

The Interactive Relationship Between University Think Tanks and Their Parent Universities: A Preliminary Analysis and Recommendations: Postprint

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Properly managing the interactive relationship between university think tanks and their host universities constitutes an unavoidable challenge in leveraging institutional research strengths while simultaneously pursuing think tank independence and influence. [Method/Process] Based on an “input-operation-output” analytical framework, this study analyzes the interactive relationship between the two parties across multiple dimensions within three stages—resource input, operational support, and benefit coordination—through literature review, web-based research, and multi-case analysis of foreign examples. [Results/Conclusion] University think tanks should fully utilize the intellectual resources and research capabilities of their host universities while employing their own capacities to achieve value-added enhancement of university intellectual investment; concurrently, they must maintain relative independence in financial and administrative operations.

Full Text

A Brief Analysis and Recommendations on the Interactive Relationship Between University-Affiliated Think Tanks and Their Parent Universities

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Managing the interactive relationship between universities and their affiliated think tanks is an unavoidable challenge for leveraging institutional research strengths while simultaneously pursuing think tank independence and influence. **[Method/Process]** Based on an “input-operation-output” analytical framework, this paper examines the multifaceted interactions between universities and their affiliated think tanks across three stages—resource input, operational support, and benefit coordination—through literature review, web-based investigation, and comparative case studies of foreign institutions. **[Result/Conclusion]** University-affiliated think tanks should maximize the utilization of their parent university’s knowledge resources and research capabilities to create added value while maintaining relative independence in financial and administrative operations.

Keywords: university-affiliated think tanks; university knowledge resources; interactive relationship; think tank independence

Classification Number: G311

1 The Necessity of Examining the Relationship Between University-Affiliated Think Tanks and Their Parent Universities

Enhancing institutional policy discourse power and influence represents the ultimate goal for universities establishing affiliated think tanks to promote the application of knowledge outputs. Academic organizations with relatively weak official backgrounds—particularly institutions of higher education—face constraints from their construction systems and decision-making procedures that limit their influence beyond academic circles. Think tanks occupy a critical intersection within the evidence-based decision-making system composed of government, academic communities, media, and the public [1], where knowledge creation and information flow are highly active, enabling them to serve as “bridges” between policy and knowledge. Think tanks possess unique resources and operational advantages in outputting value-based positions and influencing government decision-making. Riding the wave of domestic think tank construction, both academic discussions and practical initiatives regarding university-affiliated think tanks have gained momentum.

Numerous scholars have elaborated on the inherent advantages of university-affiliated think tanks. Qin Huimin [2] argues that such think tanks excel in leveraging university research resources, maintaining research objectivity, and engaging in public discourse. Du Jingyuan [3] contends that university-affiliated think tanks engage in specialized research, employ flexible talent management mechanisms, follow scientific research processes, and utilize extensive knowledge dissemination channels. These advantages prominently manifest in the provision of knowledge accumulation and research capacity resources.

However, a critical challenge persists: what type of relationship should universities and their affiliated think tanks maintain to both leverage research strengths and preserve institutional independence? Research on think tanks both domestically and internationally widely recognizes that independence constitutes the core value and competitive advantage of think tanks. The multi-stakeholder balancing mechanism involving government, media, academic groups, and the public prevents think tanks from aligning with any single party's interests, thereby maintaining relatively objective and neutral positions [4]. Yet university-affiliated think tanks receive support from their parent universities throughout construction and operation, resulting in relatively close relationships. Managing this relationship is crucial for ensuring knowledge authority and influence.

Barnes [5], in a 2002 study on university-industry institutional interaction, developed an optimal practice model through case analysis. This model considers the entire process from resource input to outcome benefits, incorporates external factors such as industry environment, and identifies key influencing factors across all stages from resource investment and project management to performance benefits. Given that the relationship between university-affiliated think tanks and their parent universities involves continuous interaction throughout think tank operations—with university researchers and knowledge assets participating in every think tank project—this paper adapts Barnes' model based on case analysis of university-affiliated think tanks to develop an “input-operation-output” logical framework for analyzing university-think tank interactions (Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]). This framework examines the interactive relationship from three stages: resource supply, operational support, and benefit coordination.

2 Defining Characteristics of University-Affiliated Think Tanks and Selection of Research Subjects

University-affiliated think tanks constitute one category within the broader think tank ecosystem, alongside official and private think tanks, each with unique resource supply and operational mechanisms that are difficult to replicate across categories. Using large-scale comprehensive professional think tanks such as RAND or Brookings as benchmarks for Chinese university-affiliated think tank development presents theoretical and practical challenges.

Domestic university-affiliated think tank development should instead reference outstanding foreign counterparts. The “Think Tanks Affiliated to University” category in the 2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index [6] aligns closely with the “university-affiliated think tanks” classification proposed in domestic academic circles. Investigation of overseas think tanks in this category and review of relevant research reveal several distinguishing characteristics (Table 1).

Based on these characteristics and rankings in the 2016 Global Think Tank Report, this study selected Harvard University's Center for International Development (CID) and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy as

research subjects (institutional profiles compared in Table 2). Through web-based and literature investigation, this paper examines the actual conditions of these two think tanks across resource input, operational support, and benefit coordination to analyze the roles played by parent universities at each operational stage.

3 Analysis of the Interactive Relationship

3.1 Resource Input

The resource input dimension primarily examines parent university contributions regarding intellectual resources, financial resources, and relational resources. The source and scale of resource supply constitute key issues in assessing think tank independence. University researchers serve as “carriers” of knowledge outputs and research strengths, making their integration into think tanks essential for leveraging university knowledge concentration and research capabilities. The proportion of financial investment from universities reveals the degree of think tank dependence, while universities’ teaching functions also contribute resources for network building.

3.1.1 Intellectual Resources People represent both carriers and sources of intellectual resources, creating notably close relationships between think tanks and parent universities. Investigations reveal substantial flows of university disciplinary talent into affiliated think tanks. Think tank directors are typically authoritative experts or academic leaders; instances of entire university research groups migrating occur frequently. University-affiliated think tanks feature unique positions such as “director’ s research assistant” rarely seen in other think tanks, and extensively employ doctoral students for data collection and analysis. These personnel often gain positions through existing workplace relationships within their schools. The university research system tradition means that personnel working in think tanks rarely experience “inverted” title situations between the two entities.

As illustrated in the personnel flow hierarchy diagram for university researchers participating in think tank work (Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]) and corresponding responsibilities (Table 3), the functions of university researchers in think tanks heavily reference their university titles. Core research members provide guidance on group development, conduct research division, and produce knowledge outputs, while support personnel handle data processing, analysis, and other auxiliary tasks. This dense human resource intersection occurs exclusively within research projects, with virtually no university personnel involvement in administrative operations. Investigation shows that think tank support staff come from diverse backgrounds, rarely possessing university research experience, and are valued for their professional experience in government, enterprise, or research institutions due to their engagement in business functions such as results promotion and administration.

3.1.2 Financial Resources Unlike substantial intellectual resource investment, foreign universities provide minimal direct or indirect financial investment in affiliated think tanks (through university-undertaken projects or funds). Based on investigation, university-affiliated think tank funding primarily comprises four sources: foundation grants, commissioned projects, training revenue, and individual donations. CID currently receives funding from several foundations without financial support from Harvard University or the Kennedy School. Baker Institute's 2016 financial report shows that university-sponsored funds accounted for only 1% of total revenue (Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]), with no overlap between university and think tank funding sources.

To maintain relative autonomy in research topics, university-affiliated think tanks limit commissioned project funding, making them more welcoming of sources such as training programs and alumni donations. Nevertheless, financial investment influences research activities. Since foundation grants constitute the primary funding source, and foundation priority areas align closely with think tank research directions—CID researchers focus on political and economic issues in developing countries, while supporting foundations concentrate on development and human rights in India, the Middle East, and other regions—this alignment shapes research agendas.

3.1.3 Relational Resources “Relationships” represent crucial intangible resources in think tanks. Think tanks occupy the center of a “spider web” connecting government, academic groups, media, and the public, with people forming the web's nodes. Consequently, the substantial number of researchers provided by universities first ensures effective connections with scientific and academic communities.

Universities' teaching and training functions provide think tanks with long-term potential for acquiring new relationships, extending far beyond academic circles. Investigations found that among government officials, enterprise media personnel, and others employed by the two think tanks, a considerable proportion had previous learning experiences or guest expert positions at the parent universities.

Additionally, universities' relatively open communication environments enable think tanks to leverage the university platform through courses, lectures, and training programs to extensively engage students, government personnel, and enterprise media professionals, objectively increasing external understanding of the institution and stimulating new relationship development.

3.2 Operational Support

The operational support dimension examines university roles in think tank operations from three aspects: institutional structure, academic cooperation, and relationship enhancement. University-affiliated think tanks follow basic operational frameworks of think tanks, conducting primary activities such as research

projects and conferences within standardized institutional structures. Key considerations include the degree of involvement by university disciplinary hierarchies and administrators in institutional structures, whether core researchers possess cooperation networks beyond the university, and the indirect roles universities play in relationship enhancement.

3.2.1 Institutional Structure Significant differences exist in university dependence levels among think tanks of different scales regarding institutional structure. Small-scale university-affiliated think tanks like CID, established within university advantage schools or departments, essentially serve as supplements to comprehensive competitiveness and struggle to escape their affiliations' shadow in institutional structure. Although adopting parallel administrative and research systems, researchers maintain school/department titles, with teaching and "academic-style" research remaining primary responsibilities. Researchers hold higher status than administrative personnel, with supervisory functions being limited.

Larger university-affiliated think tanks or mature small think tanks that have developed over time gradually separate from founding schools/departments as disciplinary fields enrich and funding sources diversify. Researchers from diverse backgrounds dilute original school/department title systems, encouraging flattened institutional structures. Expanded scale and complex funding streams spur sound administrative systems with specialized audit and supervisory committees. Baker Institute researchers receive direct appointments from the independent think tank, while original university personnel accept "dual appointments." Teaching assignments are independently issued by the think tank unit, with personnel administratively separate from the university.

3.2.2 Academic Cooperation Leveraging collective intelligence represents the primary purpose of forming research groups and gathering diverse academic talent in university-affiliated think tanks. Knowledge product output generally depends on academic cooperation within and between institutions. Both case study think tanks engage in frequent academic cooperation, though collaboration sources differ significantly. Baker Institute, as a large comprehensive think tank, primarily publishes monographs and papers with coauthors from within the institution. CID, being smaller, habitually relies on university institutional networks to find academic partners.

Taking Rohini Pande, co-chair of CID's "Evidence for Policy Design" research group, as an example: since joining, she has coauthored 29 formal publications. Statistical analysis of her collaborating institutions and their proportions (Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper]) reveals that most partner institutions have cooperative relationships with Harvard University.

3.2.3 Relationship Enhancement In relationship enhancement, universities primarily provide indirect resources to think tanks. While universities' con-

nections with academic circles are “natural,” their neutral and objective stance means less direct government contact. Universities rarely secure government “heavyweight” placements to broaden channels for institutional voice adoption, instead maintaining and adding value to relationships for think tanks through educational backgrounds and activity platforms.

As mentioned in Section 3.1, both investigated think tanks exhibit “alma mater recognition,” with many government, enterprise, and media personnel having associations with the parent universities in their resumes. Additionally, universities frequently serve as venues for think tank lectures, conferences, and training programs that involve extensive external interaction. With diverse guest sources and few university scholars invited, universities largely function as intermediary platforms, leveraging their brand, personnel aggregation, and open communication environments to provide venues for think tank external communication.

3.3 Benefit Coordination

The benefit coordination dimension examines agreements and regulations between university-affiliated think tanks and parent universities regarding brand promotion influence, knowledge product rights attribution, tacit knowledge sharing mechanisms, and profit distribution. Copyright ownership of knowledge products and the scale of think tank participation in university teaching activities reflect the degree of think tank dependence on universities.

3.3.1 Brand Identity Based on shared institutional mission and values, mutual brand promotion typically occurs between universities and their affiliated think tanks. Both case study think tanks’ names appear under university names, with university names displayed on domains, product watermarks, and logos. Universities provide knowledge authority assurance for their think tanks, while think tank activities generate attention and influence for universities.

Brand identity signifies close cooperation or certain subordinate relationships between university-affiliated think tanks and parent universities, as it requires tight institutional relationships and consistent values. However, as think tanks mature and evolve toward comprehensiveness, exposure to broader market environments and diverse factors makes institutional missions and values more susceptible to change, potentially weakening parent university relationships. The renowned Hoover Institution experienced a rupture with founding university Harvard due to emerging partisan preferences during its development.

3.3.2 Profit Distribution An important indicator of independence for U.S. think tanks is their nonprofit nature, with no instances of university participation in think tank financial distribution. Baker Institute’s latest financial report [6] shows that fundraising (\$9.15 million) nearly equals expenditures (\$8.58 million), with nearly all revenue allocated to research programs (78%) and institutional operations (22%). Research funding comprises the vast majority of total

expenditures, including researcher salaries, project operating expenses, publication costs, and special expenditures. Given the considerable proportion of university researchers in think tank positions, think tank salary levels likely motivate university researcher participation, though institutional-level financial intersections between think tanks and parent universities remain rare.

3.3.3 Knowledge Products Knowledge product ownership handling reflects the relationship between university-affiliated think tanks and parent universities. Various publications serve as evidence of think tank knowledge authority and carriers for knowledge dissemination. Publishing knowledge outputs through both proprietary and non-proprietary publications represents a universal means for think tanks to disseminate viewpoints and enhance influence.

Both investigated institutions have proprietary publications including working paper series and research reports, with intellectual property statements clearly indicating joint ownership by the think tank and parent university, granting all university faculty intellectual property rights. Intellectual property rights for publications in non-proprietary venues nominally belong to authors, though legal designation as work-for-hire is possible if they constitute outputs from university-established or cooperative projects, potentially vesting actual copyright with the university.

3.3.4 Teaching Activities Cooperative teaching between university-affiliated think tanks and parent universities represents overlapping yet complementary business activities. Universities' human resource investment aims to help researchers gain tacit knowledge growth, particularly in knowledge application and practical operations, through think tank experience and industry exchange. Inter-institutional cooperative teaching enables broader sharing of this new tacit knowledge.

Two models of think tank participation in parent university teaching activities emerged from investigation. The first involves teaching by full-time personnel, exemplified by CID. Most university researchers in these positions hold faculty appointments, with scientific research and teaching as their primary occupations, while think tank positions serve as secondary or honorary appointments. The second involves specially designed courses, exemplified by Baker Institute, which offers various courses specifically for Rice University students as an independent course provider. Course content generally relates to research topics, predominantly seminar-style, and shoulders the mission of promoting think tank knowledge concepts.

3.4 Summary Analysis

Based on the “input-operation-output” logic, this paper examined the interactive relationships between the two case study think tanks and their parent universities. University-affiliated think tanks and their parent universities exhibit various dependency relationships across multiple dimensions in resource input,

operational support, and benefit coordination stages, with differing degrees of dependence (Figure 5 [Figure 5: see original paper]).

Dependency levels across various operational aspects can be roughly categorized into three types:

(1) High Dependence. Intellectual resources, academic cooperation, knowledge products, and teaching activities fall into this category. Regardless of think tank scale, relationships with parent universities permeate the entire operational process, though not comprehensively. These four aspects are inseparable from think tank research projects, with think tanks allowing parent universities to participate in the knowledge value chain from team formation to knowledge output distribution and dissemination, leveraging university knowledge advantages.

(2) Conditional Dependence. Unlike deep dependence in academic research, relationships between universities and think tanks in institutional structure, relational resources, relationship enhancement, and brand identity are conditional. Relational resources and enhancement represent aspects requiring deliberate cultivation when establishing university-affiliated think tanks. As think tank influence strengthens, relational structures inevitably evolve from academically-focused to composite networks. Initial institutional missions and structures of university-affiliated think tanks are difficult to separate from university influence, though university-like rigid mechanisms gradually dissolve to meet expansion needs in scale and research areas, with institutional values potentially changing.

(3) Low Dependence. Financial resources, conference activities, and profit coordination represent aspects with low-frequency associations between think tanks and parent universities. Financial independence forms the cornerstone of institutional independence, with universities rarely involving themselves in think tank funding. Non-interference in think tank administration and daily operations also constitutes an important aspect of maintaining think tank independence.

Referencing the “Think Tanks Affiliated to University” category in the *2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index* [7], this analysis examined interactive relationships between several domestic university-affiliated think tanks—including Peking University’s Institute of International and Strategic Studies and Renmin University’s Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies—and their parent universities. Under the “input-operation-output” logic, domestic university-affiliated think tanks show similarities and differences compared to their foreign counterparts in managing parent university relationships (Figure 6 [Figure 6: see original paper]).

Overall, domestic university-affiliated think tanks demonstrate greater dependence on parent universities. Beyond strong interactions in knowledge resources and research capacity, domestic think tanks also intersect more with universities in financial and administrative management. Particularly unlike foreign think tanks that strive for financial independence, domestic university-affiliated think

tanks commonly accept parent university funding and commissioned projects. Specifically:

In resource input, domestic university-affiliated think tanks receive researcher transfers from parent universities, with educational credentials and university platforms positively contributing to relational resource accumulation. However, two notable differences exist: first, university and school-level leaders constitute considerable proportions of think tank management council members; second, commissioned projects account for substantial proportions of funding sources.

In operational support, although domestic university-affiliated think tanks adopt the council-led director responsibility system, university leaders intervene in institutional management and operations. Research group topics are heavily influenced by university research priorities and projects. Long-term basic research largely depends on existing research levels and achievements in university departments, with internal activities focusing more on fragmenting and popularizing existing knowledge. In relationship enhancement, domestic universities function similarly to their foreign counterparts.

In benefit coordination, the most prominent difference between domestic and foreign think tanks lies in knowledge product ownership division. Since the vast majority of researchers in domestic university-affiliated think tanks hold stable teaching and research positions in parent universities, think tanks primarily serve promotional roles in fragmenting and popularizing serious knowledge products. Numerous briefings, research reports, news reports, and columns with low knowledge density are produced by think tanks, while systematic monographs (rather than commentaries) and academic papers (collections) rarely appear as think tank outputs. This indicates that domestic university-affiliated think tanks have not experienced substantial migration of research capabilities and activities from university researchers, instead functioning more as “information ports” for enhanced exchange and convenient promotion—a key distinction from outstanding foreign university-affiliated think tanks.

4 Implications and Recommendations

To establish truly independent policy advisory institutions that fully leverage university research strengths, this paper offers the following recommendations for managing relationships between Chinese university-affiliated think tanks and parent universities, based on the “input-operation-output” framework and case analysis.

4.1 Rationally Understand and Support Think Tank Independence

University-affiliated think tanks require independence, but this does not mean rejecting university resources and assistance or blindly pursuing neutral positions. Independence primarily manifests in the degree to which “free will” of institutions and researchers can be exercised—control over “institutional oper-

ations, topic selection, research processes, and research results” [8] constitutes the right that think tanks should strive to maintain.

To preserve independence, universities must exercise control over their involvement in think tank operations. Accepting university assistance in research capacity, knowledge resources, and technical equipment leverages knowledge advantages and enhances research scientificity, while financial support and administrative intervention require careful consideration. Development stage constraints exist: nascent think tanks lacking experience need more assistance, though this dynamic changes as institutions mature.

4.2 Fully Leverage University Knowledge and Relational Resources

University-affiliated think tanks should maximally activate and utilize all knowledge resources universities can provide. These resources include not only researcher employment but also multi-level researcher system construction and other knowledge resource utilization. Broadly employing university personnel engaged in research projects—from academic leaders and core scholars to support staff and even doctoral students—creates a multi-level researcher system that fosters a university-like research environment and enhances knowledge creation efficiency.

Simultaneously, attention must be paid to other knowledge resources universities provide: intangible environments such as academic exchange circles and communities, and hardware environments such as disciplinary databases, academic publishing, laboratories, and equipment. Combining these resources with multi-level research systems creates a positive knowledge creation ecosystem that helps think tanks develop core competitiveness in knowledge production.

4.3 Implement Dual Research and Administrative Track Systems

The research-administrative dual-track system essentially guarantees research activity independence. As nonprofit organizations, university-affiliated think tanks must also consider strategy, operations, and development. While scientific research activities fuel knowledge creation, this alone cannot mobilize and guide think tanks effectively. Professionals with rich practical experience considering think tank development and operations can provide powerful driving force.

Implementing research-administrative dual tracks represents a nearly universal operational architecture for think tanks. However, unlike many domestic university-affiliated think tanks, outstanding foreign think tanks maintain clear personnel separation between tracks. University personnel densely populate research project units but rarely engage in administrative management and promotion, with even fewer current university managers serving as think tank leaders. Meanwhile, they maintain extremely open attitudes toward non-university personnel, attracting talent from government, business, and media to participate in think tank management.

4.4 Emphasize Think Tank Knowledge Capacity Feedback to Universities

Knowledge gains value and innovates through cyclical transformation. Releasing more knowledge dividends to parent universities not only helps consolidate inter-institutional relationships but also creates more exchange opportunities to support think tank growth.

Sharing knowledge product copyrights, internal courses, academic lectures, self-established training programs, and scholarships provides parent universities with clearer understanding of think tank operations and achievements, forming an intangible academic flow and sharing environment. This both promotes think tank branding and helps attract more university talent and relationships.

Beyond releasing knowledge resources, attention should be paid to supplementing and feeding back university personnel research capabilities. While absorbing university research knowledge and talent, emphasis should be placed on cultivating researchers' abilities to understand social issues, undertake horizontal projects, and combine theory with practice.

5 Conclusion

Properly understanding and managing the relationship between university-affiliated think tanks and their parent universities is an unavoidable issue in building high-quality think tanks. This relationship is dynamic, complementary, and permeates the entire operational process of university-affiliated think tanks.

Interactions between university-affiliated think tanks and parent universities frequently occur in knowledge creation, forming a complete interactive chain where both parties invest and benefit. Universities provide knowledge accumulation, researchers, and corresponding software and hardware resources that participate in research activities and enjoy knowledge dividends from outputs and potential competitiveness gains from enhanced researcher capabilities.

To maintain stability in this knowledge creation chain, relative independence in administrative operations and financial management is particularly necessary. A crucial pathway to maintaining such independence involves adopting an open posture to attract talent and resources from government, business, media, and other sectors, enabling university-affiliated think tanks to secure greater capital and achieve more scientific operations through multi-stakeholder balancing.

Author Contributions:

Kong Yuan: Selected the research topic, wrote and revised the article content.

Li Hong: Guided research direction and provided revision suggestions.

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