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Erik C. Ness¹ and Denisa Gándara¹

Abstract

This study takes an inventory of a particular type of intermediary organization ascendant within the state-level higher education policy: ideological think tanks. Our inventory identifies 99 think tanks: 59 affiliated with the conservative State Policy Network and 40 with the Progressive States Network. The analysis shows that state-level conservative think tanks (CTTs) are more tightly connected to national networks than are progressive think tanks (PTTs). By narrow margins, CTTs are also better funded and have more robust higher education policy activity than PTTs. The two most common policy issues—state funding and costs and affordability—represent higher education issues of equal salience to conservative and progressive organizations but from contrasting ideological perspectives. This inventory of the landscape of ideological think tanks' activity and their supply of information has implications for future research that might examine policymakers' demand for and utilization of ideological think tank information and services.

Keywords

higher education policy, state policies, politics

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Despite consistent calls to connect research and public policy, the politics of research use in higher education policymaking remains nebulous. The perennial disconnect between researchers and policymakers has been attributed to these two communities' fundamental differences in their settings and preferences. Just as policymakers complain that academic research rarely informs contemporary policy debates, researchers lament policymakers' preference for quick, straightforward solutions at the expense of analytic rigor. Given this divide, policy organizations and think tanks that sit on the boundaries of the research and policy communities have increasingly been found to serve as effective intermediaries in encouraging the uptake of research evidence in education policy decisions (Guston, 2000; Hess, 2008; Honig, 2004; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Although higher education researchers and leaders have long recognized the influence of many of these intermediaries on policy decisions, state-level think tank activity remains largely unexamined.

This study takes an inventory of a particular type of intermediary organization ascendant within the state-level higher education policy: ideological think tanks. At the federal level, the "politics of expertise" has become readily apparent through the swelling number and influence of ideologically driven think tanks such as the conservative-leaning Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation and the left-leaning Center for American Progress and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Rich, 2004). Most recently, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which identifies as a non-partisan membership association for state legislators, has been "exposed" for its financial reliance on corporate interests and its overwhelmingly Republican membership (Editorial, 2012; Scola, 2012). ALEC critics highlight the organization's direct advocacy for state policy linked to the interests of the tobacco industry, for example, and to the "castle doctrine" supported by the National Rifle Association (Gertz, 2012; Landman, 2011). Defenders of ALEC argue that the traditional state legislature membership association, National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL), which also identifies as nonpartisan, advances policy solutions that align more closely with the ideological left (Flynn, 2012).

Despite this attention to national ideological think tanks, we are not aware of any higher education studies examining state-level ideological think tank activity. This is especially surprising given the emerging role of groups such as the Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF) in support of higher education accountability reforms in the state. Indeed, by providing research or other information that is clearly aligned with political agendas, ideological think tanks warrant examination based on their likely success in connecting the research-policy divide. Thus, the overarching objective of this exploratory study is to examine the prevalence of these ideological organizations in the

states and the scope of their activity related to higher education policy, as represented by the content on their websites. To do this, we outline the landscape of ideological think tanks in the states, including the number and financial resources of progressive and conservative groups and their ties to national organizations. We then analyze their higher education policy activity and the extent to which they prioritize specific themes related to higher education. Before describing the research design, including our specific expectations for the inventory, the following section briefly discusses three conceptual perspectives related to research utilization, intermediary organizations, and think tanks.

Conceptual Perspectives

The classic literature on research utilization in the policymaking process examined the extent to which policy actors relied upon research evidence in crafting policy. Carol Weiss's (1979) guiding work advances a typology of research use: conceptual use (the long-term enlightenment function of research), instrumental use (the immediate application of research to a specific policy issue), and political use (the tactical or symbolic use of research). Although the political use of information produced by ideological think tanks would seem the most prevalent, these organizations may also advocate instrumentally in support of specific issues.

Many early studies of research utilization also identified a fundamental challenge posed by "two communities" of researchers and policymakers each with their own language, norms, and goals (Birnbau, 2000; Caplan, 1979; Snow, 1961) and overwhelmingly emphasized the problem with the "supply side" of research (i.e., too technical, not focusing on current issues). By contrast, studies that examine the "demand side" of utilization emphasize policymakers' use of research and their preferred sources of information, which are not limited to empirical evidence. Based on the inherently political nature of ideological think tanks, our examination stands to draw a tighter connection between the supply and demand sides of research utilization.

To inform our project, we also draw upon studies focusing on the role of intermediary organizations in connecting the research and policy communities by providing policy information and expertise. As the term suggests, intermediary organizations serve a translating function between two principals with different values and perspectives, which within the higher education policy field would be governments and colleges. Studies in other related policy sectors have shown the important functions of intermediary organizations. In K-12 education, for instance, Honig (2004, 2008) illustrates the role that intermediary organizations at the school district level sometimes play in increasing

evidence-based curriculum and pedagogical practices. Intermediary organizations have also been shown to maximize research utilization in crafting scientific research policy on campuses and at the federal level (Guston, 2000; Metcalfe, 2008; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Given the structure of the U.S. federal government, which reserves power related to education to the states, our project is situated in the states and the intermediaries active in that arena.

Ness (2010) has outlined the ways in which three types of organizations might serve these intermediary functions. Although the manner in which state agencies govern higher education varies widely, *state-level higher education agencies* serve crucial roles in providing information to and interceding between governments and institutions of higher education. *Regional compacts*, such as the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE), serve as valuable information sources and often as advocates for certain policy initiatives. Finally, there are a host of *national higher education policy organizations*, such as the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Education Commission of the States, some of which supply valuable research-based information and actively consult with state-level elected officials and higher education leaders. These organizations also hold conferences or training sessions for state policy actors, thereby potentially serving as “opinion leaders” or “change agents” within the field (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007, p. 185). These national policy organizations might also include groups with broader policy agendas such as the National Governors Association, NCSL, and ALEC. Our project on state-level ideological think tanks examines the extent to which these organizations might also serve intermediary functions similar to or distinct from the organizations listed above. Indeed, compared with the aforementioned higher education intermediaries, ideological think tanks seem much more likely to offer an explicitly political influence on research use.

Think tanks, an increasingly prevalent form of intermediary organizations, have varied agendas and missions, ranging from the production or translation of research to issue advocacy and the advancement of ideological agendas. In his book on the role of think tanks in federal public policy, Rich (2004) states that policymakers perceive think tanks to be “more marketing than research organizations, with styles of behavior that mimic interest groups rather than universities.” Similar to Henig’s (2008) characterization of the politicization of charter school research, which included high-profile education experts debating policy findings and quibbling over methodological approaches in national newspapers, Rich argues that think tanks’ aggressive marketing efforts have blurred the boundaries between experts and advocates. Abelson (2009) emphasizes the variation among national think tanks,

especially in their impact during different phases of the policy cycle. Both Rich and Abelson find conservative think tanks to be among the most influential.¹ Indeed, scholarly attention has focused disproportionately on ideologically conservative think tanks, both at the national level (e.g., Dunlap & Jacques, 2013) and at the state level (Leeson, Ryan, & Williamson, 2012). Thus, our study contributes a rare examination of state-level think tank activity among both conservative and progressive organizations.

Based on these conceptual perspectives related to research utilization, intermediary organizations, and think tanks, we identified expectations to guide our inventory of the prevalence, networks, and higher education policy activity of state ideological think tanks. With regard to the *prevalence*, we expect to find more conservative think tanks (CTTs) than progressive think tanks (PTTs) and that CTTs have greater financial resources than PTTs. We base these expectations on Rich's (2004) study of national think tanks in which he finds that CTTs outnumber PTTs by a rate of two to one. Rich's analysis also shows that CTTs have three times the amount of financial resources than PTTs.

With regard to *networks*, we expect state-level CTTs to have tighter connections to conservative national networks than PTTs have to progressive national networks. This expectation is not as firmly grounded as our expectations related to prevalence. Again, for our analysis of state think tank activity related to higher education policy, we focus on the network connections to national ideological think tanks rather than to other intermediary organizations such as higher education regional compacts and policy organizations. The previous literature on this topic does not directly consider the connections between state- and national-level think tanks. However, the nascent literature related to ideological think tanks focuses largely on conservative-leaning organizations and their coordinated activities related to climate change (Dunlap & Jacques, 2013) and tax policy (Leeson et al., 2012).

With regard to *higher education policy activity*, we expect that CTTs will be more likely to engage in higher education policy activity than PTTs. We base this on Rich's (2004) finding that a higher proportion of conservative think tanks are "full service" or multiple-issue organizations. We also expect that, compared to the more ideologically neutral positions advanced by other higher education intermediaries (i.e., state agencies, regional compacts, and policy organizations), both CTTs and PTTs will frame their policy preferences in ideological terms.

Research Design

To examine the prevalence and higher education policy activity of state-level ideological think tanks, our study proceeds in three stages. First, we took an

initial inventory of the ideological think tank landscape of all 50 states by following protocol based on Rich's (2004) national study and through an iterative process of searching websites corresponding to national organizations containing inventories of ideologically similar groups. For the conservative-leaning organizations, the State Policy Network (SPN) (59) quickly emerged as the most prominent network of state-level think tanks. We also reviewed the networks Flunked Solutions! (41) and the Pioneer Institute (38); however, these networks included only four organizations that are not also members of SPN. In addition to these networks, we expanded our Internet search to include language related to free markets, individual liberties, or limited government—all common conservative principles. From this round of analysis, we identified more than 100 additional conservative policy organizations, yet these were overwhelmingly national in scope.

For the progressive-leaning groups, our search led to one organization, the Progressive States Network (PSN) (40) that provided the most comparable inventory of ideological think tanks to that of SPN. We also considered two other organizations that provide inventories of progressive groups: the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative (SFAI) (24) and the Economic Analysis and Research Network (35). These two networks, however, are more narrowly focused on fiscal issues and are not stand-alone nonprofit groups like SPN but rather projects stemming from larger organizations (i.e., Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and Economic Policy Institute). Thus, PSN was selected as the starting point for identifying organizations comparable to those contained on the right-leaning SPN's list.

Compared to the tight network of one or two think tanks per state that comprise the conservative-leaning SPN, the PSN appears to be a wider confederation of organizations identified by PSN as having similar missions and objectives. Unlike SPN, these state-level organizations do not necessarily directly identify themselves as part of PSN. In further contrast to SPN, PSN does not solely list policy think tanks but instead lists all types of groups, including business associations, educational institutions, electoral groups, and advocacy organizations. Due to this greater variation among PSN groups and our interest in finding organizations that are comparable to the SPN-identified think tanks, we sought to include only those organizations on the PSN website that were (a) nonpartisan, (b) focused on state-level policy, (c) multi-issue organizations, (d) progressive (mentioned some form of the terms "progressive," "human rights," "social justice," "equality," "equity," or a closely related concept), and (e) think tanks.²

Finally, we explored each of the remaining groups' websites, particularly their "About Us" and "Mission" sections, to assess whether the organizations fit all five of the aforementioned criteria. This process generated a list that

parallels the SPN-identified aggregate of groups that are all state-level multiple-issue ideological think tanks.³ Ultimately, we identified 40 state-level progressive think tanks with a connection to PSN.⁴ Due to the heavy concentration of state-level ideological think tanks in these two networks, SPN and PSN, we decided to focus exclusively on these national networks and, more specifically, their state-level member organizations.

Our sample includes 99 state-level ideological think tanks, including the 59 “free-market” members of the SPN and 40 progressive think tanks within the PSN. Limiting our analysis to organizations affiliated with SPN and PSN allowed us to examine two roughly parallel networks representing conservative and progressive ideologies. The SPN represents an ideologically conservative national network. For example, the following excerpt from the SPN (2012) website describes its focus: “State Policy Network is made up of free market think tanks—at least one in every state—fighting to limit government and advance market-friendly public policy at the state and local levels.” Similarly, PSN clearly exhibits a left-leaning ideological focus. According to the PSN website, “PSN engages and builds the capacity of state and national leaders to advance public policy solutions that uphold America’s promise to be a just and equitable democracy.” PSN also “promotes an active democracy and shared economic prosperity,” and “embraces our nation’s rich diversity and increased access to opportunity for all.”⁵

Having drawn our sample from these two national networks, we next examined each of these state-level ideological think tanks. For the second stage of analysis, we collected information from each of the 99 state-level think tanks’ websites and accompanying documents to examine activity related to higher education policy issues. We organized this information into three major categories. The first indicates the presence or absence of higher education among each think tank’s policy issue coverage. The second category identifies the specific higher education issues mentioned on each website. For this section, we gather links to their policy briefs, white papers, commentaries, and other higher education-related documents. The third category includes information pertaining to the membership of each think tank and to links to national organizations on each think tank’s website.

In the third stage of analysis, we conducted a content analysis of the websites of both PSN- and SPN-member think tanks. Similar to the research design employed to examine higher education marketing (Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Morphew & Hartley, 2006), we systematically analyzed text included on both the websites and supporting documents by following Krippendorff’s (2004) steps of sampling, unitizing, reducing, and, ultimately, making inferences about emergent themes and messages. From the 99 think tanks, we identified 775 documents, which included press releases, policy

reports, commentary, white papers, and legislative testimony. We then coded these documents by emerging categories related to policy issues, and, consistent with the constant comparative method, we consolidated these categories into 19 broader themes. Because some individual documents contained more than one theme, we also tabulated the total numbers of mentions of specific higher education issues. This allowed us to examine (a) the extent of policy activity related to higher education issues by each think tank (based on their documents) and (b) the specific higher education issues that are prioritized by each think tank, by type of think tank and in total. Ultimately, we found 830 specific mentions of higher education issues within the 775 documents among the 99 think tanks. Finally, to examine the think tanks' levels of funding, which could be suggestive of capacity and visibility, we collected the most recent data (2011) on the organizations' annual revenue. These data are publicly available on GuideStar, a nonprofit organization that collects and presents information, including copies of IRS Form 990's on other nonprofit organizations.

Results

The findings related to the landscape of ideological think tanks demonstrate their wide coverage of higher education policy issues and identify a number of these organizations with extensive higher education agendas. Moreover, we find significant differences between conservative and progressive think tanks, both in their structure and content related to higher education issues. We present our findings in three sections: (a) the prevalence and network activity of ideological think tanks in each state; (b) higher education-related think tank activity, including the frequency of each think tank's activity related to higher education issues and differences between conservative and progressive think tanks in the higher education issues they prioritize; and (c) a more nuanced examination of six "high-salience" states.

Prevalence and Network Activity of Ideological Think Tanks in the States

Overall, we find that conservative state-level think tanks have a stronger presence than their progressive counterparts. Specifically, we found nearly twice as many CTTs (59) as PTTs (40). Moreover, CTTs have tighter and broader networks, given the higher frequency among SPN think tanks' online content of mentions of other SPN think tanks and national conservative organizations, as compared to the PSN groups. Specifically, nearly half of all

CTTs have a link to a conservative national think tank on their website compared to less than one third of PTTs.

As illustrated in Appendix A, all 50 states have at least one state-level CTT, and nine states have two organizations that are members of the SPN (2012) or “free market think tanks.” These state-level organizations range in founding date from California’s Pacific Research Institute in 1979 to nearly two-dozen think tanks established within the last decade. Compared to CTTs, we found greater variation in the frequencies of PTTs in the states. Of the 50 states, 18 do not have any state-level PTTs that fit our criteria, while one state, Illinois, has three such organizations. The range in founding dates for PTTs also differs from that for conservative organizations. Although we found examples of relatively new think tanks in both groups, the oldest PTT that we identified (Center for Community Solutions in Ohio) was founded in 1913, 66 years before the earliest CTT.

Our findings related to the think tanks’ revenues were inconsistent with our expectation. Whereas we anticipated more robust funding among conservative organizations, we found that, on average, CTTs and PTTs have similar sized annual budgets (i.e., US\$1.13 million and US\$1.03 million, respectively). Moreover, the median budget for progressive organizations (US\$0.73 million) is larger than for the conservative groups (US\$0.59 million). On the contrary, with regard to proportion think tanks with revenues exceeding US\$1 million, 32% of CTTs meet this threshold compared to 20% of PTTs.

The level of higher education activity for each group is relatively consistent with the size of the organization’s budget, with a few exceptions. While, in general, wealthier groups have more activity related to higher education, notably, we found that three affluent groups have little higher education policy activity, whereas three groups with modest funding have significant levels of activity related to higher education. For instance, the conservative Goldwater Institute (AZ) and the Pacific Research Institute both have budgets exceeding US\$4 million but only 14 and 7 documents related to higher education on their websites, respectively. Similarly, the progressive Center for Community Solutions in Ohio has a US\$4.8 million budget but only four documents related to higher education. Alternatively, the conservative Bluegrass Institute (KY) and the progressive Bell Policy Center (CO) and Economic Opportunity Institute (WA) all have budgets under US\$1 million, but each had at least 26 mentions of a higher education–related issue, indicating that higher priority is given to this issue area, even given budget constraints.

With regard to network activity, the results of our inventory matched our expectation that CTTs would have tighter connections to national networks than PTTs. As illustrated in the columns of Appendix A labeled “NTT Link”

(national think tank), roughly two thirds of state-level conservative think tanks include links or references to national think tanks. Given the direct emphasis on “free markets” by SPN, perhaps it is not surprising that the most often cited national organization is the Cato Institute, which includes individual liberty, limited government, and free markets among its guiding principles. Based on the recent public criticisms of ALEC and their similar emphasis on free markets, we unexpectedly find that only 10 state-level CTTs directly link to or reference ALEC. In contrast to ALEC’s brazen public image, however, Murray’s (2011) higher education policy report for ALEC is far more dense (74 pages) compared to the more common 2-5-page policy briefs produced by state-level think tanks and appears to place less overt emphasis on ideologically based policy recommendations. On the contrary, of the 40 PTTs, only 30% include a link or reference to a national think tank on their website. For these think tanks, the most commonly referenced national organizations are the Economic Analysis and Research Network (EARN) of the Economic Policy Institute and the SFAI of the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. The EARN’s stated mission is to “improve the lives of Americans through state and local policy . . . [and to] advance progressive policy at the state and regional level” (EARN, 2012), whereas SFAI promotes rigorous research to analyze budget and tax policy with a “particular focus on the needs of low- and moderate-income families” (SFAI, 2013).

Higher Education Issues of Interest to Ideological Think Tanks

Consistent with our expectation, but by a narrow margin, we find CTTs to have a more robust level of higher education policy activity than PTTs. Of the 57 conservative organizations for which we have access to web-based materials,⁶ 46 think tanks explicitly identify higher education among their policy issues. That is, 81% of CTTs contain at least one document (e.g., a press release, blog post, and white paper) related to higher education. Specifically, 483 documents related to higher education appeared among all 59 CTTs. On average, each CTT has approximately eight documents on its website pertaining to a higher education issue. PTT websites had slightly less activity related to higher education, with an average of a little over seven documents per think tank. Of the 40 PTTs we identified, 82% contain at least one unit of text related to higher education issues. In rare cases (in three conservative and three progressive organizations), higher education mentions were contained in a separate “higher education” tab on the website with links to additional information. In most cases, however, state think tanks embedded specific higher education issues within a broader issue topic, such as reduced state spending and increased transparency for CTTs, or education and budget and

tax policy for PTTs. As previously noted, our coding of these documents often identified more than one higher education issue (e.g., access and cost/affordability, efficiency and transparency) within a single document, so we also collected information on the frequency of mentions related to distinct higher education issues. As illustrated in Appendix A, 498 total mentions of distinct higher education issues appear on CTT websites. PTTs, on the other hand, have a greater tendency to mention more than one higher education-related issue in a given unit of text. In particular, 332 mentions of distinct issues are contained within 292 documents on PTT websites.

With regard to the scope and content of higher education policy activity, not surprisingly, our findings are consistent with our expectation that CTTs and PTTs express policy preferences in ideological terms. The scope of issues reported in Table 1 illustrates the broad coverage of higher education policies by state-level ideological think tanks. The two most common issues, state funding and costs and affordability, represent higher education issues of equal salience to conservative and progressive organizations but from contrasting perspectives. Every mention of state funding by CTTs involved a call for reduced funding of higher education institutions and oftentimes a mention of the inefficiencies of colleges and universities. For instance, the vice president for Washington's Freedom Foundation is quoted as saying,

Here's a suggestion for them, meet taxpayers halfway. Show us you're serious by finding the waste, inefficiencies, and low priority expenditures in higher ed and cut them first. Maybe less fancy buildings and less high priced admin for starters? (Phillips, 2012)

On the contrary, PTTs were critical of states' underinvestment in and painful budget cuts to higher education institutions.

The higher education issue on which there was most accord, both in salience and in perspective, was costs and affordability. PTTs and CTTs alike reported that college was unaffordable, but their approaches for solving this problem differed significantly. Whereas, in general, PTTs suggested that states should play a larger role in easing the financial burden on students, CTTs placed greater responsibility in the hands of higher education institutions, particularly by criticizing tuition increases. Moreover, at times, the documents on PTT websites relating to costs and affordability also included a mention of minority students and the importance of increasing access. Only one mention of minority students was made on a CTT website, Center of the American Experiment in Minnesota. This entry pertained to the ineffectiveness of affirmative action policies to reduce educational attainment gaps.

Table 1. Higher Education Issue Variation and Priority by Type of Ideological Think Tank.

Issues	Conservative think tanks (CTT)			Progressive think tanks (PTT)			Total
	Mentions	Rank	Proportion	Mentions	Rank	Proportion	
State funding	68	3	0.41	98	1	0.59	166
Costs/affordability	87	2	0.52	79	2	0.48	166
Efficiency and productivity	117	1	0.89	15	5	0.11	132
College readiness	30	4	0.97	1	12	0.03	31
HEI's promote liberalism	30	4	1.00	0	NR	0.00	30
Community colleges	5	14	0.19	22	4	0.81	27
Governance	16	7	0.62	10	10	0.38	26
Diversity/minority students	1	15	0.04	25	3	0.96	26
Finance transparency	21	6	1.00	0	NR	0.00	21
Teaching over research	16	7	1.00	0	NR	0.00	16
Higher education bubble	15	9	1.00	0	NR	0.00	15
Admissions	14	10	1.00	0	NR	0.00	14
Undocumented students	0	NR	0.00	12	6	1.00	12
Adult education	0	NR	0.00	12	6	1.00	12
Access	0	NR	0.00	11	8	1.00	11
Federal policy	0	NR	0.00	11	8	1.00	11
Fund students instead of institutions	10	11	1.00	0	NR	0.00	10
Curriculum	10	11	1.00	0	NR	0.00	10
For-profit institutions	6	13	0.75	2	11	0.25	8
Other (fewer than five mentions)	52		0.60	34		0.40	86
Total	498			332			830

Note. HEI = higher education institutions; NR = not ranked.

The next three themes in order of frequencies were of high priority for CTTs but not for progressive groups. Approximately 88% of mentions related to efficiency and productivity were from CTTs. The documents categorized under the “efficiency and productivity” theme overwhelmingly included discussions related to low completion rates, coupled with commentary on the cost to taxpayers of such poor outcomes. In some cases, outcome-based funding, an alternative to enrollment-based funding that ties institutional performance directly to state funding, was endorsed. The documents related to efficiency and productivity on PTT websites also noted low completion rates with a special emphasis on minority and low-income students.

The fourth most commonly mentioned issue, college readiness, also appeared most often on CTT websites. On this issue, we found differences both in salience and in substance. College readiness only appeared on PTT websites once, and this mention was primarily descriptive, noting that many students are not adequately prepared when they enter college. On CTT websites, on the other hand, most mentions of college readiness pointed to the wasteful nature of remedial education in colleges and universities. Finally, not surprisingly, only CTT websites mentioned that higher education institutions promote liberalism.

Unexpectedly, however, only PTT websites contained documents related to undocumented students. This finding is surprising given that, in general, conservative politicians openly oppose and resist efforts to provide in-state tuition for undocumented students. Although the issues relating to diversity, minority students, and undocumented students are closely related, mentions of undocumented students were explicitly related to both affordability (endorsing in-state-resident tuition) and access in states where undocumented students are banned from higher education institutions. There were enough mentions of these issues to merit a separate theme for undocumented students.

Finally, the occurrences of text related to higher education classified as “other” include many state-specific interests that are too narrow to be reduced into one of our broader issue categories. In Kentucky, for example, the Bluegrass Institute of Public Policy Solutions recommends that the private institution, University of Pikeville, not be allowed into the public higher education system (Waters, 2012). As another example, Minnesota 2020, a PTT, includes commentary criticizing corporations for their exploitation of college students through unpaid internships (Sorensen, 2012).

High-Salience States

Our findings also illustrate the prominence of interest and activity related to higher education issues in certain states. The frequencies of documents

related to higher education issues within a given state (among all CTTs and PTTs) ranged from 0 (in multiple states) to 79 (in North Carolina), with an average of 16 units per state. Table 2 reports six “high-salience” states each of which had a total of at least 40 documents related to higher education among all ideological think tanks in the states.⁷

Our findings indicate that two states, North Carolina and Washington, have significant activity related to higher education issues within both CTTs and PTTs. The specific issues prioritized and perspectives taken differed significantly between the two types of think tanks. In North Carolina, for example, among the documents related to higher education on the website for the conservative John Locke Foundation in North Carolina, which has annual revenue of nearly US\$3.5 million, we found a paper titled, “An education bubble?” As suggested by the title, this commentary-style essay by the Foundation’s president, Jane Shaw, argues that higher education’s rising costs are not commensurate with sufficient workforce preparation by these institutions. For example, Shaw (2009) contends:

[I]f all students at a school always get good grades, a diploma from that school is no longer an indication of the student’s quality. Thus, the value of a college education—as measured by students’ preparedness for the workplace—may be falling below what students are paying for it. Once this becomes known, colleges may be hard-pressed to fill classrooms. That could burst the bubble.

In contrast, the progressive NC Justice Center in North Carolina, which has an annual budget in excess of US\$5.8 million and whose slogan is, “Opportunity and Prosperity for All” published a brief titled, “Underpreparing for the Future: North Carolina’s Divestment in Post-Secondary Education.” Among its key findings was that, “despite the importance of post-secondary completion to North Carolina’s future economy, policymakers cut back on critical investments to support students in finishing their educational programs as they also struggled with rising costs and declining state financial aid” (Sirota & Burch, 2012).

Other states with both CTTs and PTTs have high levels of activity related to higher education issues within only one type of think tank. For instance, of the 46 documents related to higher education on Michigan ideological think tanks’ websites, 45 are from the CTT, Mackinac. The one higher education mention by the Michigan PTT was a news article relating to brain drain. Similarly, most higher education mentions from Texas are from the TPPF. Perhaps this is not surprising given that this organization is one of the six that dedicate a section on the website specifically to higher education issues and is one of best financed think tanks with annual revenue exceeding US\$5.7 million.

Table 2. Frequencies of Documents Related to Higher Education Issues Appearing on High-Salience States' Ideological Think Tank Websites.

Conservative think tanks (CTTs)		Progressive think tanks (PTTs)					State total
CTT	Documents	Issues	PTT	Documents	Issues	State total	
NC John Locke Foundation	34	Higher education bubble, efficiency and productivity	NC Justice Center	36	Costs and affordability, community colleges	79	
Pope Civitas Institute	9	State funding, community colleges					
WA Freedom Foundation	26	Costs and affordability, governance	Economic Opportunity Institute	27	State funding, costs and affordability	70	
WA Policy Center	17	State funding, efficiency and productivity					
CO Independence Institute	15	Costs and affordability, finance transparency	CO Center	3	State funding, federal policy	47	
MI Mackinac Center	45	Efficiency and productivity, costs and affordability	The Bell Policy Center	29	Diversity and minority students, state funding	46	
KY Bluegrass Institute	26	College readiness, HEI's promote liberalism	MI Prospect	1	Brain drain (Other)	43	
TX TX Public Policy Foundation	36	Governance, efficiency and productivity	KY Center	17	Costs and affordability, state funding	41	
TX Conservative Coalition Research Institute	0	N/A	Texas for Public Justice	5	Governance, finance transparency		

Note. HEI = higher education institutions.

Of the 99 ideological think tanks we identified, the TPPF was among the most active on issues relating to higher education. Not only did we find a robust collection of commentaries and white papers relating to specific higher education issues in the state and nationwide but we also encountered an innovative and comprehensive list of proposals for reforming higher education. Specifically, the TPPF published the “7 Breakthrough Solutions,” which includes among its proposals splitting research and teaching budgets and requiring evidence of teaching skill for tenure (“7 Solutions,” 2007). On the TPPF’s website, we also found evidence of legislative activity related to the think tank’s ideas for higher education. In particular, we found bill analyses and a document reporting on “successes” during the state’s 82nd legislative session (Williams, 2011). Taken together, these breakthrough solutions and successes primarily relate to initiatives designed to increase efficiency and productivity in higher education, which is the highest ranking issue among CTTs as reported in Table 1.

Discussion and Implications

This inventory of state-level ideological think tanks has two main contributions, each of which has implications for future research. Our study’s first contribution is that it identifies the higher education issues that these ideological groups deem important. The 19 categories of issues include 9 of the 10 issues included in the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ “Top 10 Higher Education State Policy Issues for 2012” (American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASCU], 2012). The significant overlap in issues prioritized by the ideological organizations and AASCU suggests that the think tanks in our analysis are providing information on the most pressing policy issues and, in nearly all cases, are doing so with an ideologically driven perspective. Indeed, our analysis shows that the frequency of issues mentioned by conservative and progressive think tanks follows predictable patterns based on ideological predilections. We also find that CTTs are more likely to be linked to broader national conservative policy networks than PTTs are to be linked to national progressive networks. Despite this variation in connection to national ideological organizations, the issue coverage suggests that CTTs and PTTs are providing information and recommendations on nationally relevant higher education issues from a political perspective within a state context. Future studies might build on our analysis of higher education issue coverage to examine more deeply the formal and informal connections between state-level ideological think tanks and broader national organizations and initiatives.

The second contribution of this inventory of state-level ideological public policy think tanks relates to the prevalence of ideological think tanks among intermediary organizations that are increasingly active in informing state-level policies. Indeed, as with the rising influence of national ideological think tanks (Rich, 2004), these organizations should be included in analyses of public policy decisions at the state level. Although there is quite a bit of variation among the states in the prevalence and activity of these organizations, all 50 states have at least one ideological think tank; taken together, these organizations mention higher education issues 830 times. This suggests a robust “supply” of information by these organizations. Future studies might examine further policymakers’ “demand” for information from state-level ideological think tanks. For instance, based on the persistent two-community divide between researchers and policymakers and the interests in the advancement of ideological agendas by both parties, these more-directly political organizations may be elected officials’ preferred sources of information rather than intermediaries led primarily by policy sectors (i.e., regional compacts, state agencies, and national higher education organizations). By extending our analysis to include the demand for information from ideological think tanks, we would gain a deeper appreciation for the ways policymakers utilize ideological information according to Weiss’s (1979) typology. Is this information used *instrumentally* to advance specific policy solutions such as the adoption of policies providing in-state tuition rates for undocumented students? Does ideological information serve as the primary *conceptual* grounding for policymakers’ policy preferences such as the limited role of government informing higher education appropriations decisions? Is ideological information used *politically* to generate support among members of the same political party such as Republican legislators and Governor Rick Perry’s administration using TPPF’s “7 breakthrough solutions” to gain support among fellow Republican office holders? These are important questions that would serve as natural next steps to this inventory demonstrating the significant higher education policy activity of ideological think tanks in the states.

Appendix A

Summary Chart of State-Level Ideological Think Tank Prevalence and Higher Education Activity.

State	Conservative Think Tanks (CTTs)				Progressive Think Tanks (PTTs)					
	# of CTT	Year Founded	Revenue (US\$ million/yr.)	NTT Link	Documents	# of PTT	Year Founded	Revenue (US\$ million/yr.)	NTT Link	Documents
AL	1	1989	1.15	Y	13	0	—	—	—	—
AK	1	2009	0.29	N	1	1	2004	0.26	Y	0
AZ	1	1988	4.19	Y	14	0	—	—	—	—
AR	2	2011/1995	0.19/0.13	N/Y	6/1	0	—	—	—	—
CA	1	1979	4.71	Y	7	1	1996	*	N	3
CO	1	1985	1.97	N	15	2	1999/2002	1.56/0.70	N/N	3/29
CT	1	1984	0.58	N	1	0	—	—	—	—
DE	1	2008	0.32	Y	2	0	—	—	—	—
FL	2	2011/1987	0.21/1.97	N/Y	0/8	1	1990	*	N	2
GA	1	1994	0.66	Y	17	1	2004	0.82	N	5
HI	1	2000	0.52	Y	1	0	—	—	—	—
ID	1	2009	0.36	N	4	0	—	—	—	—
IL	1	2002	2.88	N	13	3	2000/1997/1973	0.74/0.73/0.74	Y/Y/N	6/0/3
IN	1	1989	0.14	members only	17	2	1986/2004	1.38/*	N/Y	4/9
IA	1	1991	0.47	Y	17	1	2001	0.49	Y	6
KS	1	1996	0.61	Y	6	1	2006	*	Y	1
KY	1	2003	0.33	Y	26	1	2011	*	Y	17
LA	1	2008	0.43	Y	9	0	—	—	—	—
ME	1	2002	0.72	Y	11	0	—	—	—	—
MD	2	2001/1995	0.01/0.32	Y/Y	1/6	0	1998	*	N	2
MA	1	1988	2.2	N	0	2	2001/1996	0.84/2.37	N/N	17/10
MI	1	1987	5.78	Y	45	1	1992	*	N	1
MN	2	2006/1990	0.42/0.80	Y/Y	5/7	1	2008	0.31	N	18
MS	1	1993	*	N	0	1	2006	*	N	0
MO	1	2005	1.43	Y	4	1	2003	0.63	Y	11
MT	1	2007	0.25	Y	7	0	—	—	—	—

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

State	Conservative Think Tanks (CTTs)				Progressive Think Tanks (PTTs)					
	# of CTT	Year Founded	Revenue (US\$ million/yr.)	NTT Link	Documents	# of PTT	Year Founded	Revenue (US\$ million/yr.)	NTT Link	Documents
NE	1	2007	0.39	Y	2	0	—	—	—	—
NV	1	1991	0.6	Y	6	1	1994	0.72	N	0
NH	1	1992	0.25	N	0	1	2002	*	N	1
NJ	1	2010	0.19	Y	13	2	1999/1997	1.66/0.22	N/N	1/16
NM	1	2000	0.36	Y	9	0	—	—	—	—
—NY	1	2005	*	N	0	0	—	—	—	—
NC	2	2005/1990	3.45/1.58	Y/Y	34/9	1	2007	5.81	N	36
ND	1	2007	0.23	Y	11	0	—	—	—	—
OH	1	1994	0.49	Y	5	2	1913/2000	4.82/1.02	N/Y	4/17
OK	1	1993	3.06	Y	21	1	2008	0.43	Y	12
OR	1	1991	0.94	N	0	1	2008	0.49	N	10
PA	1	1987	1.95	Y	13	2	1996/2005	1.2/*	N/N	6/5
RI	1	~2010	0.22	N	0	0	—	—	—	—
SC	1	1986	1.01	Y	13	0	—	—	—	—
SD	1	1999	0.05	Y	2	0	—	—	—	—
TN	1	2004	0.53	N	0	1	1998	0.04	N	1
TX	2	1996/1989	0.71/5.76	N/Y	0/36	1	1997	0.25	N	5
UT	1	1994	1.31	Y	5	1	2011	0.06	N	3
VT	1	1993	0.13	Y	2	1	1979	0.13	N	0
VA	2	1995/1996	0.26/0.13	N/N	0/0	1	2006	0.9	N	0
WA	2	1991/1999	2.68/1.51	Y/Y	26/17	1	1998	0.78	N	27
WV	1	2007	0.05	members only	—	0	—	—	—	—
WI	2	2009/1987	0.63/0.70	Y/Y	6/5	1	1994	0.64	Y	1
WY	1	2008	1.04	Y	1	1	1993	0.2	Y	0
ALL	59	—	64.25	40	483	40	—	30.97	12	292
AVE	—	—	1.13	0.68	8.2	—	—	1.03	0.30	7.3

Note: NTT = national think tank.
*Data not available on GuideStar.

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Notes

1. Rich relies on surveys and interviews of policymakers and journalists. In addition to Brookings' second place rating, Rich's respondents rated three conservative think tanks in the top four: (a) Heritage Foundation, (b) American Enterprise Institute, and (c) Cato Institute. Abelson relies on media mentions in newspapers, news magazines, and television newscasts. Results are fairly consistent across media outlets. For national newspapers, the top four include (a) Brookings, (b) AEI, (c) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and (d) Cato.
2. From the original PSN list, we eliminated the groups that are classified on the PSN website as advocate, affiliate, umbrella, business association, electoral, faith based, grassroots, labor union, legal, political party chapter, and service provider. The remaining organizations were those labeled on the PSN website as think tanks, educational institutions, and "other."
3. Some organizations labeled as "think tank" were also excluded because they did not fit the criteria (i.e., were not state-level or were not general policy organizations). Others, including the Rockridge Institute in California, were excluded because the groups had already dissolved (as indicated by their respective websites' statuses).
4. Unlike our initial inventory of conservative organizations, however, we did not identify other relevant progressive networks. Instead, our searches revealed progressive think tanks with national agendas or networks, such as ProgressNow, that are primarily advocacy-oriented, working toward building grassroots support for various policy agendas rather than producing or disseminating policy information.
5. It is important to note that despite these organizations' similarities, one significant difference is that, whereas State Policy Network (SPN) functions as a network for its member organizations, PSN is intended to serve as a resource and network for legislators. As such, its list of organizations is merely an inventory and not a network for the groups.
6. The think tanks in Indiana and West Virginia require a membership to view web content.
7. The states with 40 or more documents related to higher education issues account for more than 40% of all documents collected by ideological think tanks all states. Six states include 326 documents of the 775 total.

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