# ABSTRACT

Inside the War Room: Strategies for Effective Policy Briefs from American Think Tanks

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This thesis will attempt to demonstrate what constitutes an effective policy brief. First, this thesis looks at historical attempts to measure influence, using those as a guide to define an ‘effective’ policy brief. Next, this thesis applies that definition to several briefs, separating the successful from the unsuccessful. From there, a rhetorical analysis of the briefs was performed, looking specifically for common strategies and forms that appear to have a direct effect on any given brief’s level of effectiveness. Think tanks hope that their policy briefs would sway policy makers toward a decision that best served the purposes of the authoring institution. Whether or not these institutions are, or even ever were successful at this goal is debatable at best. As a result, this thesis attempts to qualify the relationship between think tanks and policy makers, especially through the use of policy briefs.

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# INSIDE THE WAR ROOM: STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE POLICY BRIEFS FROM AMERICAN THINK TANKS

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On August 13, 1945, it was hot. Looking through a streaked glass window, it seemed like Washington D.C. was melting. Of course, the heat was not the only cause for the city's distress. D.C. joined the world reeling from the shock waves that rocked a small Japanese town some 7,000 miles away. Above, a steady fan tried its best to keep the temperature at bay, but it made more noise than cold air. On the east facing wall, the clock prompted the room's only occupant to rise. He began to walk. He knew the walk well: the corridor, then the elevator.[1] Everything around him was buzzing. This area was essential personnel only, but most everyone seemed essential these days. A few more steps now. The Doctor's Office passed on his left. It had only been three days, but the lights were already out. He had never seen it with the lights out before. His musings about the doctor brought him to the door: his short journey's end. He stepped through the threshold; his hand cooled by the brass of the knob. With a heavy thud, General George C. Marshall closed the door to President Roosevelt's Map Room.[2] President Hoover, his title just three days old, stood to greet him. Their "think tank" was in session.[3]

[1] "FDR's White House Map Room," *FDR Presidential Library & Museum*, accessed October 2, 2019, https://www.fdrlibrary.org/map-room.

[2] General Hull and Colonel Seaman, "Telephone conversation transcript" (National Security Archive, 1325-13, August 1945), 1-3.

[3] Ahmad, Mahmood. "US Think Tanks and the Politics of Expertise: Role, Value and Impact." *The Political Quarterly,* 531.

During World War II, soldiers called war rooms "think tanks."[4] The term described a secure, confidential location where officers were able to discuss strategy. Three years later, that same phrase would be appropriated by an influential organization, the RAND Corporation, to describe a new kind of industry cropping up in the heat of D.C. -- one that would shape and guide American politics and public policy for the next century. American think tanks took their cue from similar institutions in England, where they had existed since 1884.[5] The organizations existed long before RAND gave them their name, but World War II exposed an unmet need: government officials lacked access to scientific, social, and historical research. In a report to the Secretary of War, Commanding General of the Army Air Force in World War II, H. H. "Hap" Arnold,[6] identified the demand for this access:

> During this war, the Army, Army Air Forces, and the Navy have made unprecedented use of scientific and industrial resources. The conclusion is inescapable that we have not yet established the balance necessary to insure the continuance of teamwork among the military, other government agencies, industry, and the universities.[7]

RAND, and many other organizations stepped in to take on the name "Think Tank" and to fill the gap between D.C.'s decision makers and the information they needed. This information was most often delivered through the use of a short document, titled a

[4] Ahmad, 531.

[5] "Our History," *Fabian Society*, accessed October 2, 2019, https://fabians.org.uk/about-us/our-history/.

[6] Who later became a founding member of the RAND Corporation, see page 10.

[7] "A Brief History of RAND," *RAND Corporation*, accessed October 2, 2019, https://www.rand.org/about/history/a-brief-history-of-rand.html.

"policy brief," which discussed the research of a particular think tank. The document is handed off to a policy maker, who then takes the information under advisement when designing policies.

The origins of think tanks in the U.S are not entirely clear. According to some scholars, Andrew Carnegie penned the founding letter that brought Britain's successful tradition of policy advocacy groups to the United States.[8] Other scholars, like Paul Dickson, claim that the first think tank began to influence American policy as early as the 1830's.[9] James Smith, who published his history of American think tanks two decades after Dickinson, argues that the first think tank was actually created in 1857.[10] Both of these assertions claim that Congress, whether in 1832 or 1857, sought the advice of experts, thus making the institutions those experts hailed from "Think Tanks" by default.[11] In 1832, Congress reached out to professors at the Franklin Institute of Philadelphia, a research center and museum. In 1857, Congress contacted the American Social Science Association (ASSA) about social reform. However, given the definition of "think tank" used in this thesis and in most modern scholarship, Carnegie's organization best represents the first true "think tank." Neither the Franklin Institute, nor ASSA can be classified as such because they did not prioritize their political involvement. Think tanks,

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[8] Ahmad, 531.

[9] Tracy, James L., Dickson, Paul, and Lasby, Clarence G. "Think Tanks." *Military Affairs* 36, no. 4 (December 1972): 157–158.

[10] Ibid..

[11] Abelson, Donald E. *A Capitol Idea Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy* Montreal (Que: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006) 50.

like the one Carnegie created and the kind that still persists today, exist primarily to educate and influence policy makers, deemphasizing their role in the public.

In 1910, America's first true think tank was born with a lofty goal in mind. Carnegie's founding letter charged his new group to "consider… what new, elevating elements ... if introduced, would most advance the progress, elevation, and happiness of man."[12] Unlike the Franklin Institute and ASSA, the Carnegie Endowment for National Peace had only one purpose: to inform policy makers. Known then as "brain boxes" or simply by the name of the institution, other think tanks began to be established under the model Carnegie created.[13] The Institute for Government Research (IGR) followed soon after in 1916; the organization later became the Brookings Institute in 1927.[14] The Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace was established by future president Herbert Hoover in 1919 and in 1921, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) was founded.[15]

Each institution had a unique ideology and attracted a wide variety of policy experts. These experts, while they may find themselves sharing a table with those on the opposite end of the political spectrum, were united under the common goal of their institution and expected to work cohesively to find innovative solutions, regardless of any differences. As Donald Abelson puts it: "the organizations themselves were not intended

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[12] Andrew Carnegie. *Letter to the Carnegie Endowment for National Peace*, December 14, 1910, https://carnegieendowment.org/about/pdfs/CarnegieLetter.pdf, 3.

[13] "About," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, accessed October 2, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/about/.

[14] "Brookings Institution History," *Brookings*, November 6, 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/about-us/brookings-institution-history/.

[15] Ahmad, 531-2.

to be transformed into ideological battlefields."[16] These experts were expected to set aside their own political aims in favor of an educational pursuit. This ideal was short-lived. At the time of their founding, think tanks intended only to serve as a source of information for policy makers, not as a place to actively interfere in government.[17] More than anything else, these organizations (and the scholars they employed) served as translators.[18] It was their job to translate complicated, convoluted jargon into concrete, readable material for policy makers. Mahmood Ahmad argues, "For policy makers in many countries, it is often not the lack of information that is the problem, but the avalanche of it."[19] Think tanks were meant to sift through decades of research and provide policy makers with what they *really* needed to know to make informed decisions. Through the founding stories of several of America's think tanks, scholars can see how this field shifted from one geared towards education to one deeply entrenched in politics. This change is reflected not only in the organization's internal structure, but also in the policy briefs that they create. These changes saw think tanks become partisan entities who wrote persuasive briefs, concerned only with affecting policy.

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The Carnegie Endowment for National Peace, who's founding letter was cited earlier in this chapter, began a century-long American tradition of policy advocacy

[16] Abelson, 55.

[17] Smith, James Allen. *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite* (New York: The Free Press, 1991) XV-XVI.

[18] Fraussen, Bert and Darren Halpin. "Think Tanks and Strategic Policy-Making: The Contribution of Think Tanks to Policy Advisory Systems," *Policy Sciences,* 108.

[19] Ahmad, 529.

groups. Carnegie started his institution with a 10 million dollar trust fund to be used in any way that would "hasten the abolition of war."[20] To achieve this aim, the Carnegie Endowment cast a wide-reaching net that touched nearly every issue in American politics. By 1919, the Endowment created a variety of sectors, including ones focusing on International Law, Economics, History, and Education.[21] Each examined the causes of war in a new facet and recommended several ways to avoid international conflict.[22] In these divisions, the Endowment's experts were generally political scientists, historians, or economists.[23] In spite of their academic background, Carnegie did not have his experts write with a classroom in mind. Instead, they were charged with keeping policy makers informed and outraged about the horrors of war as well as suggesting and popularizing alternatives to interstate violence.[24]

The Endowment also took a marked interest in the international, establishing programs like Face to Face; the Mid-Atlantic Club; East-West Relations in Europe; Arms Proliferation in the Near East and South Asia Project; Immigration Policy Project; Trade, Equity, and Development; Post-Soviet Economies; and U.S. Leadership.[25] In addition, the Carnegie Endowment opened the Carnegie Moscow Center in 1993 to facilitate "foreign and Russian researchers collaborating with Washington staff on a variety of

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[20] as cited in Abelson, 57.

[21] Smith, XV-XVI.

[22] Smith, XV-XVI.

[23] Smith, XVI-XVIII.

[24] Carnegie, 3.

[25] Smith, XVI-XVIII.

topical areas and policy-relevant projects."[26] This interest elevated their organization to a new level of national and global importance. This status is maintained through consistent interaction with members of Congress, the Executive Branch, and other policymakers. Further, the Endowment cultivated a respectable reputation through consistent public appearances. As the first American think tank, the Carnegie Endowment set the standard for similar institutions.

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The Institute for Government Research (IGR) was founded in 1916 and later became the Brookings Institute in 1927. This organization set its sights on a less idealistic (but no more realistic) goal than the Carnegie Endowment's search for world peace. IGR focused on promoting overall government efficiency. More specifically, IGR's founders hoped to "prevent partisan politics from undermining the government's efforts to serve the public interest."[27] Under the guidance of the Institute's first director, William F. Willoughby, IGR's first task was the "establishment of a genuine national budget."[28] Willoughby's efforts were appreciated by the national government, and, in January of 1917, he met with President Woodrow Wilson.[29] After their meeting, IGR was asked to submit a memorandum[30] that detailed IGR's recommendations. Soon after, IGR was called upon to consult for a House Select Committee, tasked with writing the Budget and

[26] Abelson, 58

[27] Donald Critchlow, *Brookings Institution: Expertise and the Public Interest in a Democratic Society* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1989) 9.

[28] as cited in Abelson, 60.

[29] Abelson, 61.

[30] Likely the origins of today's "policy brief."

Accounting Act of 1919.[31] Testifying to that committee, Willoughby commented on the significance of the task at hand, saying that he "did not think that anyone could fairly say that the United States Government had a budgetary system."[32] Despite his best efforts, the bill was vetoed unexpectedly by Wilson.

Willoughby, frustrated, began to exert influence in other ways: mobilizing the public. Willoughby utilized public opinion to promote his own policies. It is at this point that policy institutions began to stray into the realm of directly influencing policy makers, rather than simply informing them. IGR sought out public relation specialists to write articles and editorials in popular newspapers across the country.[33] Donald Critchlow, author of *Brookings Institution: Expertise and the Public Interest in a Democratic Society,* noted that "a thin line divided partisan from nonpartisan, and nonpolitical from political activity. At this point in the IGR's history, these lines would be frequently blurred, contrary to institute rhetoric."[34] This interference, however, paid off. In June of 1921, President Harding signed IGR's bill. IGR's movements shifted the field towards the political and away from their academic roots.

President Hoover, founder of the Hoover Institution for War, Revolution, and Peace, did not set out to create a think tank. He wanted to create a research facility and an

[31] Abelson, 61.

[32] Fred Dews, "Brookings's Role in 'the Greatest Reformation in Governmental Practices'-the 1921 Budget Reform" (Brookings, October 12, 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2016/10/12/brookings-role-in-1921-budget-reform/.

[33] Critchlow, 32.

[34] Critchlow, 9-10.

archive for World War I history. As head of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, Hoover saw a war-torn country who was rapidly losing pieces of its heritage to violence.[35] The future president recognized the importance of cautioning future generations against the horrors of warfare and realized that he was "in a unique position to collect fugitive literature."[36] In his lengthy biography of Hoover, George Nash wrote that Hoover "resolved to undertake an audacious project … the systematic collecting of contemporary documents on the Great War before they were lost to history."[37] With this goal in mind, Hoover began to assemble his team. He needed capable individuals to travel Europe, collecting and safeguarding a wide variety of historical artifacts and documents. After, deciding on his alma mater, Stanford University, as a storehouse for his vast treasures, Hoover took the first steps of his project. Eventually, he collected so much that the president of Stanford, Ray Lyman Wilbur, called Hoover  "the greatest pack rat of all time, whenever he leaves a ton of food, he picks up a pound of history."[38]

As his collection grew, so did Hoover's ambitions. He wanted to create a research center to accompany his archive.[39] However, his attention was quickly diverted as he took on a tumultuous turn in the Oval Office. Upon his defeat at the hands of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, Hoover returned to growing and cultivating his collection. He claimed that his pet project was "not an ordinary library nor a 'packrat operation,' but

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[35] Abelson, 64-65.

[36] George H. Nash, et. al. *The Life of Herbert Hoover* 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 49.

[37] Ibid..

[38] As cited in Abelson, 65.

[39] Abelson, 66

a dynamic institution which sought to offer effective guidance for the future of our people and of mankind everywhere."[40] Although he dedicated much time to the education of the general public, he never assigned much priority to affecting the policies of Washington.[41]

This distance remained until 1960. That year brought a new director and a new, more politically involved goal. W. Glenn Campbell pulled the institution towards a position of influence in the American conservative arena. At this point, the Hoover Institution switched its focus from a research institute to becoming a true think tank. They crafted Republican-partial literature that helped guide politicians on the right for 20 years. During this time, a notable rift was growing between the Hoover Institution and her left-leaning host, Stanford University, especially as several of the institution's scholars publicly endorsed Ronald Reagan's bid for the presidency. Notably, this move was illegal. According to the Internal Revenue Code, "think tanks, as tax-exempt, non-profit organizations, were prohibited from publicly endorsing a candidate running for office."[42] In spite of this, the Hoover Institution was steadfast in their partiality. With this move, America's think tanks became overtly polarized; partisanship defined any given organization.

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While Hoover was scouring Europe for war relics, an assortment of high society gentlemen were congregating in New York to discuss international relations. This group featured lawyers, businessmen, academics, and the occasional government leader.[43]

[40] Nash, 136.

[41] Ibid..

[42] As cited in Abelson, 70.

[43] Abelson, 71.

Monthly meetings were held at the Metropolitan Club, where the society's thirty members were led in a discussion by Elihu Root, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, the current Secretary of State, and a former Secretary of War. Eventually, the members voted on a name: The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Soon after, the organization released their manifesto,

> The object of the Council on Foreign Relations is to afford a continuous conference on foreign affairs, bringing together at each meeting international thinkers so that, in the course of a year, several hundred expert minds in finance, industry, education, statecraft and science will have been brought to bear on international problems. [44]

At the time, CFR's membership was unrivaled in prestige. They, more than any other think tank, represented the country's most influential citizens, boasting celebrity activists, high-ranking government officials, and prominent businessmen.[45] While it can be easy to write off this organization as simply a meeting place for the 1%, it is impossible to deny their contribution to scholarship and the field. Between 1939-1945, CFR led a game-changing study on War and Peace that is still the standard today. In most aspects, the CFR is on the same field as other think tanks -- they just have a higher bar for membership: a fact which changed the way they play the game. Where most other think tanks relied on public opinion or persuasive research, CFR had the ability to trade in influence.[46] Within their walls, millionaires, academics, and politicians all sat around a

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[44] Laurence H. Shoup, and William Minter. *Imperial Brain Trust : The Council on Foreign Relations and United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 15.

[45] Peter Grose. *Continuing the Inquiry* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996), 7.

[46] Ibid., 13.

round table for the first time. As CFR developed, think tanks began infiltrating not just the policy making system, but the policy makers themselves.[47]

On the heels of World War II, two engineers, General Arnold of the Air Force, and a member of Roosevelt's cabinet approached the U.S. government with a proposal.[48] For $10 million, this group would research defense techniques for the U.S. Air Force.[49] Despite concerns about the organization's ties to the private sector,[50] The Air Force was enthusiastic about the prospect of an independent, not-for-profit research center that focused on American security.[51] This enthusiasm manifested in a $6 million dollar investment.[52] Officially chartered in 1948, the RAND Corporation set a goal to "further and promote scientific, educational, and charitable purposes, all for the public welfare and security of the United States of America."[53] It was at this point when they appropriated the term "think tank" to describe their institution. Before RAND, the world of think tanks was funded entirely by the private sector. Afterwards, the government began to commission the research, bankrolling some of the largest organizations.[54]

[47] Abelson, 73-74.

[48] Craig Nelson, *The First Heroes* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 104.

[49] Harold Orlans, *The Nonprofit Research Institute* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), 19.

[50] For a more detailed analysis, see B.L.R. Smith, *The Rand Corporation*.

[51] Orlans, 21.

[52] Abelson, 75.

[53] Orlans, 21.

[54] Abelson, 74.

Each of these early think tanks uniquely shaped the industry; ultimately, the think tank was transformed from a purely academic, research facility to a deeply politicized machine. Apart from that history, there is not much these organizations have in common with each other. Between ideological and structural differences,[55] any unifying features are hazy at best. Consequently, establishing a working definition of a "think tank" is a task that scholars have been wrestling with since the 1970s.[56] The most widely used definition was created by Kent Weaver, a think tank analyst, in the 1980s.[57] He classifies think tanks as "non-governmental, not-for profit research organizations with substantial organizational autonomy from government and from societal interests such as firms, interest groups, and political parties."[58] Weaver's broad, working definition is still contentious, only accepted so long as "non-governmental" does not exclude institutions who receive funding from the government. Hartwig Pautz, author of "Revisiting the Think Tank Phenomenon," offers a more specific definition:

> Think-Tanks are non-governmental institutions; intellectually [and] organizationally … autonomous from government, political parties or organized interests; and set up with the aim of influencing policy. They have no formal decision-making power and claim political neutrality … Some carry out little research themselves and commission external experts or recycle existing research, while others have considerable internal

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[55] Many of which are not discussed here. See Fraussen, Bert and Darren Halpin. "Think Tanks and Strategic Policy-Making: The Contribution of Think Tanks to Policy Advisory Systems," in *Policy Sciences* for an in-depth analysis of a think tank's structure, including funding sources and internal organization.

[56] Paul Dickinson, 1970

[57] Andrew Rich and R. Kent Weaver. "Think Tanks in the U.S. Media." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politic*s 5, no. 4: September 2000, 83.

[58] James G. McGann and R. Kent Weaver. *Think Tanks in Civil Societies: Catalysts for Ideas and Actions* (Oxfordshire: Routledge Publishing, 2017), 4.

> research capacities … They advocate ideas, develop and maintain policy networks, and provide expertise to policymakers. [59]

In its complexity, this definition speaks to the variety of the field. There is no one definition that can provide a cut-off point for what constitutes a think tank.[60]

Most scholars have settled on broad, generally applicable definitions with several subsets. The typologies of American think tanks can be used to facilitate research, but this approach is inherently flawed. Scholars like Kent Weaver, James McGann, and Donald Abelson developed these types to help classify the multitude of organizations that fall under the umbrella definition of a think tank by looking at institutional motivations and other defining traits.[61] Creating distinctions based on research, political advocacy, sources of funding, and audience, scholars are able to bring more clarity to today's varied field. Table 1, below, first appearing in the work of Mahmood Ahmad, concisely describes these classifications.

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[59] Hartwig Pautz. "Revisiting the Think-Tank Phenomenon." *Public Policy and Administration* 26, no. 4: October 2011, 421.

[60] Bert Fraussen and Darren Halpin, 107.

[61] As cited in Abelson, 44-45.

*Table 1: Think Tank Typologies* [62]

| | Ideological | Purpose | Funding | Research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Academic** | Attempts to be neutral | Research driven, focuses heavily on education | Diversified sources (grants, endowments, private donations, organizations, etc.) | Driven by ideas; future-oriented; purpose is to supply social science expertise to policy makers; strict adherence to disinterested research; findings distributed in a manner that is to serve all of humanity; hires well published PhD's in adjutant positions |
| **Contract** | Attempts to be neutral | Address government needs | Primarily government contracts | Driven by government contractor needs; long term; future-oriented; purpose is to supply social science expertise to policy makers; disinterested research; findings distributed primarily to contracts; hires well published PhD's |
| **Advocacy** | Liberal or Conservative | Ideologically driven, attempts to further a specific set of ideas | Constituents play a large role | Driven by ideology; short term; purpose is to supply social science expertise to policy makers; ideologically driven research; findings distributed for constituents; hires masters-level graduates and PhD's who have not published a lot in permanent positions |
| **Party and Legacy** | Democratic or Republican | Address the needs of a part or a specific candidate | Constituents play a large role | Driven by party allegiance; issue-focused; not concerned with supplying social science expertise to policy makers; main purpose is to prove that what they believe is right; often staffed by former government officials and interest groups |

While the typologies in Table 1 are useful for scholarship, they can also present an oversimplified picture. Many think tanks exist in a grey area, somewhere between two

[62] Ahmad, 535

of the categories. Further, through the use of these categories, scholars run the risk of prescribing a party bias onto a think tank. Donald Abelson provides an example in the Brookings Institution and the Heritage Foundation.[63] Both institutions, he argues, could be classified as either an academic or an advocacy think tank because both place emphasis on research and political involvement. He further cautions against the unrestrained use of this system, saying that,

> How scholars and journalists classify institutes can and does have a profound impact on the way different think tanks are perceived in the media and by the public. Referring to the Brookings Institution as a world-renowned policy research center provides the organization with instant credibility. It creates the impression, rightly or wrongly, that the institution produces objective, scholarly, scientific, and balanced research. Conversely, labelling the Heritage Foundation … as a well-known advocacy think tank implies that they are more committed to advancing their ideological agenda than to pursuing scholarly research.[64]

The terms used by scholars to classify think tanks have a tangible impact on the way those think tanks are perceived by the general public. Harvard's Kennedy School counts over 1200 active think tanks in the United States, fitting each of them neatly into four classifications is an impossible feat.[65] Each of these 1200 organizations, while they may have very different funding sources, ideologies, and research goals, focuses on educating and influencing policy makers.

However, even with the danger of oversimplification, these categories serve as a useful companion to analysis. More specifically, Table 1 is beneficial to ensure just

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[63] Abelson, 48.

[64] Ibid..

[65] "Think Tank Search: U.S. Think Tanks," *Harvard Research Guides*, accessed October 10, 2019, https://guides.library.harvard.edu/hks/think_tank_search/US.

comparisons. Each type of think-tank will attempt to exercise influence in very different ways. For example, an academic think tank will primarily emphasize scholarship in their writings, while an advocacy think tank will appeal to a policy maker's ideological concerns. The stark difference in approach demonstrates how this model can assist comparison-based scholarship, particularly in the vein that this thesis is attempting.

In one way or another, all policy institutes claim to pursue similar missions. In their own words, policy institutes aim to "conduct in-depth research that leads to" (Brookings Institution) "innovative, independent solutions" (American Enterprise Institute) to a variety of "policy and decision-making issues" (RAND) that "originate, disseminate, and increase understanding of public policies based on the principles" (CATO Institute) of that specific institution. At the end of the day, the job of a think tank is to impact policy makers. The history of these organizations is complicated and convoluted; their present is only more so. Each was created with an idealistic goal, but few had a specific strategy to achieve their aims. Most settled on the policy brief: a short, concise document that advised policy makers about a specific issue, sometimes including relevant history or research but always ending in a recommendation.

Think tanks hope that these briefs would sway policy makers toward a decision that best served the purposes of the authoring institution. Whether or not these institutions are, or even ever were successful is debatable at best. In short, scholars have yet to prove that their policy brief directly influenced a policy maker. This thesis will attempt to address this shortcoming in scholarship by demonstrating what constitutes an effective policy brief. First, I will look at historical attempts to measure influence, using those as a guide to define an 'effective' policy brief. Next, I will apply that definition to several briefs, separating the successful from the unsuccessful. From there, I will be able to perform a rhetorical analysis of the briefs, looking specifically for common strategies and forms that appear to have a direct effect on any given brief's level of effectiveness. That leads us to the first challenge of this thesis: how can we determine if think tanks and their policy briefs are fulfilling their sole purpose? Impact is a difficult thing to measure, so what steps can think tanks, universities, and other institutions take to ensure that they are writing effective, influential policy briefs?

# CHAPTER TWO

## Measuring Impact

A policy maker, when making national policy, has several things to consider before they make decisions or write a law. Things like ideology and party affiliation are both expected factors that affect this process. Politicians, by definition, work within their political affiliations, looking to balance the needs of the party with their constituents. In doing so, they consider a variety of factors, some easy to understand (like partisan politics) and some more difficult to measure (like indirect exposure). Looking specifically at why a choice was made is a difficult task, but when dealing with national policy, it is an important one. Attempting to understand why and how a policy maker made a certain decision raises several questions, especially when considering the complex and convoluted arena in which they work. More specifically, I am interested in whether or not policy briefs from think tanks have a role to play in this process. We know policy makers read them, so to what extent does their influence extend, and what exactly makes them effective?

To this end, it is useful to begin with a definition of "influence." Unfortunately, even this simple question of definition is multifaceted and generally contested in scholarship. In the field of politics, influence is most concisely described by K. J. Holsti in his study of international relations.[1] Essentially, Holsti calls 'influence' the action of

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[1] Holsti, K. J. *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis,* 3d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1977) 141.

"A convincing B to do X, convincing B not to do X" or otherwise "to continue a course of action or policy that is useful to, or in the interests of, A."[2] Under Holsti's model, an influential policy brief would convince a policy maker to either implement or disregard a specific policy. If a policy brief does not have that outcome, due to whatever circumstances that may exist, then it cannot be labelled as influential.[3] Therefore, Holsti argues that the easiest way to measure this influence would be by way of comparison: "If A can get B to do X, but C cannot get B to do the same thing, then in that particular issue, A has more influence. If B does X despite the protestations of A, then we can assume that A, in this circumstance, did not enjoy much influence."[4] In application, this presents a black and white answer to this question. If two policy briefs were shown to a policy maker, one arguing for a policy and the other against it, whatever course of action the policy maker takes plainly demonstrates which brief had more influence.

While this model may be useful for its simplicity, in this practice, it is far too condensed. To be fair, it is also important to realize that Holsti introduced this model as a method for studying international relations, in which A and B are nation-states utilizing their considerable resources to influence other nation-states. Our discussion, however, centers around a single piece of paper influencing an agency, a congressman, or some other decision-maker.[5] To further explore why this difference becomes problematic, Donald Abelson prompts his readers to imagine:

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[2] Holsti, 142.

[3] Holsti, 141.

[4] Holsti, 150.

[5] Holsti, 150.

> A is a resident scholar at a Washington-based think tank with expertise in foreign policy and security studies and B is the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. A has published a study on national missile defense and is asked to testify before this committee. According to Holsti's model, if A's recommendations are not followed by B … A would be perceived as having no influence … [However,] A could have played an important role in helping the public, policy-makers, and the media to consider other approaches to resolving a potentially difficult policy problem. … Conversely … even if the recommendations A has proposed closely resemble policies that are introduced, he should not take for granted that A has had influence over B. It is conceivable … that A has only reinforced what was on B's mind or that other domestic and external forces compelled B to act in a certain way. [6]

In our situation, Holsti's model would prompt a scholar to over-simplify the matter. With that being said, Holsti's framework is a useful introduction to the world of policy making. Through this model, it is easy to explore the alternative factors that could influence a policy maker and look at policy briefs within their complicated contexts.[7] Further, it demonstrates a policy brief's ability to influence other political actors, like the public, who can have a strong impact on the policy makers as well.[8]

Policy briefs, in the hands of the public, can have a much greater effect on overall policy than in the hands of a scholar. According to Joseph G. Peschek, think tanks and policy briefs have an integral role in curating public opinion over

[6] Donald E Abelson, *A Capitol Idea Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy* Montreal (Que: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006) 166.

[7] Abelson, 166.

[8] Joseph G. Peschek, *Policy-Planning Organizations: Elite Agendas and America's Rightward Turn* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

an issue.[9] He argues that the ultimate goal of a brief should extend beyond its effect on policy makers, that A has the ability to influence more than just B.[10] Further, he then promotes the idea that this route could have a roundabout effect on policy makers: rather than understanding a policy recommendation through the briefs themselves, the policy maker is exposed to the recommendations of that brief through a push in public opinion.[11]

Beyond even this layer of complexity, a major roadblock for any scholar trying to determine the effectiveness of a policy brief is the think tank itself.[12] Think tanks have made a business out of being influential. They promise their investors a direct line of communication to important policy makers.[13] As a result, think tanks have a vested interest in making themselves appear influential, regardless of whether or not they actually are.[14] This complicates the situation, forcing scholars to regard one of their best sources of information as relatively untrustworthy.

Abelson, in an attempt to account for each of these issues, put forth one of the most developed models for this method of study. Termed a "holistic model," Abelson proposes a modification to the base of Holsti's definition of influence.[15]

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[9] Peschek.

[10] Peschek.

[11] Peschek.

[12] Peschek.

[13] It should be noted that think tanks, especially academic ones, vehemently deny this. However, the expectation is still very present in the minds of donors. See Pescheck.

[14] Pescheck.

[15] Abelson, 169.

Abelson suggests that the field should be "divided into two spheres – the core (sub-government) and the periphery (the attentive public)," both of which "seek to influence specific public policies."[16] These spheres are made up by both individuals and organizations, each with their own agendas and biases. Each of these actors then jockey for influence using the tools available to them within their respective spheres.[17] These conversations each uniquely affect the political landscape and work together to contribute to the influence of a specific idea. Turning again to the example used to discuss the shortcomings of Holsti, Abelson asks readers to

> Recall the example we used of a resident scholar from a Washington-based think tank who was asked to testify on national missile defense to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee … a holistic model which acknowledges that influence can occur in different ways and at different stages of the policy cycle presents a more realistic picture of how A might achieve influence. Even though A might not be able to convince B to endorse the proposed recommendations, A's testimony may spark a debate in the media, in academic circles, in the Oval Office, at other think tanks, and in countless other places where public policy is discussed and analyzed. The fact that A may not have altered B's position regarding national missile defense does not mean that A lacks influence; nor does it mean that in the medium or long term, A's recommendations will be ignored. Rather, B's unwillingness to fulfill A's wishes suggests simply that in this instance, B is unable and/or unwilling to follow A's advice.[18]

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[16] Abelson, 167-168.

[17] Abelson, 167-168.

[18] Abelson, 168.

This approach, therefore, allows for scholars to account for the complex forces that act in any given political landscape. It combines the argument of Peschek and Holsti to create a more complete view of influence.

With that being said, under Abelson's model, it is possible for a policy brief to be extremely influential, but never have their recommendations followed. To appropriate Abelson's example, A's recommendations about missile defense may have sparked a debate in the media, but those recommendations never made their way into a bill. As a result, those recommendations were unable to create a change in the laws. In that scenario, the question must be raised: what's the point? If a policy brief is unable to effect policy makers in a concrete way, then how can think tanks justify the effort spent creating them? Looking at end of year reports, some think tanks are spending upwards of $300,000/year producing these publications.[19] There are easier, faster ways to frame the "parameters of a policy debate" and there are much more effective ways to educate the public on a specific issue than an extremely technical document.[20] If think tanks were truly interested in public opinion, they would invest in more dynamic, accessible pieces, like documentaries or TV appearances that would appeal to a broader audience. In spite of this, think tanks continue to create policy briefs in the hopes that they will persuade a policy maker to change their course of action.

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[19] The Brookings Institute, *Annual Report, 2019,* 47. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-annual-report.pdf.

[20] Lerner, Joshua Y. "Getting the Message Across: Evaluating Think Tank Influence in Congress." *Public Choice* 175, no. 3 (2018): 347.

The problem with Abelson's model is circumvented through the idea of proxy impact, which removes the concept of 'success' or 'effect' altogether.[21] Think tanks themselves typically turn to this model, as it is easy to measure and understand.[22] AEI's former President, Arthur C. Brooks, told the *Harvard Business Review* that think tanks look at "inputs such as how much they've received in contributions or outputs such as how busy they have been" as a proxy measure for impact.[23] The end of year reports for various think tanks shows the weight that organizations place on these measures: Brookings, Heritage, CATO, and others all highlight a growth social media presence as evidence for success.[24] In some cases, information on congressional testimony or citations is omitted in favor of listing increases in *Twitter* or *Instagram* followings.

In spite of the emphasis placed on these indicators, they fall short of truly measuring the effectiveness of a given think tank of policy brief. This methodology allows a think tank to prioritize their reputation over effectiveness, telling donors about social networking, conference presentations, and outreach programs as opposed to how many laws they were able to pass that year.[25] The things being measured here do not

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[21] For more on Proxy Impact, see Castillo-Esparcia, Antonio, Ana Almansa-Martínez, and Emilia Smolak-Lozano. "East European Think Tanks in Social Media – Towards the Model of Evaluation of Effective communication/PR Strategies: A Case Study Analysis." *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*; Julia Clark and David Roodman, "Measuring Think Tank Performance: An Index of Public Profile," *Center for Global Development* (2013).

[22] Arthur C. Brooks "AEI's President on Measuring the Impact of Ideas," *Harvard Business Review*. Last modified March 2018. https://hbr.org/2018/03/aeis-president-on-measuring-the-impact-of-ideas.

[23] Brooks.

[24] The Brookings Institute, *Annual Report, 2019*; The Heritage Foundation, *Annual Report, 2018,* https://www.heritage.org/annual_report_2018/index.html; The CATO Institute, *Annual Report, 2018,* https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/cato-annual-report-2018-updated.pdf.

[25] Bubnova, N. I. "Think Tanks as an Actor of Contemporary Politics." *Comparative Politics Russia* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 2017): 8–19.

necessarily beget successful policy briefs. If they did, the following table, which is adapted from *Forbes* data of the most active think tanks in 2018-2019 would have a direct correlation to the number of recommendations followed.

*Table 2: Most Active Think Tanks (2018-2019)* [26]

| | *Twitter*, 2019 | *Facebook*, 2019 | *Instagram*, 2019 | *YouTube*, 2019 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Heritage Foundation** | 640,000 | 2,062,435 | 87,100 | 43,312 |
| **CATO Institute** | 354,000 | 376,493 | 28,800 | 39,356 |
| **AEI** | 112,000 | 301,544 | 13,600 | 163,102 |
| **Hoover Institute** | 102,000 | 341,043 | 12,700 | 112,847 |
| **Brookings Institute** | 358,000 | 407,952 | 18,500 | 69,295 |
| **RAND Cooperation** | 195,000 | 104,652 | 1,561 | 15,200 |
| **Center for American Progress** | 92,600 | 93,898 | 4,076 | 6,450 |

While the table does demonstrate the largest and most popular think tanks, neither size nor popularity are prerequisites for impact.

Although the two (reputation and impact) are intimately connected, one does not guarantee the other. Of course, employing a high number of Ivy-League graduates at a think tank or having an active *Instagram* is beneficial; it does not, however, mean that a policy brief will be seen as effective. Take, for example, every brief written by a reputable think tank where Congress did the opposite of what the brief recommended. A more specific instance of the failures of proxy impact can be found in the archives of the

[26] Adapted from Alejandro Chafuen, "The 2019 Ranking of Free-Market Think Tanks Measured by Social Media Impact," *Forbes*, April 11, 2019. https://www.forbes.com/sites/alejandrochafuen/2019/04/10/the-2019-ranking-of-free-market-think-tanks-measured-by-social-media-impact/#2b46dc0d2fe7, supplemented with information from The RAND Corporation, *Annual Report, 2019* https://www.rand.org/pubs/corporate_pubs/CP1-2018.html; Juan Luis Manfredi-Sánchez, Juan Antonio Sánchez-Giménez and Juan Pizarro-Miranda, "Structural Analysis to Measure the Influence of Think Tanks' Networks in the Digital Era," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 10, no.4 (October 2015): 363-395.

Heritage Foundation, a conservative advocacy think tank. Looking at Table 1, this think tank devotes considerable time to curating an active social media presence. In addition, they are, by all accounts, a reputable think tank, boasting 4,742 radio and TV interviews, 210 lectures, 1,540 commentaries published in 2018 (each of these measures are considered 'outputs' for the sake of measuring proxy impact).[27] However, their visibility was not enough for them to convince the House to abandon H.R. 5 in early 2019.[28] The bill, which proposed expanded protections against discrimination on the "basis of sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation," passed the house with a vote of 236 - 173 on May 17, 2019, in spite of the objections of the Heritage Foundation.[29] While just one example, this failed policy brief helpfully demonstrates the problem with developing a reliable model for determining effectiveness based on proxy impact.

As explored in Chapter one, think tanks act in several, conflicting ways throughout the policy-making process.[30] As a result, determining the exact effect of a policy brief is extremely difficult, especially given that it is constantly performing in wildly differing contexts. The major issue with previous models comes in determining the difference between influential and effective. Influence is slippery and almost impossible to determine. Effect, on the other hand, is inexplicably tied to outcome. Looking at the tools a think tank has at its disposal (testifying, consultations, public

[27] The Heritage Foundation, *Annual Report, 2018.*

[28] Emilie Kao, "H.R. 5 Is No Act of Equality," *The Heritage Foundation* no. 4943 (March 2019). https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/IB4943.pdf.

[29] U.S. Congress, House, *Equality Act* of 2019, HR 5, 116th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in House March 13, 2019. https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/5/text.

[30] Abelson, 128.

opinion, and the format/use of the policy brief), what combination of these tactics create an ‘effective’ policy brief (i.e. one that has its recommendations followed by a policy maker?

Before answering that question, however, it is important to consider how fickle these decisions can become. As one scholar notes, “there is little about the process of making decisions that is scientific.”[31] Boiling down this process is next-to impossible, given the conflicting interests and roles of each individual actor. With that being said, it is possible to further our understanding by examining past behavior, and discern, with some accuracy, the importance of each step in the process. This exploration must consider several criteria, each looking at the ways think tanks are able to expose policy makers, in this case: congress, to their ideas. Congressional testimony, congressional citations, media citations, public view/popularity, and consultations with government departments/agencies should all be taken into account in an attempt to determine what combination thereof best indicates success.

One of the most straightforward ways that think tanks are able to reach congress is through the use of testimony. In this case, an expert is able to espouse a specific ideal to a captive audience, usually in the form of a congressional committee. Like the other criteria on this list, congressional testimony does not have a one-to-one correlation to success. However, it is significant for its ability to reach policy makers both inside and outside the typical demographic for that think tank.[32] Joshua Lerner argues that think

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[31] Abelson, 129.

[32] Rich, Andrew. "The Politics of Expertise in Congress and the News Media." *Social Science Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (2001): 583-601. www.jstor.org/stable/42955743.

tanks can serve two purposes during a testimony: "first as part of congressional oversight responsibilities (as a "fire alarm" service) and, secondly, as information-conduits."[33] The first duty represents a think tank's ability to present themselves as experts who congress can rely on, thus fulfilling their due diligence of research before making a policy decision. The second would be the act of communicating the necessary information. Both of these are important to a think tank's ability to exert influence and, ultimately, become successful.[34] In addition, testimony allows a liberal think tank to reach a conservative congressperson and vice versa.[35] Essentially, this is the peak of exposure for a think tank. In this situation, a policy organization is able to reach individuals central to the decision-making process, persuasively arguing for or against a specific course of action of elaborating on the arguments made in their policy briefs.[36]

Another measurement for congressional use of a policy brief is in congressional citations, where a congressperson specifically credits a particular policy brief for their role in the process. This action brings many benefits to the congressperson, as it bolsters their arguments and associates them with the perceived expertise of that think tank.[37] Like testimony, this allows a think tank to gain more visibility in congress. In addition,

[33] Lerner, 349.

[34] Lerner, 353.

[35] To this end, it is important to note that the most frequent testifiers are non-partisan groups. See Lerner, Joshua Y. "Getting the Message Across: Evaluating Think Tank Influence in Congress." *Public Choice* 175, no. 3 (2018): 347-366. Lerner argues that a party politician is more likely to cite information from a party-affiliated think tank than a neutral one, while a more neutral party would be more likely to be called in to testify in front of Congress.

[36] It should also be noted that these testimonials, floor testimonies specifically, are ineffective at influencing anyone other than the congresspeople. According to M. Gilens and L. M. Bartels, these hearings have a negligible effect on public perception.

[37] Lerner, 354.

this is another one of the few measurable ways to gauge the use of a policy brief in congress. If a congressperson cites a specific brief in a floor speech or hearing, it indicates that said congressperson (or their staff) found the brief helpful enough and the think tank reputable enough to associate themselves with.

The third criteria attempts to account for the arguments made by Pesheck. Looking at the ways the brief was used by the media can help gauge public opinion and visibility and provide an estimate for changes made to the "parameters of debate."[38] This information is widely circulated by think tanks themselves, who use this as a measure for proxy impact. Radio and TV Interviews, publications, and citations in the news are all helpful 'outputs' that think tanks publish to their donors in order to demonstrate 'effectiveness.'[39] This analysis is critical because, as Peschek pointed out, the media can provide a roundabout path to influence.

Along the same lines, another important factor to consider is that of public use. The internet allows public access to these policy briefs, which are then cited and shared using various social media platforms. Like media citations, these numbers are often boasted by the think tank themselves, who each proudly cultivate active social media followings. A study by Kathleen McNutt and Gregory Marchildon of Canadian think tanks and their social media demonstrated that the public sought out many policy briefs on their own, without waiting for the media to act as intermediary.[40] For that reason, social media and website insights are significant contributors to this analysis.

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[38] Peschek; Lerner, 354.

[39] Brooks.

[40] McNutt, Kathleen, and Gregory Marchildon. "Think Tanks and the Web: Measuring Visibility and Influence." *Canadian Public Policy* 35, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 221.

The final, determinative factor is that of policy formation and execution. This simply asks the question: was the recommendation followed? If it was, that policy brief should be termed effective. While there are certainly other factors that contribute to this final question than the ones mentioned previously, this study is attempting to determine a correlation between these factors, the major ways think tanks can influence a policy debate, and ultimate outcome. Setting aside partisan tendencies and uncredited influence, these criteria build upon the models of the previous scholars mentioned and account for both direct and indirect influences.

Partisan biases and information spread by word of mouth are both particular problems for this method of analysis. Neither can be empirically accounted for and, therefore, do not appear as criteria. In particular, political parties are problematic. To return to the previous example about House Bill H.R. 5, the vote in favor of this bill was split almost completely along party lines (228 Democrats and 8 Republicans voting yes - 0 Democrats and 173 Republicans voting no).[41] This then begs the question, were the Heritage Foundation's recommendations not followed due to conflicting partisanship? If so, further scholarship must be focused on the ways think tanks can begin to overcome party lines for the sake of their recommendations. Even still, this analysis can serve as a starting place. It will be the first attempt to quantify the relationship between effective policy briefs, think tanks, and congress. As such, it should serve as a base for future scholarship, which can then begin to incorporate other factors, like partisanship, into the conversation.

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[41] U.S. Congress, House, *Final Vote Results for Roll Call 217: Equality Act* of 2019, HR 5, 116th Cong., 1st sess., vote in the House May 17, 2019. http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2019/roll217.xml.

# CHAPTER THREE

## The Life Cycle of a Policy Brief

This chapter will explore the path of four policy briefs, paying careful attention to the criteria mentioned previously (floor testimony, congressional citations, media citations, public use, consultations, and policy formation). In doing so, I aim to illuminate the role that policy briefs play in the modern political system. More specifically, I am looking to understand the way that policy briefs inform the decisions of policy makers, with an emphasis on how those briefs and their institutions have framed their research. From there, we can begin to examine how different think tanks use policy briefs to achieve their goals of influencing policy. This holistic method of analysis will allow me to examine the 6 factors mentioned previously, in particular, looking at the effect of those factors on this process. Given the deeply polarized state of American national politics, this thesis will choose one policy brief from the types of think tanks established in chapter one: Academic, Contract, Advocacy (including one libertarian and one liberal).[1] By examining each of these types, I hope to clarify some of the differences between the functionality of each think tank category and the ways that those categories change their use of rhetoric. By broadening the scope of this case study to include those varieties of

[1] In this thesis, I will not be considering Party think tanks, given their similarity to Advocacy think tanks and their inability to be separated from their party affiliation. Overt party affiliation (and the partisan bias it assumes) is a criteria outside the scope of my present argument.

think tanks, we can better understand the diverse approaches to policy briefs and the ways in which each is utilized on a national scale.

To do this, I will analyze the life cycle of policy briefs from the Brookings Institute, an academic think tank based out of Washington, D.C., the RAND Corporation, a contract think tank, the CATO Institute, a libertarian advocacy think tank, and the Center for American Progress, a liberal advocacy think tank. Each of these sought to influence policy discussion around the Higher Education Reauthorization Act by publishing a policy brief on the topic. First, I will look at "Making HEA work: Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act to Improve Employment for the Disadvantaged" from the Brookings Institute.[2] Next, I will explore "Higher Education Programs in Prison" from the RAND Corporation.[3] The third policy brief will come from the CATO Institute, and is titled, "Not Just Treading Water: In Higher Education, Tuition Often Does More than Replace Lost Appropriations."[4] Finally, I will examine "Ensuring Accountability and Effectiveness at the Office of Federal Student Aid " from the Center for American Progress. Each of the chosen policy briefs discuss education policy, looking specifically at amendments proposed to the 1965 Higher Education Act. By maintaining a consistent topic for each brief, this thesis will attempt to mitigate the issues stemming from variations in the study that can be attributed to differing expectations, personnel, and circumstances for individual topics. Through a discussion of the life cycle of each other these policy briefs, I hope to create a basis for understanding the world in which a

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[2]Ahmad, Mahmood. "US Think Tanks and the Politics of Expertise: Role, Value and Impact." *The Political Quarterly*, 531.

[3] Ahmad, 536.

[4] Ahmad, 356.

think tank operates, evaluating the impact of a variety of exposure strategies (floor testimony, congressional citations, media citations, public use, and consultations,) in an attempt to determine the importance of each in achieving the ultimate goal of policy formation.

The subject of each policy brief is the 2019 Higher Education Reauthorization Act.[5] The law, originally passed in 1968 but reauthorized every 4 or 5 years since, regulates federal programs relating to higher education—accreditation, student loans, completion initiatives, incentivation, etc.[6] As a 1985 CRS Report notes, the act governs everything from libraries (Title II) to the physical construction of schools (Title VII) to everything that happens within the walls of those institutions.[7] The original intent of the bill was to provide a path for any individual to pursue higher education regardless of their financial situation or location.[8] Over the past half-century, the Higher Education Act has since sprawled out to become the U.S. Department of Education and form the backbone

[5] Harry J. Holzer, "Making HEA Work: Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act to Improve Employment for the Disadvantaged." *Brookings Institute*, May 14, 2019. https://www.brookings.edu/research/making-hea-work-reauthorizing-the-higher-education-act-to-improve-employment-for-the-disadvantaged/.

[6] "Higher Education Act." *American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers*. Accessed April 8, 2020. https://www.aacrao.org/advocacy/issues/higher-education-act.

[7] Congressional Research Service, *Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act: Program Descriptions, Issues, and Options*, by Jordan, K. Forbis. CRS-1985-CRS-0011. February 1, 1985, 2. https://congressional-proquest-com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/congressional/result/pqpresultpage.gispdfhitspanel.pdflink/$2fapp-bin$2fgis-congresearch$2f8$2f8$2f5$2fa$2fcrs-1985-crs-0011_from_1_to_503.pdf/entitlementkeys=1234%7Capp-gis%7Ccongresearch%7Ccrs-1985-crs-0011.

[8] "Higher Education Act." *American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers*.

of contemporary education.[9] The reach of this bill is enormous, with congressional researchers estimating that the 2019/2020 reauthorization could cost an estimated $161 billion from 2020-2024.[10]

The broad scope means that there is plenty of room for think tanks to suggest far-reaching changes. As *the Atlantic* explained in an article announcing the 2019 intent to reauthorize,

> A reauthorization could range from just clearing some cobwebs to a gut renovation of the bill. It could fix the Free Application for Student Aid, the FAFSA; it could make sure the amount of Pell Grants for low-income students is consistent with the rising cost of college; it could increase federal oversight for higher-education institutions; or it could eliminate some regulations to make it easier for colleges to try new things.[11]

For think tanks, this meant that their briefs could cover anything from minor tweaks to re-building the federal student aid programs from the ground up. The recommendations of each institute are, therefore, extensive. Generally speaking, however, any proposed changes to institutions of higher education (IHEs), including those coming from think tanks, the policy makers themselves, and other political entities, fit into 7 broad categories: "(1) Expanding the availability of financial aid to postsecondary students; (2) Instituting borrower-focused student loan reforms; (3) Modifying educational, financial, and other institutional accountability requirements for receipt of federal funds; (4)

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[9] Congressional Research Service, *Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act: Program Descriptions, Issues, and Options*, 5-7.

[10] Congressional Research Service, *Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act: Program Descriptions, Issues, and Options*, 1.

[11] Adam Harris, "Congress Might Finally Overhaul Higher Education," *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/03/congress-eyes-higher-education-act-reauthorization/584449/.

Revising public accountability, transparency, and consumer information requirements; (5) Expanding academic and personal supports to specific student populations; (6) Increasing financial support to IHEs, focusing on minority-serving institutions; (7) Creating new grant programs for states and IHEs to reduce students' postsecondary costs."[12] Many policy briefs cover multiple, or even all, of these categories. Each think tank, however, has a unique perspective on exactly how these reforms ought to be enacted. The varied and drastic suggestions make it easier to determine which recommendations were taken-- and which weren't-- as overlap between the specific policies are negligible.

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The Brookings Institute is one of the largest and most popular think tanks in today's political landscape. As an academic think tank, they espouse the original mission of think tanks (in spite of their history of contributing to the shift away from that goal).[13] They proudly note that their mission is to "conduct in-depth research that leads to new ideas for solving problems facing society at the local, national and global level."[14] Specifically, they review foreign policy, economics, development, governance and metropolitan policy.[15] According to their end of year report, the Brookings Institute invests considerable resources in placing their research in front of both policy makers and the general public, spending an equal amount on producing policy briefs as they do on

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[12] Congressional Research Service, *H.R. 4674, the College Affordability Act: Proposed Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, Summary of Major Provisions*, by Alexandra Hegji and Benjamin Collins, R46176 (2020), 2.

[13] See chapter one of this thesis.

[14] "About Us," *Brookings Institute*, January 6, 2020. https://www.brookings.edu/about-us/.

[15] "About Us," *Brookings Institute.*

producing podcasts that discuss those briefs.[16] *Forbes* reported that the Brookings Institute ranked highly in internet engagement.[17] In particular, the Brookings Institute boasts strong *Twitter*, *Facebook,* and *YouTube* followings, making them a prominent authority in the eyes of the public.[18] For policy makers, the Brookings Institute was also an important resource. In their 2019 end of year report, the think tank indicated a 44% increased presence in congress through expert testimonies.[19] These testimonies allow Brookings to send experts to testify on the information covered in their policy briefs, reaching a wide variety of policy makers on both sides of the aisle.

"Making HEA work: Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act (HEA) to Improve Employment for the Disadvantaged" is an example of one of these policy briefs. In addition to publishing the brief, Adam Looney, the Brookings Institute Director of the Center on Regulation And Markets, was called to testify before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions on April 10, 2019.[20] While there, he outlined the same recommendations that the brief's author, Harry J. Holzer, had laid out for him. In particular, both the brief and testimony recommended that congress make several amendments to the HEA:

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[16] The Brookings Institute, *Annual Report, 2019,* 45--47. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-annual-report.pdf.

[17] Alejandro Chafuen, "The 2019 Ranking of Free-Market Think Tanks Measured by Social Media Impact," *Forbes*, April 11, 2019. https://www.forbes.com/sites/alejandrochafuen/2019/04/10/the-2019-ranking-of-free-market-think-tanks-measured-by-social-media-impact/#2b46dc0d2fe7.

[18] Chafuen.

[19] The Brookings Institute, *Annual Report, 2019,* 48-50

[20] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, *Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act: Strengthening Accountability to Protect Students and Taxpayers*, 116th Cong., 1st sess., 2019.

> Create a competitive grant program for community colleges; Create a formula fund to pay for more academic/career counseling; Create a major competitive matching grants to states to expand teaching capacity in high-demand fields...; Provide resources to evaluate outcome-based funding formulas...; Create a formula fund for states to provide resources and technical assistance to both employers and community colleges; Reward institutions with additional funding if at least some minimal percentage of their resources are provided by tuition payments from employers. [21]

Looney, while on Capitol Hill, encouraged the Senate to consider those changes to the HEA bill. Looney's presence meant that Brookings' policy brief checks one box: floor testimony. During his testimony, Looney is able to represent his think tank as an expert, allowing congress to feel as though the decisions they made were well-sourced and reasoned.[22] He was also able to communicate necessary information to policy makers, spreading the recommendations that were previously established in his policy brief.[23] Even still, this particular policy brief was not cited in CRS Reports. Although both the author and Brookings have been cited many times, "Making HEA Work" does not appear in legislative publications. This is likely inconsequential, as policy makers were exposed to the recommendations of the Brookings Institute regardless, through the in-person testimony of Looney.

Across the country, this piece resonated with education-oriented professional organizations, finding its way into publications and the public eye through them. The National Council of Higher Education Resources, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, and the Institute for Higher Education Policy, among others, disseminated

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[21] Holzer.

[22] Lerner, 349.

[23] Lerner, 349.

this writing to their followings, a combined 10,000 on *Facebook* alone.[24] *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube* similarly spread this policy brief, reaching 385,000 *Twitter* accounts of Brookings own following plus an additional 11,642 accounts due to retweets and reposts; 18,300 accounts were reached on *Instagram*; and 95,700 through *YouTube*.[25] With this exposure, the Brookings Institute moved to "frame the perimeters of the policy debate," as Joshua Lerner advised was a critical responsibility of think tanks.[26]

Comparing the initial draft from January to the October draft of the reauthorization act, the recommendations of the Brookings Institute were largely followed.[27] Their policy brief, which paid special attention to Community Colleges, saw many of its suggestions put into the next rendition of the bill. This included the creation of a competitive grant program for students at community and junior colleges, support for academic and career counselors, and reward programs designed to encourage

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[24] National Council for Higher Education Resource's Facebook page. Accessed March 30, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/633750116770142/posts/making-hea-work-reauthorizing-the-higher-education-act-to-improve-employment-for/1744031072408702/ and Melissa E. Clinedinst, et. al. "Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act: Issues and Options," *Institute for Higher Education Policy* (n.d.) https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstream/handle/10919/83115/ReauthorizingHigherEducationAct.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[25] Twitter Search. Search Terms: "Making HEA Work; Brookings Institute." Twitter, March 30, 2020. https://twitter.com/search?q=Making%20HEA%20work%3A%20Reauthorizing%20the%20Higher%20Education%20Act%20(HEA)%20to%20Improve%20Employment%20for%20the%20Disadvantaged&src=recent_search_click; Brookingsinst. Instagram. March 30, 2020 https://www.instagram.com/brookingsinst/; BrookingsInstitution. Youtube. March 30, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/user/BrookingsInstitution. It should be noted that reach is different from engagement, as not all of these accounts will have read or even seen this post, due to the viewing algorithms of these websites. Even still, this number is valuable because it demonstrates the ability of the Brookings Institute to disseminate their information widely and bolsters their prominence in the eyes of both the public and of policy makers.

[26] Lerner, 347.

[27] U.S. Congress, House, *College Affordability Act*, HR 4674, 116th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in House October 15, 2019, 413; 430; 1161. https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr4674/BILLS-116hr4674ih.pdf.

apprenticeship pathways.[28] This combination of congressional testimony and extensive public exposure were clearly effective enough to convince policy makers of these specific amendments. However, this proposal does not include the groundwork for the state-based grant program that Brookings endorsed. Even still, the majority of the proposals were accepted.

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The RAND Corporation is the single largest contract think tank operating within the United States.[29] As a contract think tank, they receive the majority of their funds from government research contracts, becoming the first to do so in 1948.[30] Government funds account for $287.3 million or their $345 million in total revenue.[31] As a result of their position, it is clear that policy makers are reading RAND's policy briefs. RAND was commissioned by a government agency to answer a question, so it makes sense that said agency would want to read the answer to that question. RAND is routinely cited in CRS reports and by policy makers themselves.[32] This places RAND in a unique circumstance among think tanks. Not only are they guaranteed an audience with policy makers, they also are less concerned with influencing individuals or the private sector.

[28] U.S. Congress, House, *College Affordability Act*, 413; 430; 1161.

[29] "About the RAND Corporation." *RAND Corporation.* Accessed April 8, 2020. https://www.rand.org/about.html.

[30] Ahmad, 535.

[31] The RAND Corporation, *Annual Report,* 2019, 75. https://www.rand.org/about/annual_report.html.

[32] The RAND Corporation, *Annual Report,* 75.

Because they are less reliant on individual, corporate, or University fundraising, RAND is required to invest much less in their relationship with the general public. This is reflected in their spending habits, as things like social media campaigns and other internet-related expenses accounted for less than 15% of their total budget in 2018.[33] Even still, the public regards RAND highly. Their end of year report claims a large *Twitter* following and, impressively, 5.4 million individual downloads of their policy briefs and reports.[34] The vast majority of RAND's time and resources are devoted to the creation of those research projects. Within those, they aim to "develop solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous."[35] In particular, RAND is known for their contribution to research on foreign policy, national security, and the U.S. military, though they write on a broad array of topics, including education.

"Higher Education Programs in Prison: What We Know Now and What We Should Focus on Going Forward" is a policy brief written by Lois M. Davis. Davis urges congress to consider major reforms to prison education programs as a facet of the 2019 HEA overhaul. In particular, she suggests two changes that would drastically impact the system currently in place: "(1) Besides restoring Pell Grant eligibility, other options should be considered for ensuring long-term funding of in-prison college programs. (2) An outcomes evaluation of in-prison college programs and the Pell Experimental

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[33] The RAND Corporation, *Annual Report,* 75.

[34] The RAND Corporation, *Annual Report*, 75.

[35] "About the RAND Corporation."

Initiative is needed to inform how best to provide these programs."[36] Here, RAND is encouraging Congress to reinstate structures to support prison education, something that was cut off in 1994. Like the Brookings Institute, RAND received the opportunity to recommend these reforms in person through a committee hearing on May 15, 2019.[37] Additionally, their research was cited in a CRS report on the subject, further disseminating this information to policy makers.[38]

Among a general audience, this policy brief was frequently mentioned, bolstering arguments for holistic prison reform as well as education reform.[39] In particular, this brief was popular among academics, as it was cited in several research papers.[40] Additionally, RAND impressively garnered reach for this brief, with 50,909 likes on their *Facebook* page.[41] Through *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube,* RAND gained extra views, including 195,200 *Twitter* accounts of their following plus an additional 63,138 accounts due to retweets and reposts; 1,558 accounts were reached on *Instagram*; and 15,200 through

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[36] Lois M. Davis, "Higher Education Programs in Prison: What We Know Now and What We Should Focus On Going Forward" *Rand Corporation*, May 14, 2019, 2. https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE342.html.

[37] U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, *Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2020*, 116th Cong., 2d sess., 2019, 296.
https://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t49.d48.h.rp._116-62?accountid=7014.

[38] U.S. Congress, House, Committee, *Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2020*, 296.

[39] Jennifer L. Steele, et. al. *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults* (New York, RAND Corporation, 2019).

[40] Steele.

[41] RAND Corporation's Facebook page. Accessed March 30, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/RANDCorporation/?__tn__=%2Cd%2CP-R&eid=ARD86nNtfRbsy2IQoFlvkGSKAsn5TNTArgyyWHgxFUxs4uQhUl9sXDP9wyrX07Ftf-jg8-8wGAaCB34Y.

YouTube.[42] Considering that RAND does not heavily invest in these areas, they were able to reach an impressive number of people.

Moving to the October version of the HEA Reauthorization Act, RAND was ultimately unsuccessful. In particular, they were looking to change a single section of the bill: sec. 401(b).[43] The list of changes to the HEA do not even mention this portion, however.[44] The suggested amendments only mention prison education in passing, as a part of a definition.[45] Similarly, the CRS Report for a January, 2020 edition of this bill fails to mention prisons at all.[46] In spite of the RAND Corporation's impressive presence throughout every stage of bill-writing, they were unable to successfully convince policy makers of their recommendation.

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The CATO Institute, an advocacy think tank, is largely ideologically driven, working to provide research based heavily on the social sciences.[47] This is clearly laid out in their mission statement, which states that the Cato Institute aims to "originate, disseminate, and increase understanding of public policies based on the principles of

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[42] Twitter Search. Search Terms: "Higher Education Programs in Prison; RAND Corporation." Twitter, March 30, 2020. https://twitter.com/search?q=Higher%20Education%20Programs%20in%20Prison%20What%20We%20Know%20Now%20and%20What%20We%20Should%20Focus%20On%20Going%20Forward&src=typed_query; RANDCorporation. Instagram. March 30, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/randcorporation/; RAND Corporation's Facebook page. Accessed March 30, 2020.; TheRANDCorporation. Youtube. March 30, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/user/TheRANDCorporation.

[43] Davis, 2.

[44] U.S. Congress, House, *College Affordability Act*, 249.

[45] U.S. Congress, House, *College Affordability Act*, 282.

[46] Congressional Research Service, *H.R. 4674, the College Affordability Act: Proposed Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, Summary of Major Provisions*, by Alexandra Hegji and Benjamin Collins, R46176 (2020).

[47] Ahmad, 535; "About Cato," *Cato Institute*, September 10, 2019. https://www.cato.org/about.

individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace. [Their] vision is to create free, open, and civil societies founded on libertarian principles."[48] As this quote states, CATO emphasizes research with a libertarian leaning. The outright ideological claim is far different from Brookings or RAND, who both try to avoid political affiliation. CATO focuses on civil liberties, economics, and public policies, though, like RAND, they research a wide variety of topics.[49]

In addition to research, CATO has the additional responsibility of endearing themselves to the public in order to earn revenue. The vast majority of CATO's income stems from donor contributions.[50] Therefore, each year, they must invest a considerable amount into their public relations, including publications, interviews, an online presence, and other tactics to garner public support. This stress is extremely clear through their end of year report, where CATO cites 21 different metrics used to measure public popularity, but never discloses the number of testimonies their experts have given or citations their briefs have received in Congress.[51]

Though they never publicized it, CATO has been routinely mentioned in congressional publications. "Not Just Treading Water: In Higher Education, Tuition Often Does More than Replace Lost Appropriations" is one such policy brief. This brief, written by Neal McCluskey, lays out research that suggests that federal student aid be decreased, rather than increased. He claims that increased aid encourages institutions to

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[48] "Mission," *Cato Institute*, September 10, 2019. https://www.cato.org/mission.

[49] "Research," *Cato Institute*, September 10, 2019. https://www.cato.org/research.

[50] The CATO Institute, *Yearly Audited Financials 2018*, 4. https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/cato-institute-audited-financials-2018.pdf.

[51] The CATO Institute, *Annual Report, 2018*, 6. https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/cato-annual-report-2018-updated.pdf.

raise tuition rates, which then causes congress to increase aid again, thus perpetuating a cycle of inflated prices for higher education:

> By all indications, the state of higher education financing over the last quarter-century is not how it has been portrayed: institutions treading water just to stay financially afloat as state and local governments have withdrawn their support. Most states have seen their schools do better than that on a per pupil basis, and all have seen significant increases in total revenue. What may well be enabling much of this is federal student aid, and colleges taking not just whatever they need, but whatever they want. [52]

McClusky's detailed report circulated through congress, cited in both hearings and written reports.[53]

This unexpected recommendation made waves across both the academic and public spheres. Books like James V. Koch's *The Impoverishment of the American College Student* and Todd J. Zywicki's *Unprofitable Schooling: Examining the Causes of, and Fixes for, America's Broken Ivory Tower* both cited CATO's research as turning points in their arguments.[54] Across social media, the brief reached 366,600 *Twitter* accounts of CATO's following, an additional 126,969 accounts were reached through retweets and reposts; 28,800 accounts were reached on *Instagram*; and 53,300 through *YouTube*.[55] This particular policy brief received significant attention for its drastic and

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[52] Neal McCluskey, "Not Just Treading Water: In Higher Education, Tuition Often Does More than Replace Lost Appropriations" *The Cato Institute*, 13. https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa-810.pdf.

[53]U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Committee on Education and Labor, *The Cost of College: Student Centered Reforms to Bring Higher Education Within Reach*, 116th Cong., 1st sess., 2019, 44.

[54] James V. Koch, *The Impoverishment of the American College Student* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 270; Zywicki.

[55] Twitter Search. Search Terms: "Not Just Treading Water; CATO Institute." *Twitter*, March 30, 2020. https://twitter.com/search?q=No%20Just%20Treading%20Water%20In%20Higher%20Education%2C%20Tuition%20Often%20Does%20More%20than%20Replace%20Lost%20Appropriations&src=typed_query; The CATO Institute, *Annual Report, 2018*, 6.

unprecedented recommendations. The research cited within changed the expectations for the Higher Education Act and the understanding of the structure of private and public education systems.

Ultimately, this recommendation was not followed. In the October draft of the HEA amendments, congress opted to increase federal student aid, particularly aid set aside for underserved communities.[56] With this brief, CATO serves as an excellent example of a policy brief that greatly impacted the general public but failed to influence policy makers. While CATO certainly "framed the perimeters of the policy debate" and even changed how the public views the system of higher education, the changes suggested were impractical.[57] Congressional failure to increase federal student aid would result in education becoming inaccessible for many students, particularly for individuals of a lower socio-economic status. Such a change would disproportionately affect low-income and minority students. As a result, CATO, while their brief certainly had an impact on the academic and public spheres, was unable to affect the behavior of policy makers.

The Center for American Progress (CAP) serves a similar role to CATO, but on the other side of the ideological aisle. As an advocacy group, they adhere to progressive political views. CAP's mission statement identifies itself as an "independent nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to

[56] U.S. Congress, House, *College Affordability Act,* 245-596.

[57] Lerner, 347.

change the conversation, but to change the country."[58] Like CATO, CAP also heavily depends on donations from the public. In 2019, 97% of CAP's revenue stemmed from individuals and foundations.[59] The remaining 3% consisted of corporate sponsorships.[60] CAP prides itself on this ratio, informing their contributors that "corporate donors are not permitted to remain anonymous, and corporate donations do not fund new research."[61] In spite of their reliance on the public, CAP falls far behind other think tanks in terms of their social media followings and engagement.[62] Looking again at the table provided in chapter two, CAP ranks poorly across most social media platforms.

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[58] "About." *Center for American Progress*. Accessed April 14, 2020. https://www.americanprogress.org/about/mission/.

[59] "Our Supporters." *Center for American Progress*. Accessed April 14, 2020. https://www.americanprogress.org/c3-our-supporters/.

[60] "Our Supporters." *Center for American Progress*.

[61] "Our Supporters." *Center for American Progress.*

[62] Center for American Progress' Facebook page. Accessed March 30, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/americanprogress/. Twitter Search. Search Terms: "Ensuring Accountability and Effectiveness at the Office of Federal Student Aid"; Center for American Progress" Twitter, March 30, 2020. https://twitter.com/search?q=Ensuring%20Accountability%20and%20Effectiveness%20at%20the%20Office%20of%20Federal%20Student%20Aid&src=typed_query; AmericanProgress. Instagram. March 30, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/americanprogress/; See Progress. Youtube. March 30, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0COu43Li7CUL2jseBpH9kQ.

***Table 3: Most Active Think Tanks (2018-2019) (Repeated)*** [63]

| | ***Twitter*, 2019** | ***Facebook*, 2019** | ***Instagram*, 2019** | ***YouTube*, 2019** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Heritage Foundation** | 640,000 | 2,062,435 | 87,100 | 43,312 |
| **CATO Institute** | 354,000 | 376,493 | 28,800 | 39,356 |
| **AEI** | 112,000 | 301,544 | 13,600 | 163,102 |
| **Hoover Institute** | 102,000 | 341,043 | 12,700 | 112,847 |
| **Brookings Institute** | 358,000 | 407,952 | 18,500 | 69,295 |
| **RAND Cooperation** | 195,000 | 104,652 | 1,561 | 15,200 |
| **Center for American Progress** | 92,600 | 93,898 | 4,076 | 6,450 |

This, of course, makes their quest to "change the country" through public opinion or through the laws much more difficult. CAP also is far more private than other think tanks, failing to publish an end of year report or even yearly financial statements to their website.[64] As a result, it is far more difficult to survey CAP's accomplishments. Even still, looking through congressional publications it is clear that CAP's research was disseminated to policy makers. "Ensuring Accountability and Effectiveness at the Office

[63] Adapted from Alejandro Chafuen, "The 2019 Ranking Of Free-Market Think Tanks Measured By Social Media Impact," *Forbes*, April 11, 2019. https://www.forbes.com/sites/alejandrochafuen/2019/04/10/the-2019-ranking-of-free-market-think-tanks-measured-by-social-media-impact/#2b46dc0d2fe7, supplemented with information from The RAND Corporation, *Annual Report, 2019* https://www.rand.org/pubs/corporate_pubs/CP1-2018.html; Juan Luis Manfredi-Sánchez, Juan Antonio Sánchez-Giménez and Juan Pizarro-Miranda, "Structural Analysis to Measure the Influence of Think Tanks' Networks in the Digital Era," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 10, no.4 (October 2015): 363-395.

[64] "State Notices." *Center for American Progress*. Accessed April 14, 2020. https://www.americanprogress.org/state-notices/.

of Federal Student Aid," by Ben Miller and Jason Delisle, is one of their briefs that was sent on to policy makers according to CRS reports.[65]

The two authors advise that "Congress should consider necessary updates to the statutory goals and structure of the performance-based organization rather than abandoning it entirely" and that "the Education Department should make improvements to its management of Federal Student Aid, including specific objectives to achieve the plan's goals, avoiding vague language leading to immeasurable outcomes."[66] Those recommendations, and the research that backed it, were not widely spread through CAP's social media following. The brief reached 92,600 *Twitter* accounts of CAP's own following, in addition, 11,076 accounts were reached through retweets and reposts; 4,076 accounts were reached on *Instagram*; and 6,450 through *YouTube*.[67] While the brief was also included in professional newsletters, like the Career Education Review and the National Association of Graduate Students, this only added around 10,000 individuals to their reach.[68]

In spite of the lack of attention, CAP's recommendations were all implemented into the October draft of the HEA. The amendments to federal student aid as a

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[65] Congressional Research Service, *The Office of Federal Student Aid as a Performance-Based Organization*, by Alexandra Hegji and Henry B. Hogue, R46143 (2019).

[66] Ben Miller, "Ensuring Accountability and Effectiveness at the Office of Federal Student Aid" *The Center for American Progress*, May 1, 2019, 3.

[67] Twitter Search. Search Terms: "Ensuring Accountability and Effectiveness at the Office of Federal Student Aid"; Center for American Progress" Twitter, March 30, 2020. https://twitter.com/search?q=Ensuring%20Accountability%20and%20Effectiveness%20at%20the%20Office%20of%20Federal%20Student%20Aid&src=typed_query.

[68] "Ensuring Accountability and Effectiveness at the Office of Federal Student Aid." *Career Education Review*, May 20, 2019; https://www.careereducationreview.net/media-kit/; Legislative Affairs. "Legislative Letters 5-13-19." *National Association of Graduate-Professional Students*. Accessed April 14, 2020. http://nagps.org/legislative-letters-5-13-19/.

performance-based organization focus on transparency, and increased oversight, both of which CAP endorsed.[69] More specific goals, laid out in CAP's brief, were also followed. These include routine, 5-year performance reviews and an overhaul of management.[70] This example presents a foil of the circumstances surrounding CATO's policy brief. While CATO succeeded in disseminating their ideas among the general public, they were unable to see any of their recommendations enacted. CAP, however, failed to spread their brief widely. However, they saw each of their suggestions adopted into an amendment to the HEA.

***Table 4: Strategies of Most Successful Policy Briefs***

| | **Testimony** | **Congressional Citations** | **Media Use** | **Public Use** | **Policy Creation** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **"Making HEA work..." - Brookings Institute** | Yes | No | Yes | 492,342 accounts reached | 2/3 recommendations incorporated |
| **"Higher Education Programs in Prison" - RAND Corporation** | Yes | Yes | Yes | 326,005 accounts reached | 0/2 recommendations incorporated |
| **"Not Just Treading Water" - CATO Institute** | No | Yes | Yes | 575,669 accounts reached | 0/1 recommendations incorporated |
| **"Ensuring Accountability…" Center for American Progress** | No | Yes | No | 114,202 accounts reached | 4/4 recommendations incorporated |

[69] U.S. Congress, House, *College Affordability Act,* sec . 1031; Miller, 3.

[70] Miller, 3, 24-25.; U.S. Congress, House, *College Affordability Act*, 77-78.

Looking at the above results, a specific conclusion about the path of an effective policy brief is unclear. In particular, the RAND Corporation, which excelled at each criteria examined, was unsuccessful in their attempt to change a single section of the HEA. Conversely, the Brookings Institute, who also did well, but failed to be cited in either speeches or written reports, was almost wholly effective, convincing policy makers to adopt all but one of their recommendations. CATO and CAP also provided a look into the importance of social media and content to influence the general public. CATO, whose research was wildly popular, was unable to effect change, while CAP, who did not invest in wide publication, had a tremendous impact on policy makers. As a case-study model, this analysis is inherently limited in its application. However, this information can still prove useful as a foundational piece for larger studies. With access to more data, a statistical model could be formed, tracking the five established criteria (floor testimony, congressional citations, media citations, public use, consultations) in order to find a reliable correlation to policy adoption.

In addition to providing a path forward for continued scholarship, this model can also give insight into the rhetorical forms of policy briefs. More specifically, how are successful policy briefs framing their recommendations, and how does that differ from the rhetoric found in their less effective counter-parts? As previously established, Brookings and RAND both sent their policy briefs along similar paths, but only one was successful. What is the difference between the content, form, and style of the two briefs, and how did one end up in a bill and the other disregarded? CATO and CAP, despite both being advocacy groups, took oppositional approaches to their briefs, and, again, only one found success. What are the similarities between the writing styles of the two advocacy think tanks, and how could that have affected the outcome? The following chapter provides a close reading of each brief, exploring exactly how stylistic and rhetorical strategies are utilized to persuade policy makers in adopting recommendations.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Rhetorical Analysis

A rhetorical analysis for each of the policy briefs selected will help distinguish the strategies of effective/non-effective policy briefs, giving some insight into the preferences of policy makers. This analysis will take into account audience, purpose, and context to inform the discussion of the content of these briefs. Further, document design, specifically the use of color, bullet points, information layout and other factors that impact presentation, can also greatly affect the perception of the policy brief. Taken together, each of these (length/depth, design, writing style, etc.) leave a distinct impression on a policy maker, tangibly changing the way they process the information found within.[1] This chapter aims to explore a connection between the various measures of success (floor testimony, congressional citations, media citations, public use, consultations, and the ultimate marker: policy formation) and specific types of rhetoric. In part, this analysis will reference conclusions made in the previous chapter, for convenience, those conclusions have been summarized in the table below.

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[1] Fielden, John S. "'What Do You Mean You Don't like My Style?'" *Harvard Business Review* 60, no. 3 (May 1982), 131.

*Table 5: Strategies of Most Successful Policy Briefs (Repeated)*

| | **Testimony** | **Congressional Citations** | **Media Use** | **Public Use** | **Policy Creation** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **“Making HEA work...” - Brookings Institute** | Yes | No | Yes | 492,342 accounts reached | 2/3 recommendations incorporated |
| **“Higher Education Programs in Prison” - RAND Corporation** | Yes | Yes | Yes | 326,005 accounts reached | 0/2 recommendations incorporated |
| **“Not Just Treading Water” - CATO Institute** | No | Yes | Yes | 575,669 accounts reached | 0/1 recommendations incorporated |
| **“Ensuring Accountability…” Center for American Progress** | No | Yes | No | 114,202 accounts reached | 4/4 recommendations incorporated |

Generally, policy briefs follow a predictable model. First, they provide what the Brookings Institute titles an “executive summary.” This section identifies necessary context, such as information on those affected by the suggested changes and a history of relevant laws, poses the question facing policy makers, and quickly suggests a course of action. These sections are meant to be skimmable, clear, and concise, focusing on ease of information and prioritizing reader comprehension. Following the executive summary, the brief explains, in more detail, the research being conducted and further explores any context**.** While this section is significantly longer than the summary, the information must still be highly prioritized so that readers can quickly and easily find and access the information they need. Policy briefs are meant to be just that -- brief. Policy makers and their staff have to sift through hundreds of pages every day, so effectiveness hinges on readability and concision, only the most necessary and persuasive information should be included.

Finally, the brief concludes with specific recommendations. In more detail than the summary allows, this portion states and justifies the recommended course(s) of action for the reader. Especially in the recommendation section, information design is critical, making use of lists and headings in ways that the other sections will not. Success can hinge on headings, bullet points, and text formatting.[2] Think tanks know that they are jockeying for a competitive spot in the busy day of a politician, so format is pivotal. The recommendation section, in particular, must be clear to avoid misinterpretations. Any confusion could lead a policy maker to disregard the research entirely, regardless of its merit.

The elements of a policy brief (summary, context and research, and recommendations) will guide the rhetorical analysis presented here. Each brief makes use of specific rhetorical strategies throughout those three sections. While the specific intersection between policy briefs and rhetorical strategies have not yet been studied, the purpose of any policy brief is broadly persuasive and, therefore, adheres to many of the same conventions as other persuasive pieces. In particular, the style of persuasive pieces are uniquely structured according to their purpose and audience. Style can be communicated through appeals, arguments, structure, word choice, design, etc.[3] The use thereof has a tangible effect on the audience, making them more or less likely to be

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[2] Connie Malamed. *Visual Design Solutions Principles and Creative Inspiration for Learning Professionals*. (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015), 14.

[3] Fielden, 129.

persuaded by the arguments of the author.[4] For this thesis, style will be defined according to the research of Dr. John Fielden, as “the way something is said or done, as distinguished from its substance.”[5]

Another factor of consideration in this chapter is that of rhetorical appeals. Though there are several models to classify the types and forms of arguments, this thesis makes use of the twenty-five “Argumentation Schemes” developed by Dr. Douglas N. Walton, et. al. in 1996.[6] These schemes help define the patterns seen in different types of arguments, dividing them into several classifications based on context, evidence use, and the scope of the claim. Among the schemes that Walton identified are several that will be useful to this analysis: “argument from expert opinion, argument from position to know, practical reasoning (argument from goal to action), argument from cause to effect, *ad hominem* argument, and the argument from source.”[7] Working within Walton's framework, this thesis defines and analyzes the specific appeals of each policy brief.

Looking at the policy brief’s overarching argument, studies have identified a specific structural pattern among politically persuasive pieces. In her research. Dr. Corina Andone at the University of Amsterdam identified a pattern in the oral arguments of politicians who were attempting to convince their audience to adopt or forgo a specific law or amendment. That pattern begins with a

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[4] Fielden, 131.

[5] Fielden, 129.

[6] Douglas N. Walton, Chris Reed, and Fabrizio. Macagno. *Argumentation Schemes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.)

[7] Douglas N. Walton and Fabrizio Macagno, "A Classification System for Argumentation Schemes" *Center for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation, and Rhetoric* 38 (2016): 1.

> "prescriptive standpoint [which is then] effectively supported by a pragmatic argument emphasizing the positive consequences of following a course of action and also by the appeal to the majority in which both a quantitative component (a large number of people) and a qualitative component (the wants and preferences of a large number of people) play a role."[8]

In short, politicians create oral arguments that describe their recommendation, support it with research, then make a broad appeal to the needs of their constituents. While oral arguments are not a one-to-one comparison to policy briefs, similar themes can be seen in policy briefs. Most briefs use this organization: a prescriptive argument backed by pragmatic evidence. This structure sets the expectations of the audience and forms the framework that think tanks work within.

Like chapter three, this chapter will examine four policy briefs that are attempting to influence the 2019 Higher Education Reauthorization Act (HEA), sometimes referred to as the College Affordability Act. First, I will look at "Making HEA work: Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act to Improve Employment for the Disadvantaged" from the Brookings Institute.[9] Next, I will explore "Higher Education Programs in Prison" from the RAND Corporation.[10] The third policy brief will come from the CATO Institute, and is titled, "Not Just Treading Water: In Higher Education, Tuition Often Does More than Replace

[8] Corina Andone, "Argumentative Patterns in the Political Domain: The Case of European Parliamentary Committees of Inquiry," *Argumentation* 30, no. 1 (March 2016): 59.

[9] Ahmad, Mahmood. "US Think Tanks and the Politics of Expertise: Role, Value and Impact." *The Political Quarterly*, 531.

[10] Ahmad, 536.

Lost Appropriations."[11] Finally, I will examine the brief, "Ensuring Accountability and Effectiveness at the Office of Federal Student Aid " from the Center for American Progress. Each of those will be discussed in a rhetorical analysis, looking to identify trends in stylistic choices and persuasive appeals.

The Brookings Institute's "Making HEA Work: Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act to Improve Employment for the Disadvantaged" stands out because it was only published online, without a PDF format.[12] This can pose an issue, as it places limits on their ability to distribute the writing and changes how well they can isolate or draw attention to specific parts of the text.[13] Major concerns with the persuasive abilities of online resources heavily revolve around the idea of trust.[14] Researchers find that individuals, particularly those who did not grow up in the internet age, are more inclined to believe work that has been published in a physical form.[15] For a congressional audience, among whom the average age of Members of the House a was 57.6 years and

[11] Ahmad, 356.

[12] Harry J. Holzer, "Making HEA Work: Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act to Improve Employment for the Disadvantaged." *Brookings Institute*, May 14, 2019. https://www.brookings.edu/research/making-hea-work-reauthorizing-the-higher-education-act-to-improve-employment-for-the-disadvantaged/.

[13] Ziming Liu, *Paper to Digital: Documents in the Information Age* (Westport, Conn: Libraries Unlimited, 2008):, 4.

[14] *Persuasive Technology*: Second International Conference on Persuasive edited by Yvonne de Kort, Wijnand IJsselsteijn, 165.

[15] Kort, de, W.A. IJsselsteijn, C.J.H. Midden, van den Hoven, Berry Eggen, *Human Technology Interaction, User Centered Engineering, and Department of Industrial Design. Persuasive 2006* (First International Conference on Persuasive Technology for Human Well-Being: Eindhoven, The Netherlands, May 18-19, 2006): Adjunct Proceedings, 2006, 165.

of Senators was 62.9 years for 2019-2020, this could pose a significant issue.[16] However, an online version of this text allows the Brooking Institute to make use of linking, creating hyper-links from one section to another.[17] This practice aids readers who are looking for specific information and sets up a user-friendly bibliography.[18] The online format most likely appeals to lay readers, who have an aversion to downloading unnecessary things and are only seeking a small amount of question-specific information.[19] This format lends itself to the Brookings Institute's emphasis on cultivating public engagement.[20]

The Brookings Institute's executive summary continues to cater to a lay audience, as they lay out the broad context of the brief before they approach their recommendations. The author, Holzer, moves on to highlight the specific sections of the HEA that he will focus on, preparing his audience for the research to follow. This particular executive summary does not lay out the ultimate argument of this policy brief. Instead, it simply outlines the scope of the HEA and the general focus of the brief. In this brief, Holzer is requiring his reader to search through the entirety of his brief to find his recommendation. This is a dangerous choice considering the short time that policy

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[16] Congressional Research Service, *Membership of the 116th Congress: A Profile*, by Jennifer E. Manning, R45583. November 4, 2019, 2.

[17] Harry J. Holzer, "Making HEA Work: Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act to Improve Employment for the Disadvantaged." *Brookings Institute*, May 14, 2019. https://www.brookings.edu/research/making-hea-work-reauthorizing-the-higher-education-act-to-improve-employment-for-the-disadvantaged/.

[18] Ziming, 5.

[19] Ziming, 5.

[20] The Brookings Institute, *Annual Report, 2019,* 45--47. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-annual-report.pdf.

makers and their staff will devote to reading these briefs. As previously mentioned, policy briefs are just one of a million things that members of congress read each day. Therefore, it is highly beneficial for think tanks to create a true summary that includes all of the important information within the brief.

The brief quickly moves to research. Holzer begins with a quantitative illustration of the problem his recommendations claim to address. He cites research that lays out the low graduation rates, high debt default rates, and likelihood of terminal credentials (i.e. degrees with little to no market value) among community college students.[21] This evidence provides the basis for the remainder of Holzer's claims and creates a source-based argument.[22] Upon establishing this platform, the brief continues on to incorporate pathos-based reasoning, intended to rouse the pity of the reader in order to draw them toward action. Holzer writes, "with better guidance and more information … one can imagine that many would choose fields of study more realistically, generating higher completion rates and more labor market value than now." Holzer presents these students as ignorant. As a result, policy makers are in a position to "save" them from their ignorance and their ultimate fate of debt default by implementing the recommendations laid out in the brief.

The combination of these two elements employs value-based practical reasoning, or an argument from the consequences.[23] Holzer presents the consequences of *not* enacting his recommendations (a continuation of low graduation rates, high debt default

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[21] Holzer.

[22] Walton, 10.

[23] Walton, 17.

rates, the likelihood of terminal credentials all of which is facilitated by the ignorance of community college students).[24] These consequences are, obviously, undesirable. Therefore, policy makers must incorporate the suggestions of this brief into their next rendition of the HEA. This pattern continues as Holzer fleshes out the remainder of the context surrounding his brief. Holzer also addresses counters to his claims. Specifically, he reviews the PROSPER and AIM HIGHER proposals, which are drafts of HEA amendments already proposed. He lays out reasons why these two propositions would fail to address the problem established earlier in the brief. The information in this section is well organized, using headings and lists to draw attention to the most important sentences: the recommendations. In combination with the argument from source and argument from consequences that Holzer established throughout the brief, these strategies situate his recommendation section favorably.

Looking at the results from chapter three, the combined argument styles creates a practical and persuasive brief. Holzer alternates between logical and emotional appeals, both of which are effective in persuasive writing. Ultimately, the Brookings Institute saw 2/3 of their recommendations incorporated into an amendment to the HEA.

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"Higher Education Programs in Prison" from the RAND Corporation designed their policy brief to be modern and eye-catching, and used high-contrast colors like purple and orange to draw the attention of the reader.[25] Their use of color allows the

[24] Holzer.

[25] Lois M. Davis, "Higher Education Programs in Prison: What We Know Now and What We Should Focus On Going Forward" *Rand Corporation*, May 14, 2019, 2. https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE342.html.

readers to prioritize and organize information.[26] The headings and quotes in orange serve as markers of important transitions in the piece.[27] Continuing to draw on contrast, RAND alternated between serif and sans serif typefaces to indicate section titles and other areas of particular attention.[28] Like color, changes in font also add interest to the page and emphasize specific pieces of information.[29] In combination, the two design choices aid the reader in skimming the document. Eye-catching headings allow individuals looking for specific information to find it quickly, even without the use of linking.[30] However, the bright colors and interesting fonts are in danger of undermining the professional nature of the document.[31] While it certainly adds interest, such a style may be interpreted by the audience as informal and unnecessary. Ultimately, professional standards may prohibit this practice.

Like the Brookings Institute, the RAND Corporation begins their executive summary with a concise statement of the problem to be addressed, pinpointing the sections of the HEA that this brief will consider. This summary includes several statistics that provide necessary context for the changes suggested. With the inclusion of this information, Davis, the brief's author, creates the basis for her argument. As seen in the brief from the Brookings Institute, Davis sets herself up for an argument of consequence,

[26] Robin Williams, *The Non-Designer's Design Book : Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice* (Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press, 1994), 104.

[27] Williams, 104.

[28] Davis.

[29] Williams, 173.

[30] Williams, 173.

[31] Williams, 173.

"The stakes for ex-offenders are higher than they are for others; being able to land a job," which is made more likely through access to higher education, "can mean the difference between successfully transitioning back into a community and returning to prison."[32] With this statement, Davis is arguing that the consequence for adopting her recommendations would be lowered recidivism rates while the consequences for not adopting her recommendations would mean contributing to steady or rising recidivism rates in at-risk communities. Davis then plainly states the change that this brief advocates for: a reincorporation of Pell Grant eligibility for prison education programs.

The research that Davis presents to support her claim begins in 1994.[33] She details the consequences of removing prison education programs from Pell Grant eligibility.[34] This includes a discussion of declining opportunities for higher education in prison and the consequences thereof.[35] This puts Davis in a position to counter an argument from an established rule, basically providing reasoning to change pre-existing laws.[36] She continues with a review of the positive impact of education on successful reentry for prior offenders.[37] In this section, she references existing scholarship to create an argument from cause to effect.[38] This type of argument is structured by correlating a future action (improving access to education for offenders) to a previously established pattern (studies

[32] Davis, 1.

[33] Davis, 3.

[34] Davis, 3.

[35] Walton.

[36] Walton.

[37] Davis, 3.

[38] Walton.

showing that education programs in prisons reduce recidivism).[39] Davis takes time to outline the feasibility of her recommendations, providing a counter-argument for skeptical readers, especially those who are worried about the cost of such a program. She concludes her research by providing examples of similar programs, with special attention to their impact on the likelihood of reoffense.[40] Ultimately, she uses this information effectively, creating a convincing argument to support her recommendations.

Throughout her brief, Davis employs a wide variety of argumentative strategies to support her main claim. She carefully makes her case for the necessity of reversing the decision made in the 1994 HEA to prohibit prison education programs from Pell Grant funding. Because Davis is arguing for the reversal of a previously accepted rule, her brief had to not only convince policy makers of the benefits of changing this section, but also of the harm being done by the bill in its current state. Her dual purpose means that she is required to incorporate a variety of persuasive techniques that other briefs do not. That choice of rhetoric, like argument from an established rule and argument from cause to effect, both of which are used in the negative, are important to creating a compelling reason for change. It seems, however, that these claims ultimately did not prove to be persuasive for policy makers, as congress did not address any of her concerns in their new draft of this bill. This is likely reflective of the priorities of congress, rather than of Davis' argument. The Committee of Education and Labor, who is overseeing the HEA, does not identify prison e

[39] Walton.

[40] Davis, 10.

\ucation as something they hope to reform.[41]

The CATO Institute's "Not Just Treading Water: In Higher Education, Tuition Often Does More than Replace Lost Appropriations" demonstrates a thoughtful and intentional layout, using pull quotes and typeface to draw particular attention to important elements.[42] This design allows the brief's author, McCluskey, to choose what the reader focuses on, pulling their attention to the most impactful components of the argument. For these sections, McCluskey essentially creates an outline of his brief, choosing to highlight sentences that summarize research and state their claims. The sentences that this policy brief uses for pull quotes demonstrate a number of argument schemes, including *ad hominem* attacks.[43] *Ad hominem* arguments are defined as an insult or argument against the opponent rather than the opponent's argument. McCluskey chooses to characterize colleges and their administration as greedy, using that description to bolster his main claim: "aid almost certainly fuels inflation, but something else drives it: colleges—and the people in them—want as much revenue as possible."[44] McCluskey again uses this strategy as a substitute for a counter-argument in another pull-quote: "While it is likely that cost disease and cuts to per pupil public appropriations play parts in college price inflation, logic and empirical evidence suggest that student aid also plays a significant

[41] "Our Principles: House Committee on Education and Labor." *House Committee on Education and Labor*. Accessed April 14, 2020. https://edlabor.house.gov/issues/education/literacy-and-adult-education.

[42] Neal McCluskey, "Not Just Treading Water: In Higher Education, Tuition Often Does More than Replace Lost Appropriations" *The Cato Institute*, 13. McCluskey.

[43] Walton.

[44] McCluskey, 12.

role—perhaps a very large one."[45] In this case, McClusky is dismissing the possibility of alternative explanations by calling them illogical and unable to account for empirical evidence.[46] This type of rhetoric is often identified as a common fallacy, particularly in casual and political argumentation.[47] While pull-quotes, in many cases, are positive tools used to guide readers toward a stronger understanding of the writing, when not carefully chosen, those quotes may highlight failings in the text, without providing the context to justify the claims made.

Moving into the text itself, McClusky's executive summary, similar to those in previously examined policy briefs, outlines the general context for his research.[48] Without providing statistics, McClusky positions his summary on an argument from position to know.[49] Essentially, McClusky is expecting his audience to believe his claims without directly presenting the specific research that those claims are based on. McClusky then poses the central focus of his research, which questions the root cause behind the rising tuition rates at institutes of higher education.[50] McClusky concludes his executive summary by squarely placing the blame for this inflation on parallel increases in student aid.[51]

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[45] McCluskey, 11.

[46] McCluskey, 11.

[47] Walton.

[48] McCluskey, 1.

[49] Walton.

[50] McCluskey, 1.

[51] McCluskey, 1.

One of the most notable facets of McClusky's research is the use of graphs to communicate the CATO Institute's findings. With a 49-page long appendix dedicated to charts and 5 figures embedded within the text of the brief itself, it is clear that McClusky relied heavily on quantitative data to come to his conclusions. With the inclusion of these figures, McClusky pivots his argument from position to know, which was set up in the summary, to an argument from source, which was previously observed in the policy briefs of the Brookings Institute and RAND Cooperation. This collection of data then moves to support McClusky's overall assertion: that rising tuition rates is a result of rising student aid. McClusky's main claim is an example of an argument of correlation to causes, basically asserting that consistent data showing a correlation of these two factors indicates that one causes the other. The data McClusky pulls from is extensive, and indeed demonstrates a relationship between the two.

Ultimately, this brief provides a strong base of support for its overall claim, creating a persuasive case for causation. However, the presence of *ad hominem* attacks betrays this brief as a passion project. Rather than engage with counter-arguments, McClusky chose to dismiss them outright and then opted to highlight these as pull-quotes. Looking at the results of the previous chapter, this combination of arguments was not successful. Although McCluskey utilized similar claims as other briefs (excluding the *ad hominem* arguments) and provided an impressive amount of data to back up his assertions, he was unable to convince policy makers of his position.

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The final policy brief examined, "Ensuring Accountability and Effectiveness at the Office of Federal Student Aid" from the Center for American Progress, begins by identifying the Office of Federal Student Aid as the largest bank in the United States.[52] Unlike the other policy briefs analyzed, the Center for American Progress (CAP) opts to subvert the reader's expectations by redefining what qualifies as a "bank" within the first sentence.[53] This provides an interesting beginning to their brief, capturing their audience's attention without the use of alarming statistics, but with a sharp break from the expected style and tone of a typical policy brief.[54] The use of a subversive narrative early within the brief helps hold the reader's attention, even after returning to the expected tone.[55]

Having piqued the reader's interest, Miller and Delisle, the brief's authors, present their executive summary. This section concisely describes the situation this work is intended to address and, using bullet points, lays out questions to clearly establish the scope of the brief.[56] Like the recommendations made by RAND, CAP is proposing changes to an existing section: the classification of the Office of Federal Student Aid.[57] However, CAP is laying out the opposite argument to the RAND's brief: that a specific portion of the HEA ought to be kept, in spite of its flaws.[58] This creates a positive argument to an established rule. In particular, Miller and Delisle identify issues with the

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[52] Ben Miller, "Ensuring Accountability and Effectiveness at the Office of Federal Student Aid" *The Center for American Progress*, May 1, 2019, 1.

[53] Miller, 1.

[54] Fielden, 129.

[55] Miller, 1.

[56] Miller, 2.

[57] Miller, 1.

[58] Miller, 3.

previous iterations of this section, noting that a total abandonment of the principle would result in an exacerbation of the issues presently seen.[59] The executive summary concludes by recommending that the current classification of the Office of Federal Student Aid as a performance based organization be kept, but that several modifications be made to the Office of Federal Student Aid to allow it to better fulfill its role.[60]

The research to support CAP's recommendations begin, like RAND's, with a history of the section in question.[61] This portion establishes the context and original intention of the classification, positioning Miller and Delisle to reiterate the improvements that this section could allow for.[62] The authors then move to thoroughly discuss the issues that have been presented since the change in classification.[63] Giving the audience the opportunity to understand the ways that CAP's recommendations can address these shortcomings, this section provides direct support for the main claim. Each of the problems addressed creates an argument from example, or, a demonstration of the ability of the proposed changes to mitigate specific issues, implying that those changes will then better the organization as a whole. The authors end their research section by elaborating on scholarship that supports their recommendation. As with other briefs, CAP relies heavily on an argument from source to make their claims. This is pragmatic, as it allows policy makers to understand the impact of these recommendations.

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[59] Miller, 2.

[60] Miller, 3.

[61] Miller, 5

[62] Miller, 6.

[63] Miller, 12-16.

This brief can be most easily compared to that of the RAND Corporation, as both are fighting for or against the removal, respectively, of an existing section in the HEA. As a result, both had to tackle a dual claim: convincing policy makers of the benefits/detriments of eliminating or reinstating this section, but also of the effects of the bill in its current state. In doing so, both briefs used similar argument schemes to present their main claim. However, unlike RAND's brief, CAP's recommendations were each incorporated into the next draft of the HEA. This can be attributed to the content, as the issues covered by CAP more closely aligned with the priorities of committee members.

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The results of this analysis, like that of chapter three, are mixed. While specific trends in the argument schemes and styles used by think tanks have been identified, it is difficult to determine the impact each had on the overall effectiveness of the brief. In particular, each brief ultimately rested the claims on an argument from source, demonstrating the necessity of quantitative data when creating policy recommendations. This data is particularly important because it demonstrates the effect of specific policies on a large number of individuals, which is important to consider when making policy for an entire nation. This trend was maintained, regardless of the type of think tank. Academic, contract, and advocacy think tanks all heavily relied on this type of argument. A wide variety of stylistic techniques were also used, and each think tank utilized specific choices in design and format to aid the reader in identifying and retaining important information. However, as a case-study model, this thesis cannot provide sweeping conclusions about the effectiveness of these argument schemes and strategies for think tanks. Even still, the results of this rhetorical analysis are significant for the identification of common approaches to policy briefs. As previously mentioned, the intersection between rhetoric and policy briefs have not been examined in scholarship. Therefore, this chapter lays the groundwork for a much larger study to further pinpoint the preferences of policy makers and the most successful rhetorical strategies.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusions

In 1945, soldiers articulated the very first use of the term "think tank." Originally, the name was given to war rooms: locations where military leaders sat down to strategize for World War II.[1] The term described a safe room for those with knowledge to determine the best course of action for soldiers on a battlefield. With this nickname, those soldiers laid the foundation for the policy organizations that would soon grow to greatly influence politics in the United States. At first, they were meant to be agents of education: neutral experts, supplying policy makers with the information that they needed to govern well.[2] These think tanks would provide government officials access to scientific, social, and historical research that would aid officials in law making.[3]

Overtime, however, that original goal became polluted with partisanship and ideology.[4] Those same experts, no longer neutral, still provide that same research to policy makers. Now, however, their goal is one of influence. Think tanks look to sway policy makers towards adopting one law or another, according to their own agenda.

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[1] General Hull and Colonel Seaman, "Telephone conversation transcript" (National Security Archive, 1325-13, August 1945), 1-3.

[2] Abelson, Donald E. *A Capitol Idea Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy* Montreal (Que: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006) 55.

[3] "A Brief History of RAND," *RAND Corporation*, accessed October 2, 2019, https://www.rand.org/about/history/a-brief-history-of-rand.html.

[4] Abelson, 55.

Those recommendations, though supported by research, are now framed with persuasive rhetoric. One of the greatest tools of these organizations is the policy brief.[5] From the confines of their war room, think tanks created short, persuasive documents to suggest specific changes in laws to policy makers.[6] Through these briefs, think tanks, and the experts that they employ, exerted tremendous influence on American public policy and changed the American political landscape.[7]

In this thesis, I have set out to deepen our understanding of the relationship between policy briefs and policy makers. More specifically, I hoped to create a foundation of understanding for qualifying what makes an “effective” policy brief and exposing what rhetorical strategies those policy briefs utilize. To do so, I examined historical attempts to measure influence. Building upon that scholarship, I created a definition for what constitutes an ‘effective’ policy brief. In this case, effectiveness hinged on whether or not the recommendations within that brief were followed by policy makers. From there, I was able to apply that definition to several briefs, categorizing them to separating the successful from the unsuccessful by looking at the life cycle of each brief. The last section of my thesis consisted of a rhetorical analysis of each brief. Specifically, I searched for common stylistic choices and rhetorical appeals among policy briefs in an attempt to find strategies that affect a brief’s success.

One of the many challenges of this thesis was determining how exactly impact can be measured. Without a clear measure, it would be impossible to figure out how

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[5] Bert Fraussen and Darren Halpin. "Think Tanks and Strategic Policy-Making: The Contribution of Think Tanks to Policy Advisory Systems," *Policy Sciences,* 108.

[6] Fraussen, 108.

[7] Abelson, 55.

exactly rhetoric changed the reception of a brief. As previous scholars have discovered, the process of identifying influence has been difficult.[8] This area of study is made even more complicated when things like partisan bias are considered.[9] In this arena, political affiliation is an all-too important factor that this thesis did not consider. As is mentioned in the case study that closes chapter two, regardless of what rhetorical appeals a think tank uses, their recommendation will pass or fail according to party affiliation. This is a major cause for the apparent lack of scholarship in this area, as party loyalty serves as a barrier for understanding the extent of relationships between policy makers and think tanks.

To mitigate this problem, this thesis chose to examine a bill that is still in committee: the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (or the College Affordability Act of 2019). The committee of Education and Labor, which oversees this act, has 28 Democrats and 23 Republicans.[10] Because of this, both I (and the authors of the policy brief I examined) had to be less concerned with voting along party lines, as members of a committee are far more likely to hear the testimony of opposite-party experts at this stage than at any other.[11] Therefore, it is possible to improve our understanding of the role of

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[8] Donald E Abelson, A Capitol Idea Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy Montreal (Que: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006) 129.

[9] Holsti, K. J. *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis,* 3d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1977) 141; Joseph G. Peschek, *Policy-Planning Organizations: Elite Agendas and America's Rightward Turn* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Abelson, 166.

[10] "Membership: House Committee on Education and Labor." *House Committee on Education and Labor*. Accessed April 14, 2020. https://edlabor.house.gov/about/membership.

[11] Lerner, Joshua Y. "Getting the Message Across: Evaluating Think Tank Influence in Congress." *Public Choice* 175, no. 3 (2018): 347-366.

think tanks in the law-making process by examining bills still in committee, which allows this thesis to analyze policy briefs in spite of partisan biases.[12]

To do so, I considered several criteria, each looking at the ways think tanks are able to expose policy makers, in this case: congress, to their ideas. Congressional testimony, congressional citations, media citations, public view/popularity, and consultations with government departments/agencies were all taken into account in an attempt to track the life cycle of a policy brief. Chapters three and four both looked at four policy briefs from different types of think tanks, one academic, one contract, and two advocacy (one libertarian, one liberal). This thesis first examined, "Making HEA work: Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act to Improve Employment for the Disadvantaged" from the Brookings Institute.[13] Next, it explored "Higher Education Programs in Prison" from the RAND Corporation.[14] The third policy brief came from the CATO Institute, and is titled, "Not Just Treading Water: In Higher Education, Tuition Often Does More than Replace Lost Appropriations."[15] Finally, this thesis reviewed "Ensuring Accountability and Effectiveness at the Office of Federal Student Aid " from the Center for American Progress.[16] For each brief, congressional testimony, congressional citations, media citations, public use, consultations, and policy formation

[12] Lerner, 354.

[13] Harry J. Holzer, "Making HEA Work: Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act to Improve Employment for the Disadvantaged." *Brookings Institute*, May 14, 2019.

[14] Lois M. Davis, "Higher Education Programs in Prison: What We Know Now and What We Should Focus On Going Forward" *Rand Corporation*, May 14, 2019.

[15] Neal McCluskey, "Not Just Treading Water: In Higher Education, Tuition Often Does More than Replace Lost Appropriations" *The Cato Institute*.

[16] Ben Miller, "Ensuring Accountability and Effectiveness at the Office of Federal Student Aid" *The Center for American Progress*, May 1, 2019.

were traced in order to illuminate the role that policy briefs play in the modern political system.

More specifically, with this research, I hoped to gain a better understanding of the ways policy briefs, and the think tanks that create them, can inform the decisions of policy makers, paying special attention to the ways the research within those briefs is framed. With that goal in mind, the analysis performed in chapter three, which accounted for the six factors previously mentioned, allowed me to examine the different ways that think tanks use policy briefs to achieve their main purpose of influencing policy. As it uses a case-study method of analysis, this thesis is unable to create sweeping conclusions regarding the nature of all policy briefs.

However, looking at the results from chapter three, it is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all path to success. In particular, the RAND Corporation, which excelled at each criteria, was unable to change a single section of the HEA. Conversely, the Brookings Institute, who did almost as well as RAND in each category, but failed to be cited in either speeches or written reports, was almost entirely successful, ultimately convincing policy makers to adopt all but one of their recommendations. The CATO Institute and Center for American Progress also provided a look into the importance of social media and content to influence the general public. CATO had widely popular research but was unable to affect change, while CAP, who did not invest in wide publication, had a tremendous impact on policy makers.

These policy briefs were judged by more than the criteria mentioned, and it appears that no one method of exposure led to widespread success. Of course, more patterns could be revealed with further study. The discoveries made in chapter three can prove useful as a foundational piece for larger research projects. With access to more data, a statistical model could be formed, tracking the five established criteria in order to find a reliable correlation to policy adoption. Such research would provide more depth to the information given here and could lead the way forward in scholarship in this field.

The briefs were further differentiated through the use of a rhetorical analysis. Looking specifically at content, form, and style, chapter four used rhetorical frameworks established by scholars studying strategies in persuasive documents.[17] At its core, a policy brief is meant to persuade their reader.[18] As a result, they employ specific approaches in an attempt to convince policy makers of their recommendations.[19] In addition, each think tank makes decisions about design, layout, and form that also have tangible effects on the reception of the document.[20] Chapter four aimed to distinguish between rhetorical strategies and design choices used in effective and ineffective briefs, looking to expose patterns of use amongst the genre. Such information would allow for scholars to gain some insight into the preferences of policy makers and better their understanding of the writing in this field.

The conclusions of chapter four, like those of chapter three, are somewhat limited. As I only examined four briefs, I am unable to apply these results to the entire genre.

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[17] Walton.

[18] Arthur C. Brooks "AEI's President on Measuring the Impact of Ideas," Harvard Business Review. Last modified March 2018. https://hbr.org/2018/03/aeis-president-on-measuring-the-impact-of-ideas.

[19] Fielden, John S. "'What Do You Mean You Don't like My Style?'" Harvard Business Review 60, no. 3 (May 1982): 128–38;  Walton.

[20] Connie Malamed. Visual Design Solutions Principles and Creative Inspiration for Learning Professionals. (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015), 14.

However, the data suggests that policy briefs favor arguments from source, or arguments that rely upon external data. This trend demonstrates the necessity of large amounts of quantitative and qualitative data. Additionally, a wide variety of stylistic techniques were also used in each brief, and the authoring think tanks utilized specific choices in design and format to aid the reader in identifying and retaining important information. Looking at each brief, the priority of authors in their information design was in highlighting sections to facilitate organization and discerning the most important pieces of information through color changes or pull-quotes. This is likely in response to the push for skimmable information.[21] Policy makers and their staff process tons of information daily, so effectiveness hinges on readability and concision. Think tanks know this, so their document design reflects a desire to create briefs that can be quickly read and understood. While specific trends in the argument schemes and styles used by think tanks have been demonstrated, it is difficult to determine the impact each had on the overall effectiveness of the brief. Without a larger sample size, this thesis is unable to determine the exact impact each strategy had on the life cycle identified in chapter three.

As has been established throughout, this thesis was intended to start a conversation among scholars. The rhetorical strategies of effective policy briefs have never been studied, so this research is meant to serve as a foundation for further scholarship. Studies can use statistical models and larger sample sizes to broaden the application of this thesis, allowing researchers to establish clear connections between specific methods of exposure or rhetorical strategies to the overall success of a brief. In

[21] Robin Williams, The Non-Designer's Design Book : Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice (Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press, 1994), 173; Ziming Liu, Paper to Digital: Documents in the Information Age (Westport, Conn: Libraries Unlimited, 2008): 4.

addition, future studies can branch out beyond briefs aimed at committee-level policies, thus including an examination of political affiliation. By incorporating partisan biases as a factor in research, scholars can gain a more pragmatic look into the world of think tanks and policy makers, deepening their understanding even further.

Practically, this research benefits those who create policy briefs, as it provides a look into ways they could improve their own writing. Understanding the avenues through which policy briefs can be influential allows think tanks to specialize their recommendations to serve one specific outlet. Thus, increasing their effectiveness in that medium. Additionally, a technical examination of the rhetorical appeals and document design of policy briefs can facilitate think tanks as they attempt to create more persuasive pieces. Think tanks can gain knowledge of what strategies are deemed more effective and utilize them in their project more frequently. Ultimately, as scholars understand more about the relationship between think tanks and policy makers, think tanks can exploit that information to become more effective in their ultimate goal of influencing policy.

Beyond the think tanks themselves, policy makers can also utilize the information within this thesis to better prepare themselves to read policy briefs. By studying how they can be exposed to different ideas from think tanks, policy makers can recognize the significance of a particular method and take that into account when deciding whether or not to follow a given recommendation. Such an ability will allow congress to be more discerning in their consumption of information. Further, an understanding of the persuasive techniques used by think tanks can allow them to better distinguish between types of arguments. Policymakers can see through the rhetoric used in briefs, consciously recognizing exactly what evidence is convincing them and reacting accordingly.

Hopefully, with more knowledge about the politically-motivated world of think tanks, policy makers will be better prepared to apply the information they have gained from policy briefs, without being blinded by the rhetoric used to make that information more appealing.

Another practical application stems from the implication of this thesis for students. This thesis was borne out of an attempt to streamline policy briefs emerging from Baylor University's Social Innovation Collaborative. In particular, I, as a student tasked with writing policy briefs, wanted to learn how to write them well. I wanted to know how style and rhetoric in these briefs affected their success and sought to apply that information to my own projects. Though not a sweeping list of recommendations, this thesis lays the groundwork for students, like me, who want to tackle an assignment in this unfamiliar genre. It provides an explanation of the role policy briefs play in the policy making process and explores the different outlets through which policy makers could become exposed to them. This work also demonstrates popular stylistic and rhetorical strategies relied upon by think tanks, providing reasoning behind the choice of each. While no step-by-step instruction manual exists for writing a policy brief, students can utilize this thesis in order to familiarize themselves with the world of think tanks and the possibilities for their genre.

In conclusion, while my thesis serves several communities in their attempt to better understand policy briefs, there is much room to expand. Further scholarship must be focused on the ways think tanks can begin to overcome party lines for the sake of their recommendations and look for ways to broaden the application of these conclusions through the analysis of many more briefs. Even still, this analysis can serve as a starting place. It was the first attempt to quantify the relationship between effective policy briefs, think tanks, and congress. As such, it should serve as a base for future research, which can then begin to incorporate other factors, like partisanship, into the conversation. Think tanks, policy makers, and students can all find useful information within this thesis, and each could benefit from better understanding the complex and convoluted arena in which policy briefs are asked to operate.

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