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U.N.I. think tank

Brad Koch
University of Northern Iowa

Judson Poppen
University of Northern Iowa

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U.N.I. Think Tank

Brad Koch and Judson Poppen

Presidential Scholar Thesis

April 21, 1998

TO: Janet Rives

FROM: Jerry Smith

SUBJECT: Presidential Scholar Thesis

DATE: 4-20-98

Janet, please accept this memo as my official sign-off on the Presidential Scholar Thesis on a UNI Think Tank that Judson Poppen prepared with Brad Koch. I have read their thesis and believe it provides a useful starting point for developing the think tank possibility.

As custodians of a rare and precious national commodity-brains-the Think Tanks have a serious responsibility to see that this commodity is used wisely and productively in coping with some of the most important problems of our nation and society.

- General Maxwell D. Taylor, from a paper
entitled "Case Study of a Think Tank".

Think tanks all over the nation are making great strides. Modern think tanks began with the RAND Corporation. RAND was a governmental success. The RAND corporation was a "developer of scores of military innovations, a prime analyst for U.S. foreign policy-makers, an instigator in the space program, and the most important corporate analyst for American nuclear policy." (Dickson 50) These are just a few of the things for which RAND was responsible. RAND has been called, "the most famous and one of the most important in that elite group of American R&D institutions known as think tanks." (Dickson 25) RAND's success led the way for other think tanks. Think tanks have been used outside the government for over 25 years. Think tanks have developed new flavors of food, improved fire fighting, mapped out development of new nations and worked to save whole industries. These are just a few of the wide-range of things for which think tanks have been responsible. (Dickson 5)

Many social problems exist in society all throughout the United States. No area is immune to the impact of social problems. Here at the University of Northern Iowa, many problems exist, such as, racism, sexism, ecological, excellence in education, and poverty. In order to combat these problems, a setting such as a university could be influential. University of Northern Iowa's President Robert Koob decided that a student-run think tank at U.N.I. would be an excellent idea to deal with problems, such

as those listed above. The think tank would be comprised of intelligent students who would devise plans to solve some of the problems in the community and around the world. After the students decide on a solution to the problem, the think tank would also be directly involved in implementing the solution. That way the effectiveness of the think tank would be readily noticeable. It is important that the U.N.I. think tank be independent, free from any one department. This would enable the think tank to feel comfortable asking the help of any department that it deemed necessary.

This paper will discuss the possibility of a student-run think tank on the campus of the University of Northern Iowa. The goal of this paper is to give a complete view of how a student-run think tank would be implemented at U.N.I. The paper will be divided into three main sections. First, the paper will begin with a discussion of the basic requirements for a think tank at U.N.I. Second, the paper will discuss the keys to making the think tank a success. Finally, the paper will go into the actual steps that the think tank should take in order to go about solving a certain problem. When finished, this paper will present a model that will be able to be used in the future to set up an actual U.N.I. think tank.

Basics of the Think Tank

In order to start a think tank, certain basics, such as size and leadership, must be present. These basics represent the minimum requirements necessary for the think tank to function properly. It is important to look at each of these basics carefully. Even though the basics are important, they are flexible and can be adapted to fit the needs of the U.N.I. think tank.

Seminar

The best way to start the U.N.I. think tank would be to offer it as a seminar for the Presidential Scholars. Currently, the Presidential Scholars (except for seniors) are

required to sign up for one of three Presidential Scholar seminars. These seminars are typically on a topic different from the scholar's major. They are used in order to give the scholars extra academic knowledge on a broad range of topics. Individual interaction is very important during the seminars. Scholars are taught how to develop their thoughts, as well as how to communicate those thoughts to other members of the seminar. Instead of three basic seminars being offered to scholars, two could be offered. The third seminar could be the think tank. If the scholar decides to register for the think tank, he/she will be required to attend a two-hour meeting once a week at a scheduled time.

It is important that the beginnings of the U.N.I. think tank are structured and contained in a seminar format so that its first trial is a success and interest is generated for future generations of scholars. Having worked with Presidential Scholars, we know they are performance driven. If that drive can be focused by giving each of the Presidential Scholars a grade, or some type of credit for this project, they will be much more inclined to give their best effort. As the think tank progressed and more people became involved, the program could be expanded to include all students, but for it to begin, it will have to be included in the Presidential Scholar program of study. This should benefit both the think tank and the Presidential Scholar program.

Application

From previous discussions with the scholars about the think tank, an opportunity such as this think tank should generate a lot of interest in the Presidential Scholars. Any scholar wishing to sign up for the think tank the following semester should fill out an application for the think tank. The applications should be due well before the registration deadline. The purpose for this is so students will know ahead of time if they are allowed to register for the think tank. The application that the students will fill out has some very basic questions they should answer. A sample application is

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provided at the end of the paper. When all of the applications are turned in, the board can then look at them to decide which students would be a good match for the think tank. If the total number of applications is 20 or less, all applications will probably be accepted unless a student turns in a poor application.

The possibility exists that the popularity of this organization will be great. If the number of applications is over 20, the Presidential Scholar Board must decide which scholars to accept for the think tank. The board should base its decisions on a few critical factors. One of the factors is seniority. Older scholars should be given a certain degree of preference in order to make sure that all scholars have a chance to be involved in the think tank during their stay at U.N.I. The next factor that should be looked at is the amount of experience the person has had in social work and problem solving. Students who have already worked with poverty, racism and other issues could bring valuable knowledge to the group. Problem solving experience in classes or with business work groups could also be beneficial. The last factor that should be looked at is the quality of answers that the individual gave on the application. If the scholar demonstrates a great deal of motivation for joining the think tank, he/she would be a great asset to the group. After the Presidential Scholar Board has looked at these factors collectively, it should be ready to assemble a think tank composed of quality individuals.

For the think tank to be a success, it is important for the Presidential Scholar Board to encourage the program. First, they should recruit new members from among the scholars. Scholars tend to be outgoing and willing to participate in organizations such as this. It is important to publicize information about the think tank, among scholars. The Presidential Scholar Board must stress the importance of the think tank to the group in order to encourage membership.

Number of Students

It is very important that the think tank have the right number of people in order for the organization to function properly. Most sources put the maximum number of members in a group around 10 to 12. A group any larger than this size and the performance of the group goes down (Parker 156). A maximum number of 20 students will be accepted per seminar for the organization. If the number of people who apply for the positions exceed 20, the Presidential Scholar Board can review the list of applicants and decide which 20 will be chosen for the think tank. If the number of people who apply is less than 20, unless there are extreme circumstances, all will be accepted.

If the number of Presidential Scholars who are accepted to sign up for the think tank is 12 or less, one group will be formed. If the number of scholars who are accepted is between 13 and 20, the scholars will be divided into two groups. It is important groups not grow too large because they tend to grow apart and develop subdivisions working against one another, while hindering the progress of the group.

Each Presidential Scholar seminar ideally has 15 scholars, (the number of scholars per class) so if that ideal group would be divided, a couple groups of around seven students would work well. The group should have a minimum of around six students. It is important to realize that just as overly large groups have problems, so do undersized groups. If the group becomes too small then valuable perspectives and a variety of different skills are lost. These things can also prevent the group from moving forward efficiently.

Officers

Leadership in the think tank is critical. A group leader will be elected by the members of the think tank. The leader should be well informed about what his/her responsibilities are and what is expected from him/her ahead of time. The leader will

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be responsible for running the meetings, as well as for reporting the progress of the meetings to the head of the Presidential Scholar Board at least once a month. If more than one think tank exists, a leader for each group will be elected. After the think tank has been in operation for one semester, a semester of previous membership in the think tank will be required for election as leader. Previous membership is important in order to pass on accumulated knowledge and procedures for the success of the group.

Secretary

The only other position that the think tank will need to fill is the secretary. If more than one group exists, one secretary will be needed for each group. A student secretary should be hired by the Presidential Scholar Board to work 10-20 hours a week. The job of the secretary is to take general notes on the meetings, correspond with outside organizations and maintain a UNI think tank web page. Any past information the group may need, should be documented for later use. The secretary is responsible for any organization of information brought out at the meetings of the think tank. Every member of the think tank should always be aware of what is going on in the group and a secretary will help provide stability regarding the information that is gathered and records of the happenings of the group.

Head of the Presidential Scholar Board

Although the U.N.I. think tank is to be student-managed, a small degree of supervision is still necessary. The head of the Presidential Scholar Board will supervise the progress of the groups. It is important that the head not attend the think tank meetings. Instead, the leader of the think tank will be responsible for reporting the progress of the group to the head at least once a month. It is important that the head not get too involved in the think tank, especially in the generation of ideas. In difficult situations the Presidential Scholar Head could be a resource. If the think tank is to be viewed as a seminar, the Presidential Scholar Board must maintain knowledge of

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think tank progress.

Institution

It is desirable for the think tank to be thought of as an institution, not as an academic class. This should be accomplished in two ways. The first is through the Head of the Presidential Scholarship Board. That person will be responsible for the think tank for at least two semesters. This will help bring continuity to the think tank. The other way to make the think tank an institution is to develop a web page for the think tank. The page should include the names of all members, past and present. The page should also list the accomplishments of the group and the problem the group is currently working on. This will also provide a way for outside people to access information about the U.N.I. think tank.

Professors

When students are researching a social issue for discussion, many professors on campus could be a great deal of help. Students could send an e-mail to all professors to find out who would be interested and in what areas they could help. If the think tank was working on a particular social issue, students could look at the e-mail responses to see which professor could be most helpful to consult. If a professor is willing to help, they could be consulted when their expertise was necessary. While professors can serve as great resources, it is also important that the group maintains its identity as a student group.

Location

The think tank will have a room reserved for two hours each week for the think tank meetings. It is important to have a regular meeting place and time. This will help to prevent time conflicts with other classes and activities. The students will know well ahead when the think tank is going to meet so they can plan for the meetings. Locations and times will be the same as other seminars.

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Another thing the think tank will need is an office on campus. The office will be primarily used by the secretary to transcribe notes, answer phone calls, and take messages. The office will help to give the think tank a central location for the members to go outside of the meeting times. In order for this organization to be well respected, it needs a primary location where the think tank can always be accessed.

Credit

Attendance and participation are requirements, and participation cannot take place without attendance. All absences must be cleared with the think tank members. The semester-long think tank will be non-graded, and the student will get two hours of elective credit. Ideally, students would volunteer any extra time they had to solving problems. We believe the think tank seminars will be as valuable as other Presidential Scholar seminars. The think tank seminars will require a lot of time and should receive the same two hours of credit that other seminars receive. The credit should be non-graded which will encourage Presidential Scholars to get involved with the think tank seminars.

Topic

A variety of problems exist around the world. Solving important world problems would lead directly to changes in the local area. Possible problems could include dealing with the current education system: 1) Devising ways to remove poor teachers from the profession, 2) Finding ways to attract talented individuals to the profession, 3) Recognizing master teachers and seeing they are rewarded for their efforts, 4) Devisng a scheme for master teachers to educate potential master teachers. It might also be important to look at how federal monies for education are dispersed. Once that is discovered, how does U.N.I. tap into that? Other groups may be attracted to looking at ecological concerns: 1) Offsetting the destruction of the rain forests (reforestation of Iowa?), 2) Fertilizing Iowa's crops without polluting Iowa aquifers. It is

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important for the think tank to look at problems that have not been dealt with successfully in the past. Before the think tank starts its seven step process, which will be discussed later, the group needs to decide on a quality topic. The group itself can come up with a problem, or perhaps an outside party will approach the think tank with a problem. The think tank will make the final decision as to what the problem will be. If the think tank is composed of two separate groups, it is probable each group will choose a different problem. It would be acceptable, if the problem was of such scope, that both groups would decide to attempt the same task.

Semester Plan

In order for the think tank to be accepted in the academic community, accountability must be present. The think tank's accountability will be in the form of a semester plan. At the start of the semester, the think tank will produce the master plan for the semester-long project. The plans will include deadlines for each part. This semster plan will be presented to the Presidential Scholarship Board for approval. The semester plan will help to keep the think tank headed in the right direction, and press the group into moving forward.

Action

Many think tanks are developed solely for the purpose of generating ideas. The purpose of the U.N.I. think tank should be to go much farther. The members of the group should concentrate not only on ideas, but on ideas that could actually be put into action. Each issue that is tackled by the group should end with some type of action facilitated by the group. Action should be the terminus of the think tank. It is important that the group make an impact on society. The final product of the think tank should be readily visible.

Budget

The U.N.I. think tank will need funds in order to function. The student secretary will cost approximately $3,200 per year. This is the average for a 10-20 hour week at the University minimum wage. The think tank office will need a computer that has access to the world wide web. A good computer with necessary peripherals costs about $2,000. The office will also need a phone line and long distance service. This will probably average out to $100 a month. For the months of August through May, this will average out to around $1,000 a year. Another $10,000 should also be set aside for a fund for gaining extra resources for the project. This may include travel (bringing resources in and flying think tank members to valuable sites), speakers and pertinent publications/computer programs relevant to specific think tank issues. Another $800 would be needed for supplies. The total cost of the think tank is projected at $17,000 for the first year of operation.

Models

One advantage of a student-run think tank is that it is brand new. In our discussions with other Presidential Scholars, the thought of starting something from scratch has great appeal. Every member of the group will need to remember that he/she could be setting a precedent for future groups. The group will face many challenges as it grows and progresses, but each challenge will elicit valuable learning experiences and strengthen the model being developed. Treading new water will be enabled by problem solving with no restrictions.

Future

The number of years that will be necessary for the U.N.I. think tank to "take hold" is unknown. The original intentions of the think tank were to eventually open the think tank to the entire university. Any student wishing to become involved in a group to help solve problems could apply. If the Presidential Scholar Board decides that the

person is qualified, he or she could become a member of the think tank. After a few years of existence, the think tank should consider opening its membership to students outside of the Presidential Scholarship program.

Any university that decides to start a think tank must be aware of the associated responsibility. If the U.N.I. think tank is successful, other universities undoubtedly will follow U.N.I.'s lead. People have often said, "The creation of the first television was a huge accomplishment, but how hard do you think it was to create the second?" University think tanks are, for the most part, uncharted waters. The task of creating the U.N.I. think tank will demand fortitude and time. A successful think tank will afford rewards to students and society. Hopefully, the worth of the think tank will be apparent.

Keys to making the think tank a success

Many theories exist on how to make a group a success. A few of the main keys to making the think tank a success will be discussed in the next section. Although these keys are not necessary to create and maintain a think tank, the keys are likely integral for the think tank to be successful and to impact on problems. The keys to successful teams and successful leaders, as well as keys to solving complex problems, will be examined.

Successful Teams

Successful teams need to have three main components to function. Every team must have members that possess a variety of skills. Teams must also have a solid and sincere commitment to work together toward a common problem. Finally, the members of the team need to be held accountable to ensure every member is fulfilling his/her responsibility (Katzenbach 8). Developing a team with these three main components will produce a group that has the ability to solve problems.

Not every member of a team needs to possess every skill for success. Rather, a

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team needs to have a variety of members with a variety of complementary skills. Every team needs to have members with some expertise in the topic that is being researched. With some previous knowledge, the team will be able to zero in on major issues. It is also necessary to have a team that includes a number of successful problem solvers. These members will help the team focus and identify the underlying problems. These members can also be important in identifying successful problem solving strategies, and helping make efficient decisions. Finally, every member of the team needs to possess good interpersonal skills. Each member might have different ways of communicating with the group, but everyone has to be successful at getting his/her point across and working with others. With the ability to communicate effectively and create positive conflict, the group will be able to move forward (Katzenbach 47).

Members of teams also need to commit to work together on the problem they are solving in order to be successful. Just as important as the commitment, is the group recognition of a common purpose and a common goal (Katzenbach 49). With a common purpose and building on the achievement of smaller and more specific performance goals, the team will be able to recognize progress and build momentum toward reaching its final goal.

Once a team possesses the skills to solve a problem and is committed to a common purpose, the group simply needs to perform to be successful. Performance at a high level requires considerable time and effort. For a group to perform, each member needs to be held accountable for certain information and responsibilities (Katzenbach 60). Obviously each member will be held accountable to the group, but more importantly the members need to hold themselves accountable. With individual accountability, the group will function well as a team and each member will have an internal desire to work as part of the team.

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Once teams tackle a problem, challenges will arise. During these challenging times, it is most important for the group to remain cohesive. There are a few simple things a team can do to keep itself in a friendly situation. First, it is important to revisit the basics of the problem. This may lead to a "refocus." Another solution is to go for small wins. Small wins indicate continued progress and contribute to positive attitudes. The team can also look for ways to inject new information into the problem or try a new approach to solve the problem. That would help the group gain a different perspective on the problem. It is also possible to develop new skills or take advantage of facilitators, individuals or outside organizations. Finally, it might be helpful to change the dynamics of the team. Possibly changing roles, possibly electing a new leader, will give the members new insight (Katzenbach 160).

Solving Complex Problems

The U.N.I. think tank will be expected to solve complex problems. Glenn Parker decided on four main keys in order for teams to solve complex problems. (Parker, 13) The first is that the team must have a leader with a creative vision. It is extremely important the leader of this think tank can "see the whole picture." The leader must know exactly where the group is heading and be able to keep it on track. The second key is that the team must have freedom from unnecessary restrictions, and freedom to fail. It is important for the group to be relatively free from the influence of professors. It is important that the leader give progress reports to the head of the Presidential Scholar Board, it is also important that he/she not be present for the think tank meetings. The third key is that the team must have a diversity of opinions. Since the Presidential Scholarship program is comprised of students from a variety of backgrounds and majors, this key should be accomplished easily. The last key to solving complex problems in a team involves having an openness on the part of team members to new ideas. The Presidential Scholarship students are intelligent. In most

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Scholarship Seminars, the students are taught how to think for themselves. This training will help contribute to the type of openness that is needed for think tank success.

Leaders

One of the most important jobs of the leader is to facilitate interaction among members of the group. (Parker 46) This includes well-run meetings where everyone is involved in the discussions. Members of groups sometimes need encouragement to discuss. The information these people have is potentially valuable. It is the leader's job to elicit these people's views for the group.

Interactions are the groundwork for success in a group. (Parker 47) However, interactions among group members do not always result in positive situations. It is not uncommon for conflict to be present at meetings. The leader of the think tank must be able to deal with conflict. Although most people think conflict is harmful to a group, that is not entirely true. Because conflict can help to ensure that the members address certain questions that may be overlooked, the leader must be able to deal with conflict tactfully and constructively. This brings the advantages of conflict to the group.

U.N.I. think tank example

The think tank should go through seven steps in order to solve a social problem. The first step is for the group to identify the problem. The second step is for the group to define the problem. Here is where the group discusses what it really wants to accomplish. The third step is for the group to research the problem. After it has been researched, the group will generate ideas on how to solve the problem. The fifth step is for the group to review the solutions and then pick the most promising one. The sixth and seventh steps are to implement the solution and reflect back on the entire process, respectively.

The possibility of starting a think tank at UNI is very real. All of the ideas have

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been thoroughly discussed and researched and a final approval from the President is all that is necessary. Enclosed in the next section are seven simple steps to implement the UNI think tank for the 1998-99 school year.

Basic Steps to Create a Think Tank

1. Offer think tank as a seminar choice for Presidential Scholars. Award two hours of non-graded credit to each member.

2. Accept applications and form think tank groups. Allow a maximum of 20 members to join the think tank. There must be at least six members in a group, but no more than 12 members in any group. Two teams may be formed if necessary.

3. Hire a secretary to work 10-20 hours a week.

4. Set aside an annual budget of at least $17,000.

5. Give the group an office, computer equipment, and phone service as resources for the project.

6. Appoint the Head of the Presidential Scholar Board as the faculty advisor for the group.

7. Make this paper available to the group as a guide to the think tank.

Works Cited

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Parker, Glenn M. <u>Cross-functional Teams</u>. Joey-Bass Publishers. San Francisco,
California 1994.

UNI "THINK TANK" APPLICATION

NAME _____

MAJOR _____

PHONE NUMBER _____

FR.   SO.   JR.   SR.

ADDRESS _____

Define "Think Tank" in your own words.

What do you think you will gain or accomplish from being involved with this "Think Tank"?

List any previous leadership positions or community involvement.