well-suited to be advocacy organizations. In addition, they often have audiences that expect them to provide services for free in the public interest, and to act more as neutral facilitators or educators than their not-for-profit counterparts. As such, university units that describe themselves as a "public policy research organization," "policy institute," or "urban/metropolitan studies center" appear to be one part think tank and one part service provider.

Policy Organizations as University Entities

When a public policy organization is part of a university, it is commonly referred to as a "center" or an "institute." These units are distinctly different from academic departments, even though they have things in common and are often directly associated with them (e.g., with departments such as political science, public affairs, or management). However, university public policy units are a much more recent organizational phenomenon than academic departments and are generally considered to be nontraditional. Often, they were initiated at financially opportune times or in response to political, economic, or social upheavals. In considering the genesis of such nontraditional units in the academy, Ikenberry and Friedman (1972, pp. ix-x) offer a useful perspective:

> In many ways these new organizations were like departments. They employed professional personnel with similar if not identical qualifications. Many were very clearly engaged in the work of the academy—teaching, research or service. In other obvious ways, how-

> ever, they were quite different. They didn't focus on a single discipline, as did departments. Funding tended to come principally from grants and contracts with foundations, governments or industries and not from traditional sources. And there seemed to be a tentativeness to the whole enterprise—less permanence of programs, staff, budget, and other resources than one tended to expect in departments....As they multiplied, they tended frequently to become centers of controversy.

In addition, academic departments offer degree programs, have national standards, are linked by professional associations, and are certified by accreditation reviews. By contrast, university-based public policy centers and institutes are not typically guided or governed by such formal arrangements.

A Survey of Function, Structure, Impact, and Evaluation

A national survey of units that a college or university would identify as its public policy center or institute was conducted in the spring of 1998 as part of the author's sabbatical research project. Since few centralized data are available on these units, the Morrison Institute for Public Policy (School of Public Affairs, Arizona State University) sponsored research to provide a comprehensive source of information on them using a questionnaire asking about their functions, organization, governance, and status. The resulting data should facilitate discussion so that institutions of higher education can create, maintain, or improve such units and, by doing so, better contribute to the policy communities—whether local, metropolitan, state, or national—that they serve.

Criteria and Methods

Identification of university-based policy centers and institutes was accomplished by examination of, for example, a review of think tank "inventories" (*Gale Research Centers Directory*); public databases of national organizations and conferences where leaders of university policy centers might be members or attendees (APAM, SCUPSO, Policy Center Network, LINKS); an extensive Internet search for such organizations; and a review of web sites of universities likely to have them.

This universe of think tanks and similar organizations was the basis for developing a population of authentic university-based public policy units. In order to be included in the survey, an organization had to meet all of the following criteria:

- Is a distinct entity within an academic department, college, or administrative unit at a U.S. university
- Conducts research and/or offers services related to domestic policy issues (i.e., is not singularly focused on one topic)
- Is more than a one-person operation
- Actively conducts work meant to inform and assist public decision-making (i.e., as opposed to being a clearinghouse, a professional society, or a council of advisors)

Using these criteria, our universe was winnowed to 338 units. A draft survey instrument was developed and field-tested with several academics in the mainstream of public policy research and service units who direct them. The refined four-page instru-

ment contained 20 questions (both open and closed-ended) and was mailed to each of the 338 units with an explanation of the research study, a deadline, and a postage-paid return envelope. In most instances, the recipient was identified by name as being the director or chief administrator of the unit. All that did not respond by the deadline were contacted by phone one or more times to encourage participation.

This procedure yielded a response rate of 60 percent; 195 units completed and returned the survey, and 16 indicated that they either did not fit the criteria or were no longer operating. Since all units in the final population were surveyed, the results are statistically significant at the $p \leq .05$ level (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). It is also noteworthy that the population contained one or more university units in 49 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The 195 respondents represent 44 states, or 90 percent of states that have university units that fit the criteria.

Results

The results of multiple survey questions are presented below as four general categories: function, organization, impact, and evaluation.

Function

When asked to choose "the *one* phrase that best describes your unit," the most frequent responses by far were "university center" (37%) and "public policy research organization" (28%). It is notable that one closed-ended choice—academic unit—was selected by only 13% of respondents. Consistent with these answers, when asked to identify the "major functions/services of your organization," 90% of respondents chose "public policy research"; other major functions mentioned by more than half of the respondents were "public service and outreach," "technical assistance," and "program evaluation" (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Functions conducted by university policy centers/institutes*

Major Functions	Percentage of Responses
Public policy research	90
Public service	71
Technical assistance	61
Program evaluation	52

Respondents overwhelmingly chose to "describe the unit's research and activities" by selecting the word "applied" (47%). The second most frequent choice—"interdisciplinary"—was selected by 17%, followed by "scholarly" (see Table 2). Finally, when asked to identify for whom the unit's work was conducted, "state government agencies" was the most common response (61%), followed closely by "nonprofit sector" (58%), "federal government" (55%), "local government" (53%), and then "independent/general scholarship" (52%).

Table 2. *Self-description of research and other activities of university policy centers/institutes*

Descriptions	Percentage of Responses
Applied	47
Interdisciplinary	17
Scholarly	8

Structure

Several questions on the survey were intended to gather information on the size, budget, personnel, and placement of these units in the university organizational structure.

The typical unit reports to a dean, provost, vice president, department chair, or president, in order of frequency (see Table 3). The median number of full and part-time personnel includes four faculty, six professional classified staff, three and a half support staff, and 10 "other" staff (usually graduate students).

Table 3. *Reporting relationships from public policy institutes*

Relationship to:	Percentage of Respondents
Dean	45
Provost	18
Vice President	13
Department Chair	9
President	3

Consistent with these figures, 32% of these units have total annual budgets of less than $500,000, 22% have an annual budget between $500,000 and $1 million, 19% are between $1 million and $2 million, and 28% have annual budgets in excess of $2 million. "Grants and contracts" is the largest category of income for the units. More than 90% indicated that they receive grants and contracts, and that this source of revenue accounts for about 60% of their funding. About two-thirds of them get a state appropriation (both private and public universities were surveyed), which accounts for about one-third of annual income. "Gifts and endowment income" and "fees and sales" produce revenue for about one-third of the units, too, but each of these sources provides less than 10% of the budget.

The nature and structure of the relationship that faculty have with the units is a matter of much discussion among directors of such university policy centers and institutes. When asked, "How are faculty associated with the institute/center?" two-thirds of respondents indicated that faculty are "contracted as needed." Regarding a formal university "appointment" as an indication of relationship, many respondents (49%) said that "faculty have their regular appointment in the unit's 'home' academic depart-

ment," and 36% indicated that faculty had "a joint appointment to the unit and a separate academic department for a specific period of time." A smaller number yet (34%) said that faculty "have their regular appointment in the unit itself." Respondents were also asked how faculty are recruited and compensated. From a list of nonexclusive choices, the most frequent responses were "supplementary or consulting pay" (56%), "perks" (55%), and "unit's research or other activity is the basis for their scholarly publications" (54%). Other faculty recruitment and compensation items that were mentioned frequently included, "they work with/for the unit as part of their regular assignment," "their time is purchased from their assigned academic department," and "they are released from teaching."

Impact

Two questions were posed to determine what effect these public policy units have on their audiences. First, respondents were asked to indicate if their unit's products/services "frequently," "sometimes," or "rarely/never" had certain *types* of impacts on public policy-making or public administration. Using the same three-point scale, they were then asked to rate the *significance* of the unit's impact on public policy-making or administration.

These data reveal that the work of university-based policy organizations has many effects, but it most frequently affects research on public policy making/administration (mean rating of 1.7) or is a wake-up call on public issues (rating of 1.8) (see Table 4); least frequently affected is the training of public administrators (rating of 2.2). Results also reveal that respondents think that their units are having a more significant impact on state and local policy/administration and on scholarship (mean ratings of 1.9 and 2.0 respectively) than they are having on federal policy or on the private sector (both got ratings of 2.5).

Table 4. *Ways in which university policy centers/institutes have an impact*

Type of Impact	Mean (1=frequently, 2=sometimes, 3=rarely/never)
Provide research on public policy making/administration	1.7
Create a wake-up call on public issues	1.8
Initiate/change public programs	1.9
Provide information used by advocacy groups	1.9
Initiate/change laws	2.1
Train public administrators	2.2

Evaluation

Survey data show that university public policy organizations engage in research, technical assistance, program evaluation, facilitation, and training activities. The units and their activities are evaluated by unit directors, university administrators, and the external community using a variety of measures.

The three most common "measures used to determine the unit's impact" by its director were identified in this order—"direct feedback from policy makers and public officials" (mentioned by 86% of respondents); "visibility of the unit's work, for example, by mentions in newspapers or citations of its research" (85%); and "requests for public presentations" (80%). The only other impact measures that were identified by a majority of those surveyed were "feedback from academic colleagues" (56%) and "number of scholarly publications" (54%; see Table 5).

Table 5.
Measures used by policy center directors to determine unit impact

Measures	Percentage of responses
Feedback from policy makers/public officials	86
Visibility of work	85
Requests for presentations	80
Feedback from academicians	56
Number of scholarly publications	54

How the unit is perceived—both within and external to the university—is another way by which the units are evaluated. With regard to internal perceptions, 48% of respondents reported that their unit was both "appreciated by central administration" and also "recognized and appreciated, but only by a small segment of colleagues"; 44% said it was "widely recognized, acknowledged, and appreciated"; and 24% indicated that the organization was "visible and recognized, but the nature of its work is not considered to be sufficiently scholarly."

In considering the perceptions of external evaluators—defined in this survey as state and local policy-makers—almost 70% of respondents felt that their units were seen as "an important source of information and advice," and 50% believed that policy-makers considered them to be an "objective, neutral convener for public policy issues"; 24% also felt that state and local policy-makers thought that their unit was "a very academic source of information."

"External funding" (mean of 1.2) was considered the most important *university* criterion for evaluation of these units (1=very important and 3=unimportant). "Public

Table 6. *University evaluation criteria for policy centers/institutes*

Criteria	Mean (1=very important, 2=somewhat important, 3=not important)
External funding	1.2
Public service	1.6
Scholarly publications	1.7
Teaching	2.2

service" (rating of 1.6) and "scholarly publications" (1.7) were next most important, and "teaching" was rated least important (2.2; see Table 6). However, the survey did not establish whether these university criteria were formal or informal.

A Typical University Public Policy Center/Institute

The data cited above can be used to describe a "typical" university-based public policy center or institute. The caveat in offering such a description is, of course, that it homogenizes what are in fact many unique and diverse organizations. Nevertheless, given the absence in the literature of any other descriptor of a typical unit, it can be said that an average university public policy institute/center has the following characteristics:

- Fourteen full or parttime staff (including faculty, professional classified staff, and support staff), plus graduate students
- Recruits, compensates, and associates with faculty in a variety of ways
- Has an annual budget of almost $1 million (mostly derived from grants and contracts, although about one-third is provided by state appropriations)
- Usually reports to a dean
- Has eclectic functions and services (e.g., policy research, meeting facilitation, program evaluation, technical assistance)
- Does most of its work for government sponsors or audiences
- Has its greatest impact on state and local policy and public administration (but also affects scholarship)
- Evaluates itself and is evaluated on the basis of visibility, direct feedback from policy-makers, and the external funding it generates
- Is generally recognized and appreciated within the university (but often only by a small segment of the academy, including the central administration)
- Has a director who is considered "entrepreneurial"
- Is considered an important source of information and advice by state and local leaders
- Thinks of its work as "applied"

Challenges and the Road Ahead

The research presented here and substantial anecdotal evidence indicate that universities, especially public ones, recognize the need to have units that address public policy issues. These units are often considered, or consider themselves to be, outside the mainstream of traditional university activity. In one sense, analyzing them is a study of entrepreneurship, creativity, adaptation, and survival in a university context; in another sense, it is the study of the evolution of traditional academic social science research and the external pressures to which the academy is increasingly being subjected.

A common theme that emerges when talking with directors and staff of such units, and that is also revealed by open-ended comments made on the survey, is a sense of having to justify or defend, within their own institutions, what they do. They often mention university personnel questioning the legitimacy of their organization or the

degree to which its work qualifies as scholarly; directors consider this to be the result of a lack of understanding by colleagues of what these units do, how they do it, or how it fits the university's mission. They also very frequently cite funding issues as the key obstacle that they face.

> I have had to argue the case of the scholarly performance of faculty before administrators whose view of sponsored research was that because it had to be relevant to be externally funded and because it often involved collaborative endeavors, it inherently had to be inferior to the research of a solitary faculty member who was working unsupported by any external sponsor.
>
> —*Irwin Feller,*
> *Director of the Institute for Policy Research and Evaluation,*
> *Penn State University (1986, p. xi)*

Perhaps, this type of criticism of university policy units, and the tenuous funding that many of them face, is simply a microcosm of a much larger issue; namely, determining what is expected of, and an appropriate mission for, universities as we approach the twenty-first century. For some time now, leading figures in higher education have questioned the value, appropriateness, and practicality of universities engaging in their traditional missions alone. For example, Derek Bok (1982) wrote in his book entitled, *Beyond the Ivory Tower*:

> Should universities turn inward and dedicate themselves to learning and research for their own sake, benefitting society only indirectly through advancements in basic knowledge and the education of able students? Should they respond energetically to society's request for new services, new training programs and new forms of expert advice? Or should they take the initiative and set their own agenda in order to bring about social change? (p. 66)

Clark Kerr (1972), Ernest Lynton (1987), Ernest Boyer (1990), and many other scholars have posed similar questions. Answers by members of the academy have been plentiful, but not decisive. As this academic debate continues, our country, and certainly our metropolitan areas, face increasingly complex and daunting societal and policy problems. And, there seems to be a growing awareness by government officials, the media, and the public that universities possess a unique set of resources for determining potential solutions and that they are obligated to do so. But, when a policy center poses a solution to a public problem, it can, at the same time, put its university in jeopardy if the solution is not politically popular.

University policy centers and institutes are sometimes caught between a rock and a hard place both in the community and in the university. At one end of the continuum is "A somewhat cynical conception of the role of [university] institutes as that of a profit-oriented, income generating unit whose primary function is to sustain itself economically and, if possible, show a profit" (Ikenberry and Friedman, 1922, p. 43); at the other end there is a school of thought that suggests that academic and other public

policy research institutes are important because "Policy makers and media moguls alike have come to rely on them to help make sense of the complexities of modern society and to navigate the political labyrinth" (McGann, 1945, p. 44).

Discussion along these lines will continue as universities struggle to find the right path for the new millennium. Meanwhile, their policy centers and institutes will make intellectual contributions and provide service—within the boundaries of their financial resources—to help solve the problems faced by their communities. But these questions are likely to remain front-and-center for such units—Will their "applied" work continue to be questioned for its scholarly value? How can the university best evaluate their impact? How should the university reward faculty for participating in applied research and public service activities? Is it desirable for these units to be so dependent on external funding sources?

Suggested Readings

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Is your institution a metropolitan university?

If your university serves an urban/metropolitan region and subscribes to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Metropolitan Universities printed elsewhere in this issue, your administration should seriously consider joining the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities.

Historically, most universities have been associated with cities, but the relationship between "the town and the gown" has often been distant or abrasive. Today the metropolitan university cultivates a close relationship with the urban center and its suburbs, often serving as a catalyst for change and source of enlightened discussion. Leaders in government and business agree that education is the key to prosperity, and that metropolitan universities will be on the cutting edge of education not only for younger students, but also for those who must continually re-educate themselves to meet the challenges of the future.

The Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities brings together institutions who share experiences and expertise to speak with a common voice on important social issues. A shared sense of mission is the driving force behind Coalition membership. However, the Coalition also offers a number of tangible benefits: ten free subscriptions to *Metropolitan Universities*, additional copies at special rates to distribute to boards and trustees, a newsletter on government and funding issues, a clearinghouse of innovative projects, reduced rates at Coalition conventions. . . .

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