
Education Policy Think Tank Models and Mission

by Callie McLean & Lily Robin

This paper explores how two advocacy think tanks—the Heritage Foundation (Heritage) and Center for American Progress (CAP)—engage in research on K-12 education and attempt to influence education policymaking. Through our research, we discovered both expected and surprising differences and similarities between the think tanks. Differences included topic choice, particularly around school choice and disadvantaged students, the use of data analyses to underpin positions, and the volume of publication. Similarities included the mix of output type. Our most notable finding was that the model and mission of each think tank drove topic choices and how each conducted research and interacted with the policy world and media.

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates how two advocacy model think tanks research and report on education issues and how they determine impact on education policy. We chose to examine Heritage and CAP because they represent leading conservative and progressive advocacy think tanks and provide a stark contrast in organizational missions and education policy positions. First, we examine each think tank's background: its history, mission, model, and funding. Then we focus on the work these think tanks did in K-12 education during 2014 and 2015, when a shift in active policymaking at the federal and state levels took place due to the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). We examine all the written materials produced by each think tank and compare the topics and format of each, including examining their data, sources, quality control, and transparency. Finally, we examine how each think tank conceptualizes their impact on education policymaking and compare the think tanks in terms of media coverage, Congressional testimony, and active engagement in policy making. This comparison allows us to identify similarities in the approach used by these two very distinct think tanks, as well as uncover key differences—differences that we can map directly back to differences in each organization's mission and the advocacy model. We conclude our paper by identifying the potential direction of further research.

ADVOCACY THINK TANK MODEL

Both organizations fit the model of what academic researchers call an “advocacy

think tank.” Indeed, Heritage is widely considered to have created the first true advocacy think tank. According to Weaver (1989), think tanks tend to follow one of three models: the “university without students,” contract, and advocacy think tanks. The Brookings Institution, established in 1927, was the first think tank and fits the traditional “university without student” mold, which emphasizes rigorous academic quality and non-partisanship. Heritage started the advocacy model in the 1970s. This model has a policy and ideological focus, with an intention to change policy and its debates. Advocacy think tanks take existing research and summarize it into short, accessible pieces. Both CAP and Heritage have a specific ideological perspective that informs their research, and a primary goal in their research and outputs is to change minds. CAP, for example, wants to reach the public to change the terms of the debate, but they especially want to change the actual policies, so they work to target policy makers through both generalized media outreach and targeted relationship-building (Scott Sargrad, personal communication, April 22, 2016). This model distinction becomes important when understanding any output analysis from either organization.

Heritage and CAP are 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit organizations, limiting the lobbying they can do. Heritage's sister organization, Heritage Action for America, is a 501(c)(4) lobbying organization. Heritage Action's lobbying efforts includes publishing the Heritage Action Scorecard, which rates how politicians' votes align with Heritage's positions (Heritage Action America 2015). CAP coordinates with a 501(c)(4) arm called the Center for American Progress Action Fund. In a site

visit, CAP staff explained that all CAP employees are also employees of both the 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4). This allows employees to engage in both research and specific advocacy work such as lobbying.

HERITAGE HISTORY

The Heritage Foundation was founded in 1973 as a conservative think tank created “to deliver compelling and persuasive research to Congress providing facts, data, and sound arguments on behalf of conservative principles” (Heritage 2008). Paul Weyrich, a leader in 1970s conservative politics, and Edwin Feulner, then-Executive Director of the Republican Study Committee, founded Heritage after receiving a \$250,000 grant from business owner Joseph Coors (Feulner 2003). Edwin Feulner was heavily involved in policy analysis and politics prior to founding Heritage (Edwards 2013). The founders wanted to create a think tank to provide timely information to politicians and inform their votes. This goal remains critical to the present-day Heritage Foundation.

Heritage is the original advocacy think tank (Troy 2012). Heritage influenced President Ronald Reagan’s policies during his two terms. Heritage distributed the 1,093-page “Mandate for Leadership: Policy Management” to every member of the Cabinet, and about two-thirds of the 2,000 recommendations were adopted during Reagan’s presidency (Heritage 2008). Heritage created a network of conservative allies by founding the Resource Bank in 1977, a group of more than 2,500 experts and nonprofits attending conferences and workshops put on by Heritage. Heritage is a media-savvy think tank and has its own media site, the Daily Signal (Crutchfield and Grant

2012). Heritage’s target audiences include Congressional members and their staff, current presidential administrations, news media (and therefore the general public), and the academic/policy field (Heritage 2016).

Edward Feulner served as president of Heritage from its founding until 2013. Since then, former US senator of South Carolina, Jim DeMint, has held the position. Jim DeMint is a Tea Party Republican, and his appointment as president of the Heritage Foundation was met with some controversy (Steinhauer and Weisman 2014).

CAP HISTORY

As Bai (2003) recounts, the origins of CAP began as a response to the rise in conservative think tanks such as Heritage and amidst the backlash to the George W. Bush presidency. Founded in 2003 by President Bill Clinton’s former Chief of Staff John Podesta, the organization aimed to create and coordinate progressive ideas and messaging Podesta wanted to form an organization with thought leaders and large funders in the mold of successful influential conservative organizations. In its first year, CAP operated on a \$10 million budget, including donations from George Soros.

Podesta started CAP with a clear focus on generating ideas and advocacy. During the Bush era, conservatives dictated the legislative agenda and focused on unified messaging. While many Democrats felt the left simply needed to reframe its positions to garner public support, Podesta did not agree, saying “the ideas are most important” (Bai 2003). He argued that the only way to change the status quo would come from “substance” and new ideas. From the start, CAP followed the lead of

conservative institutions like Heritage to combat conservative views. In an on-site meeting with CAP, Winnie Stachelberg, Executive Vice President for External Affairs, said that, at their inception, CAP met with Heritage to learn their model (Appendix A). CAP began with a media department that still thrives today, as well as an independent news site, ThinkProgress.org, and research arms whose topics span from poverty to foreign security and the federal budget.

HERITAGE MISSION

Heritage's mission is to create and advocate for "conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense" (Heritage 2016). Improving academic outcomes is important to Heritage, but its researchers are wary of exclusively relying on measures such as test scores and grades, believing such metrics may not portray an accurate picture of achievement (Mary Clare Reim, personal communication, April 15, 2016). Heritage puts emphasis on other indicators as measures of success of schools, such as parental satisfaction, and adopting policies that promote conservative values, such as individual liberty. Thus, consistent with its mission, Heritage values the availability of school choice. This importance of the organization's mission will be explored in more detail later in this paper.

CAP MISSION

CAP is "dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. [The] aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change

the country" (CAP 2016a). CAP wants to effect real change, think innovatively, and transmit ideas to policymakers. Key tactics are effective communications and outreach efforts, adapting quickly to media narratives, and tracking national policy debates to generate ideas in real time (2016a). As part of the mission to improve education for all Americans, special attention goes to disadvantaged students (Sargrad 2016). CAP researchers tend to use standard measures of achievement such as test scores and grades to gauge academic achievement. They also view improvements in teacher training and skill, along with better teacher working conditions, as important for improving education outcomes.

FUNDING: BROAD BASE VS. FOUNDATIONS

Heritage has a long tradition of maintaining a broad, diverse funding base. Heritage began fundraising by garnering support through direct mail, a method learned from environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club (Crutchfield and Grant 2012). This practice continues today. The Heritage website does not list the percentage of donors who give \$5,000 or more, but 524 donors gave \$10,000 or more in 2014, according to financial reports. Additionally, "about 44 percent of Heritage Action's overall contributions came from individuals or entities giving less than \$5,000" in 2012 (Maguire 2013). Heritage relies little on foundations for funding. Individual donors make up 75 percent of their donor base, and only 12 percent of the donor base is foundations. Only three percent of donations come from corporations (Heritage 2014).

Heritage's diversified funding sources

help the organization to maintain ideological integrity. During an on-site visit, Heritage staff shared anecdotes of some donors expressing surprise when Heritage refused to tout opinions the donor requested. According to Transparify, an organization investigating the financial transparency of think tanks globally, Heritage is “broadly transparent,” with all donors above \$5,000 listed in at least four precise funding levels. Anonymous donors make up less than 15 percent of their funding (Transparify 2015).

CAP gets a great deal of funding from foundations (CAP 2016b). The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, among other foundations, has donated over a million dollars to CAP in 2015 alone (CAP 2016b). According to Transparify, CAP earned a three-star rating, falling short of the “broadly transparent” and “highly transparent” levels (Transparify 2015). This means they had all or most donors listed in two or three broad contribution levels as opposed to more detailed numbers (Transparify 2015). However, CAP has since indicated to Transparify that they made changes to earn a four-star rating, which would make CAP “broadly transparent” (Transparify 2015).

CAP is forthcoming about where funding for specific projects comes from, often publishing funders’ names at the bottom of reports. Like Heritage, CAP representatives insist they do not change research findings research to suit funders’ opinions. Instead, CAP finds funders based on the project’s research topic. This way the funder(s) are already on board with the general direction of the project (Sargrad 2016).

Table 1. Charity Navigator and Transparify Rankings Comparison

Think Tank	Rankings			Transparify
	Charity Navigator	Accountability and Transparency Rating	Stars	
CAP	Overall Rating (1-100) 94.13	Financial Rating (1-100) 95.56	Stars (1-4) 4	Stars (1-4) 4
Heritage	83.19	76.43	3	4

Sources: Data from Charity Navigator (2016) and Transparify (2016).

COMPARISON METHODOLOGY

Our research of CAP and Heritage included interviews, site visits, and online research. We attended one site visit each to CAP and Heritage, where we learned some basics about the organizations. We also conducted an in-person interview with Mary Clare Reim, a member of the Heritage Education Policy team, and a phone interview with Scott Sargrad, the Managing Director of CAP's K-12 division. In addition to these site visits and interviews, we attended events hosted by both think tanks. We attended "Why the Future of Religious Freedom in Higher Education Matters for All Americans" at Heritage (April 13, 2016) and "Harnessing the Talent of DACA and Unauthorized Students at the K-12 Level" at CAP (March 30, 2016).

To investigate topic selection and outputs, we reviewed each think tank's websites¹ and affiliate sites for K-12-focused publications for all of 2014 and 2015. Outputs for CAP include reports, fact sheets, issue briefs, and some unlabeled outputs. For Heritage, outputs included fact sheets, commentaries, Daily Signal, lectures, testimony, and media.

We determined the main topic of each report or output based on the topic of the conclusions, titles, and key findings of each report. To make clearer associations, we grouped some topics together under larger umbrellas. For instance, we created the topic "Federal Legislation," which covers the reauthorization of the ESEA, Race to the Top, the federal budget, and other related topics. Tables 2 and 3 show the

¹ Center for American Progress. 2017. "Education." <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/view/>; The Heritage Foundation. 2017. "Education." <http://www.heritage.org/issues/education>

distribution of topics and the breakdown of sub-topics within each larger topic.²

To compare data and methodology and sources, we looked at each output for the think tanks and investigated any tables and sources provided. We noted if the output had any graphs, charts, and/or tables; what data were analyzed, if any; and what types of sources were cited. We also noted whether they conducted their own data analysis or only cited data reported elsewhere.

When we explored the impact of each think tank, we noted any effect on bills and legislation, testimony, and involvement and impact on school programs. We investigated impact by recording the number of times CAP or Heritage were cited while searching for education policy. We explored The New York Times, The Washington Post, Forbes, CNN, The Wall Street Journal (which had no articles related to education for either think tank), and NPR. We also looked at Politico and The Hill to assess coverage in political media outlets. We examined EdWeek to explore coverage in education specific media outlets.

RESULTS

Topics and Types of Outputs

Heritage

Report Types

In 2014 and 2015, Heritage published a

² Many of the reports could be classified as multiple topics out of the eight main topics we chose. For these reports, we determined which topic was the dominant topic of the report and used the other topic as the sub-topic for the report in question. Also, there are two reports that CAP produced that we chose to label as "other" because they were very specific and did not fit well into any of the other topic areas.

modest amount of research regarding K-12 education. During that period, Heritage had two staffers dedicated to education research. Limited staffing may have contributed to relatively few reports on the subject. Heritage had eight reports on K-12 education in 2015 and four in 2014. Six of the reports are what Heritage calls backgrounders, and two are issue briefs. The reports are mostly literature reviews or explanations of proposed or current legislation or other topics, such as school programing. Heritage publications tend to be concise and readable. The shortest was five pages, the longest, an outlier, 26 pages, and the second longest, 15 pages. “Key Points,” a recurring feature in Heritage reports, synthesizes the information in the report and notes the report’s stance on existing or proposed legislation.

Report Topics

In 2014 and 2015, most reports (eight out of 13) focused on federal legislation regarding K-12 education. Other reports addressed school choice, Common Core, and academic achievement. Report topics are summarized in Table 2 below.

Federal legislation was the most dominant topic. Within federal legislation, A-PLUS, a proposed addition to the ESEA to limit government intervention in state

education practices, was a frequent topic. The proposal would allow “states to opt out of federal accountability entirely and send funding under the current law back to states in the form of block grants” (Camera 2008). Other federal legislation topics include Title I of the ESEA, and ESAs (Education Savings Accounts). These are spending and budgetary restructuring programs and proposals related to school choice. The budget and the general ESEA were other focus areas of reports on federal legislation.

While this paper focuses on K-12 education policy research, it is worth noting that Heritage also had a high number of reports and Daily Signal articles focused on higher education issues. Of the 184 Daily Signal articles published in 2015 on education topics, 128 were about K-12 education and 51—more than a quarter—were about higher education. It is possible that the think tank shifted focus in light of increased public attention on higher education and some newly proposed legislation, pulling the attention of Heritage researchers away from K-12 issues in 2015. Refer to Table 2 for more details.

CAP

Report Types

CAP published extensively on K-12

Table 2. Heritage Research Topics and Subtopics, 2014 and 2015

Federal Legislation	School Choice	Common Core	Academic Achievement
A-Plus (3)	Mixed Topics (3)	School Choice (1)	Mixed Topics (1)
ESEA (2)			
Budget (2)			
ESA (1)			

Table 3. CAP Research Topics and Subtopics, 2014 and 2015

Federal Legislation	Common Core	Academic Achievement	The Teaching Profession	Disadvantaged Students	School Leadership	Enrichment Learning	Other
ESEA (10) ¹	Implementation (4)	General (1)	Autonomy (2)	Teachers and Teacher Diversity (7)	SEA (4)	Class Time (1)	Military Families (1)
Race to the Top (2)	Disadvantaged Students (2)	Curriculum (1)	Retention (2)	Achievement Gap (4)	Principals (2)	Technology (1)	Children First (1)
Title I: ESEA (2)	Academic Achievement (1)	Truancy (1)	Salary (2)	School Funding (3)	Organizational Culture (2)	Common Core (1)	
Common Core (1)	Testing (1)		Organizational Culture (1)	ESEA (2)	Unions (1)	Non-Academic Skills (1)	
Accountability (1)	Other (2)			Discrimination (2)	Technology (1)		
				Class Time (1)			
				ELL (1)			

¹ Seven of these reports on the topic of the ESEA also deal with the topic of disadvantaged students (communities of color, low income, students with disabilities, etc.) and how the ESEA will affect them.

education policy, with 47 reports, issue briefs, or other types of outputs in 2014 and 25 in 2015. The CAP-affiliated ThinkProgress.org did not publish any education policy articles, so the website did not provide more to analyze. Of the 2015 reports, nine were lengthy reports with both in-depth analysis and a literature review. Seven were what they called issue briefs, or short literature reviews of an issue. Four outputs CAP called “Fact Sheets” did not cite data or literature but attacked proposed ESEA legislation from conservatives. One output was a video which reviewed discrimination LGBTQ students face. The rest included opinion pieces, anecdotal articles, and outputs similar to the issue briefs.

Report Topics

CAP covered a wide range of topics in education policy in 2014 and 2015. The range and selection of topics stay consistent with the CAP mission and aim to advance progressive ideals to influence change. Sixteen of their outputs covered federal legislation—mostly on reauthorization of the ESEA. The number of research outputs on the ESEA increased from 2014 to 2015. Four out of 47 reports focused on the ESEA in 2014, which rose to 13 out of 25 in 2015, half of the reports put out on K-12 education in that year. This increase in ESEA coverage from CAP shows how politics impact their research. The reauthorization of the ESEA was due in 2015, and concerns were raised over the impact on disadvantaged students. Both think tanks focused on the ESEA, and both think tanks discussed other federal legislation. Other than the ESEA, topics within the broader topic of federal legislation did not overlap for the two think tanks. Twenty

outputs covered the topic of disadvantaged students, often focusing on how to narrow the achievement gap. CAP often addressed the achievement gap directly throughout 2014 and 2015, and it often emerged as a subtopic in reports mainly about other research topics. Other outputs covered by CAP and not Heritage include the seven outputs on improving the teaching profession (both for teaching and for teachers), 10 reports on school leadership, and four reports on enrichment learning. Overlapping with Heritage, ten outputs covered Common Core and three covered academic achievement.

Methodological Approach and Research Design

Heritage

Methodology, Data, and Sources

In the realm of education, Heritage publishes reports mostly synthesizing other research reports, literature reviews, and explanations of concepts, legislation, and/or programs. The output reflected a methodological focus on synthesizing prior research, along with qualitative methods, and, at least in all the reports we examined during these two years, did not draw on original data collection or analysis. Most Heritage reports pertaining to K-12 education focused on understanding proposed and current legislation and where Heritage stands on those issues (Reim 2016). The literature reviews are mostly shorter outputs that make use of theory and American founding documents to determine and justify the conservative stance on an issue. Some are longer and include more in-depth exploration of the theories in question and how they apply to a certain policy. Some of the reports

provide data taken from other sources to support claims that status quo policies on education are not working, but most of the reports rely heavily on theory to defend policy alternatives.

We found that the majority of 2014 and 2015 reports did not contain tables or figures and, while data were occasionally presented as evidence the status quo was failing, data analyses were seldom presented in support of proposed alternatives. Many of the 2015 reports took an in-depth look at policies and policy proposals and how they might affect schools and students. These reports often included abundant theoretical support for policy recommendations such as ESAs, but provided little empirical evidence on student outcomes. All reports that included tables and figures took those figures from other sources. While we did not find any original data analysis in these reports, researchers sometimes run data analyses that Heritage does not publish in the reports. They use these analyses to inform their work (Reim 2016). The 2015 Heritage reports almost always provide a strong and unambiguous policy recommendation.

Heritage research, at least as it appears from the 2014 and 2015 reports, is driven more by theory than data. This may be due to the Heritage mission placing implicit value on certain concepts such as individual liberty. The Heritage mission may play a role in how and why Heritage carries out their research on education in a different way than CAP. In the realm of education, it appears that Heritage's mission informs what they ask, but also, in part, what they say. For example, Heritage strongly values individual liberty, so when considering school choice, Heritage is concerned with the expansion of individual liberty, which

they see as a pathway to better outcomes for all students (Reim 2016).

Heritage has a great range in the number and types of sources cited. The 2015 reports ranged from citing no sources to citing 40 sources, with a mean of slightly over 14 and a median of 7.5. The reports cite a range of different sources including other Heritage works, government information, founding documents, media, other think tanks, academic works, journals, books, and other online information. Heritage also cited other think tanks with a range of different political ideologies and missions.³ Academic sources and journal articles are infrequently used in the reports. Books are not used as sources in most of these reports, but they are heavily cited in two reports, "Open Education: Individualized Learning from Kindergarten to College" and "From Piecemeal to Portable: Transforming Title I into a Student-Centered Support System."

Quality Control

Heritage reports have a strict quality control process, with a team of people looking over every report. When subject matter areas and issues overlap, other researchers at Heritage will add their thoughts

3 Brookings, AEI, Goldwater Institute, Clayton Christensen Institute, Reason Foundation, New America/Ed Central/ and Atlas, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, The Heartland Institute, Foundation for Economic Education, Hoover Institute, CAP*, The Fordham Institute, Georgia Public Policy Foundation, CATO, Pioneer Institute, Mathematica Policy Research Institute (in text but not cited).

*The CAP citation comes from a report titled "No Exit, No Voice: The Design of Common Core," and the citation uses Cindy Brown and Elena Rocha, "The Case for National Standards, Accountability, and Fiscal Equity" to lay out the "race to the bottom" argument that Heritage argues against.

and expertise. Heritage has a highly collaborative atmosphere committed to a unified conservative message (Reim 2016).

CAP

Methodology, Data, and Sources

Much like Heritage, CAP does not necessarily aim to produce rigorous or original data analysis in their reports, as do some think tanks, such as The Brookings Institution or The Pew Research Center. CAP had extensive lengthy literature-review oriented reports that sometimes use data with some minimal analysis. The data in CAP reports mostly came from government sources such as the National Center for Education Statistics and the Department of Education. CAP reports also used government data from state education agencies as well as other state- and school-level data. Other data sources used include think tanks (e.g. Mathematica) and advocacy agencies such as Students First. Approximately half of the 2015 CAP reports had at least one table or graph. Some of these figures were taken directly from other sources, and some were created by CAP report authors using secondary data.

CAP had a large range in the number and types of sources cited. CAP's 2015 reports cited on average, about 30 sources, with a range of approximately two to 200 sources cited. CAP especially cited government agencies and documents, along with academic journals. Like Heritage, CAP also cites sources such as media, advocacy organizations, think tanks, and academic institutions. CAP reports, like Heritage, also self-cited the organization's prior reports. Diverging from Heritage, CAP cited the Gates Foundation and Wallace Foundation

several times. CAP also frequently cited personal conversations and meetings with a variety of people.

Quality Control

CAP's collaborative atmosphere witnessed in an on-site meeting with five researchers and a vice-president extends to the quality control on its reports. Both the economics and the editorial teams vet reports. The economics team ensures any proposed policy is economically viable. The editorial team makes sure that reports from other authors do not contradict one another, and if they do, all team members sit down together to collaborate on a point of view. They examine where they differed and make sure they produce research that complement each other with the same results. Thus, like Heritage, CAP takes care that its messages are consistent. CAP strongly voiced their commitment to publishing excellent research with a unified message.

IMPACT

Impact can be measured in different ways, and in this section, we explore how each think tank defines and measures impact. We also explore media coverage as a form of impact along with impact on bills and legislation, testimony, and involvement and impact on school programs.

Heritage

Heritage emphasizes direct political impact, coalition-building, and informing the attentive public. Heritage measures impact through media attention, influence on proposed legislation, and Congressional testimony. When speaking of recent accomplishments, Reim (2016) cited a mix of policy wins and impact on the public's

awareness. She spoke about Heritage's influence on legislation pertaining to ESAs, as well as increased public knowledge about ESAs. Other successes Reim mentioned included A-PLUS and Title I portability, which did not pass, but received a surprisingly high number of votes in Congress.

Media

Heritage places a great deal of focus on media attention. One way to influence policy makers is by catching their attention in the media. Heritage also uses media to direct the conversation and educate the attentive public. While we did not look at local media sources when gathering numbers on media coverage, in an interview with Reim, we learned that Heritage reaches out to local media sources. Heritage focuses on changing not just federal policy, but local policy as well, and utilizing local media allows Heritage to influence local policy makers. Focus on local media also allows Heritage to target lawmakers in their own states. Heritage often will produce reports focused on a state or local issue, such as Nevada's ESA program or DC's Opportunity Scholarship Program. In addition to publishing these stories and garnering national attention, Heritage tries to get the stories published within the appropriate locality. In our interview, Mary Clare Reim mentioned local media outlets with which Heritage has a relationship, such as the *Boston Herald*, *Washington Times*, *Las Vegas Review*, and *The Illinois Business Journal*, as well as smaller local papers.

Mainstream media sources often cite Heritage. Heritage wants to directly impact policymakers, but they also want to shape the discussion by raising public

awareness about issues. One of Heritage's biggest education victories of the past year includes increasing awareness of ESAs and their potential for education (Reim 2016). Within our selected sources, in 2015, 18 articles mentioned Heritage and education. Most of the media focus from these outlets came from *The Washington Post*, with 11 articles, and *The New York Times*, with two. These outlets covered the organization neutrally, citing Heritage's involvement in an issue or event. CNN and NPR each had one news story, both neutral. *Forbes* also published three articles mentioning Heritage in 2015. This is particularly noteworthy because Steve Forbes, the head of Forbes, Inc. and editor-in chief of *Forbes* magazine, sits on Heritage's board. This did not, at least in terms of education policy, seem to have an impact on how the magazine reported on the think tank. *Forbes* published three articles relating to education and Heritage in 2015. The reporting was mostly neutral, leaning slightly positive.

In addition to mainstream media outlets, we also looked at political and education-focused media outlets. We looked for articles citing Heritage on education issues in 2015 in *The Hill* and *Politico*. Despite being heavily involved in education politics due to the ESEA reauthorization, only one article cited Heritage in *The Hill* and none in *Politico*. In contrast, 17 articles in *EdWeek* mention Heritage.

Direct Impact on Legislation

Heritage testifies in front of legislatures on a variety of issues. Heritage's 2014 Annual Reports states there were 29 congressional testimonies in the year for the whole organization. Heritage held

212 briefings for members of Congress (Heritage 2014). While not related to K-12 education, one testimony listed on the Heritage website under 2016 shows Burke giving a Congressional testimony before the Committee on Education and the Workforce pertaining to the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (Burke 2016).

In an interview with one of the authors, Reim explained Heritage builds coalitions and networks and meets with policy makers to create impact. These networks help influence policy makers through briefings and meetings. Meetings with policy makers directly influence policy, while solidifying relationships between Heritage and Capitol Hill. However, these meetings are not always with federal policymakers. They often take place at the local level. In 2014, Burke “travelled to Minnesota, Oklahoma, Utah, and Virginia to promote the concept” of ESAs (Heritage 2014).

One of the most important ways Heritage impacts policy is through the Heritage Action Scorecard. This scorecard rates all House and Senate politicians on how closely their voting history aligns with Heritage’s conservative mission (Heritage Action America 2015). The media coverage analyzed on Heritage shows this scorecard can have a big impact on policy because many Republican politicians want to maintain a high rating, and a threat of a lower rating serves as a deterrent to voting for or against certain bills.

CAP

CAP also focuses heavily on making an impact. Like Heritage, CAP measures impact through media attention, influence on bills and current and proposed

legislation, and testimony and successful programs.

Media

CAP is well-represented in mainstream media, particularly in *The Washington Post*. In 2015, *The Washington Post* published 15 articles either covering CAP or referencing CAP in education policy. We examined the tone of each article and found six negative, seven positive, and two neutral articles, making the totality relatively neutral, though very divided, toward CAP. Valerie Strauss wrote most of the negative articles, condemning the Gates Foundation and their support of Common Core and donations to CAP. *The New York Times* only had one piece relating to CAP and education, a positive opinion piece. *The Wall Street Journal* had no articles relating to CAP and education. *Forbes* had five, generally positive, articles on CAP and education policy. Steve Forbes, the Editor-in-Chief, sits on Heritage’s board. *Forbes* published two more articles featuring CAP than Heritage. NPR published two stories on CAP and education, one neutral and one authored by a CAP employee. *The Hill* and *Politico* had a handful of stories referencing CAP, relating to ESEA and Common Core. *Politico* was neutral, while *The Hill*’s stories were both positive, and one was an opinion piece written by CAP researcher Carmel Martin.

The topics of the media coverage align with CAP’s output. Part of this is because news organizations at times merely republished recent CAP publications. Topics covered included Common Core, truancy, reauthorization of ESEA, disadvantaged students, and teacher training—all topics that CAP covered in 2015. After speaking with CAP representatives, we learned they

strategically choose their topics based on gaps in policy. However, they also respond to current events, trends, and discussions as they happen. It appears that news organizations may sometimes follow CAP's lead as the think tank generates discussion.

Direct Impact on Legislation

CAP finds several ways to impact legislation. CAP sees great value in testifying in front of legislatures. In a conversation with Scott Sargrad, the Managing Director of the K-12 team at CAP, he said CAP testified to legislatures five to ten times between 2014 and 2015. Additionally, CAP develops and maintains relationships on Capitol Hill with legislators and their staffers. They meet with them regularly to discuss CAP's aims and discuss their research. These relationships and meetings allow CAP to increase their influence on decision makers.

Through their efforts, CAP has seen success in impacting legislation as well. CAP was vocal in the ESEA reauthorization. In December 2015, President Obama signed the ESEA reauthorization. Many CAP-supported provisions were incorporated as provisions in the new law (Sargrad 2016). According to a CAP press release, CAP advocated for the following provisions in the new ESEA: a new \$250 million program for high-quality early childhood education, increased protection of students with special needs, new funding for auditing testing to reduce over-testing, and a rejection of Title I portability, which CAP felt would take money from poorer districts and give to wealthier ones (Preiss 2015b).

DISCUSSION

Methodology and Outputs

Heritage and CAP showed similarities in their types of outputs. Both had mostly short, opinion-driven outputs, with some longer reports with more detailed research. The output varied more in terms of methodological style. While we cannot know all the analysis that may go into each report, CAP's outputs cited more empirical evidence, such as research studies and descriptive statistics, than did those of Heritage. Heritage focused more heavily on values and theory, occasionally citing empirical evidence regarding the status quo, but less so for policy alternatives. CAP often cites empirical evidence to support their stance on various policies.

Their output similarities and differences underscore the mission behind these think tanks. Heritage and CAP, as advocacy think tanks, will naturally have few data-driven reports with shorter, more opinion-based pieces. However, CAP tended to publish longer reports than did Heritage. Both advocacy think tanks are less concerned with academic rigor and more concerned with the report's relevance and their ability to impact legislation and increase public awareness. This requires a quick turnaround. According to their mission statement, CAP wants to do more than "change the conversation"—they want to "change the nation" (CAP 2016a). To change the nation, they need to change the conversation first, hence a focus on the here and now. Similarly, Heritage was founded to have a political influence and be a resource to politicians providing timely information to influence policy making.

Topics

The two think tanks both overlapped and differed in their topic choices. CAP addressed a larger range of topics than did Heritage (See Figure 1). Both CAP and Heritage contributed to the timely policy debates over Common Core and the reauthorization of ESEA, set to expire in 2015 if not reauthorized. Both researched academic achievement, but looked at very different aspects. Heritage expressed concerns over testing and standards as federal government overreach, while CAP looked at academic achievement with a focus on the achievement gap and teacher diversity. We were surprised the topics covered by Heritage and CAP did not overlap more, with the exception of the ESEA and Title I of the ESEA. They did not directly challenge the other side as much as might have been expected. This might be because both want to drive and initiate conversation rather than merely react to it. For example, while Heritage wants the conversation to be about school choice, CAP wants to steer the discussion towards disadvantaged students. CAP focused on progressive ideals such as lowering the achievement gap, increasing

teacher compensation, and the need for enrichment learning. Heritage focused on conservative issues like school choice, ESAs, and federal government overreach. Refer to Figure 1 for a visual representation of the spread and distribution of topics between the two think tanks.

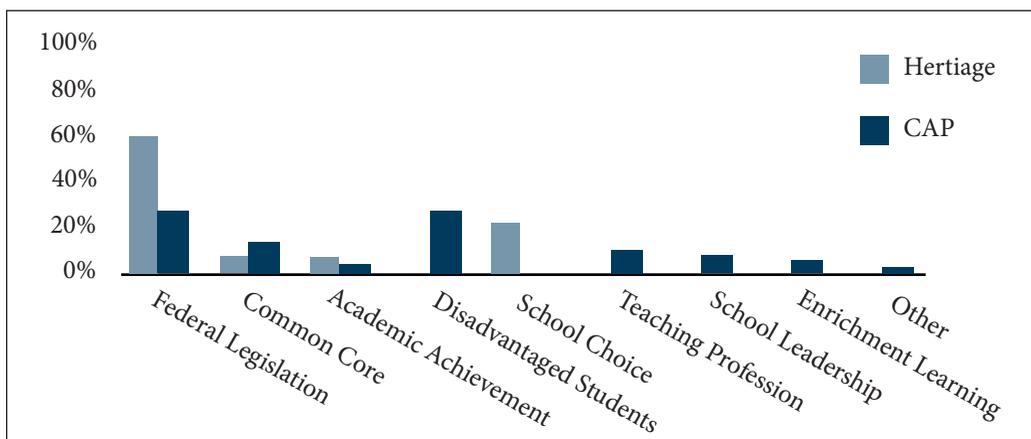
Factors Influencing Topic Choice

Mission

Both think tanks’ missions drive the topics they covered. CAP aimed to produce publications that both covered current topics and steered the conversation into new territory. Heritage did the same from the conservative side. Both organizations have their mission internalized, and it drives their work.

Heritage’s topic choices directly connect to their mission of protecting and promoting free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, and traditional American values. Promoting and preserving conservative values lies at the heart of everything Heritage does, as several Heritage representatives told us. Their most heavily emphasized education

Figure 1. Distribution of Topics by Think Tank



topics, school choice and limiting government overreach in education, directly relate to the Heritage mission.

All of CAP's topics clearly originate from their mission of improving the lives of all Americans. CAP's focus on disadvantaged students certainly connects back to that, and their focus on compensating teachers fairly does as well. Improving education outcomes for disadvantaged students is at the core of most CAP research (Sargrad 2016).

Politics

CAP and Heritage, as advocacy think tanks, responded quickly to current political events. In our interview with Sargrad (2016) at CAP, he said they allow flexibility in their topic ideas, so they can react quickly to changing situations. Looking at the topic choices, we see CAP and Heritage shifted emphasis from 2014 to 2015, heavily focusing on the reauthorization of ESEA. CAP jumped from four reports dealing with the ESEA to 13 reports, and Heritage increased from one to three reports relating to the ESEA. The two advocacy think tanks also focused on Common Core, an issue about which many educators, politicians, and parents are passionate.

Media and the General Public

Heritage and CAP are primarily interested in their missions and policies, but politics are inherently intertwined with media and the general public. These two advocacy think tanks take cues from the general public and the media when they feel a topic is prominent. For example, Heritage shifted focus from K-12 education to higher education in 2015, just as religious freedom in higher education gained

traction in the media. Heritage is mostly responsive to its mission and current events, but when public attention focuses on an issue, especially when it is in line with the Heritage mission, Heritage will shift research to cover that topic (Reim 2016). It is also difficult to separate politics from the media and the attentive public. The media and parents cared about public policy topics the two advocacy think tanks covered, such as Common Core and ESEA, because of the impact they saw on their child's education.

Funders

We saw no evidence that funders hold much sway on topic choices for either of the think tanks. CAP decides independently which topics to cover in the coming year and then reaches out to funders predisposed to agree with the general direction in which they would go. Heritage, with their broad base of funders, does not have one funder that holds the purse strings. This means they can dictate their own choices and align topics with their conservative ideology without any one donor's input.

Media Trends

CAP and Heritage received similar media attention from mainstream and political media, with differences in education-specific media. CAP received a lot more attention from the education specific media outlet we chose to look at, *EdWeek*.⁴ Most media attention came from *The Washington Post* and *EdWeek* for both think tanks. Media coverage was neutral overall for Heritage and CAP; however, almost all

⁴ We only chose one education specific media outlet, but we chose a very prominent one. We cannot say that the way *EdWeek* covered the two think tanks would reflect practices in all or most other education-oriented media outlets.

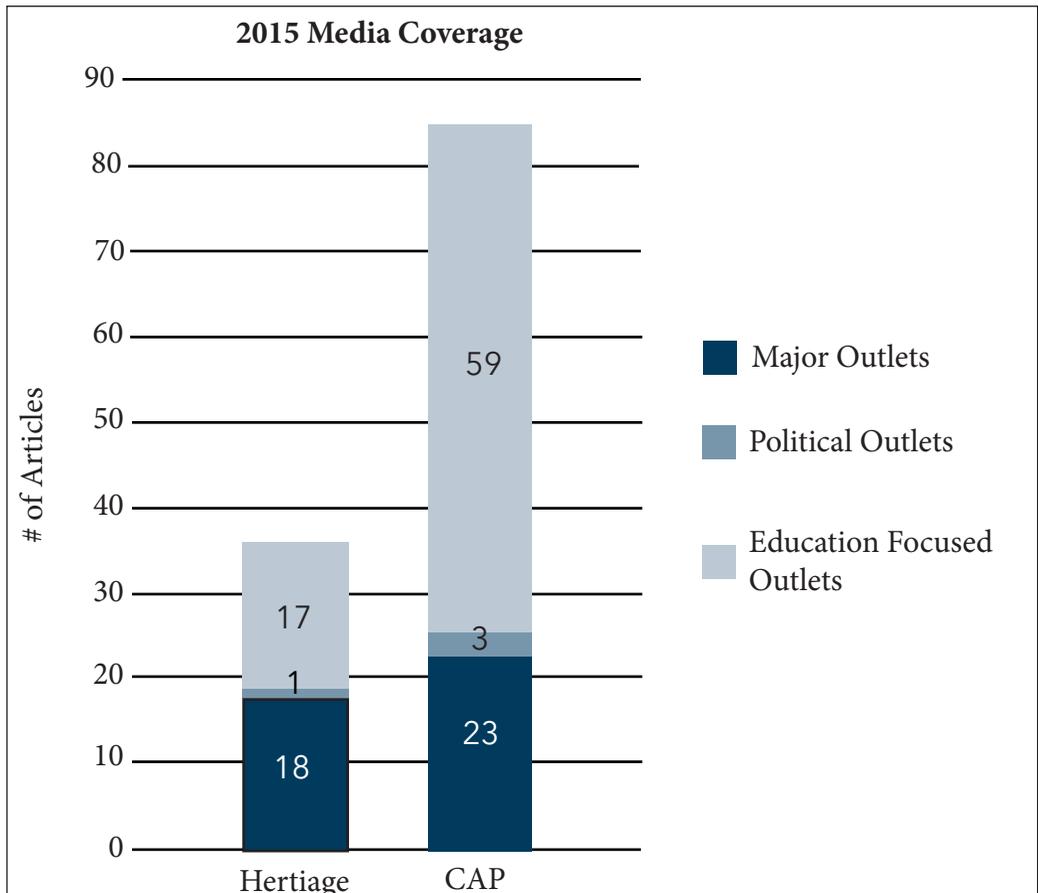
coverage on Heritage was neutral, while CAP received a divided and even amount of positive and negative coverage. Positive articles included one that positively described CAP’s stance on truancy. Several cited CAP as a reputable source. *Forbes* covered both Heritage and CAP, though featured a couple more articles on CAP, with neutral to positive reporting for both. Steve Forbes, Editor-in-chief, serves on the Heritage board.

Heritage and CAP received a lot of media attention from major outlets and EdWeek, the education specific outlet we looked at. See Table 4 and Figure 2 below to compare coverage received by each think tank from the different media outlets. Despite Heritage’s lower publication

Table 4. Articles per Think Tank from Each Media Source

# of Articles About and/or Citing the Think Tank in 2015 on the topic of education		
	Heritage	CAP
<i>NYT</i>	2	1
<i>WAP0</i>	11	15
<i>Forbes</i>	3	5
<i>CNN</i>	1	0
<i>NPR</i>	1	2
<i>PolitiCo</i>	0	1
<i>The Hill</i>	1	2
<i>EdWeek</i>	17	59
Total	36	85

Figure 2. Number of Articles per Think Tank from Each Media Source



output, they still received similar attention, with the exception of EdWeek, which cited CAP more than twice as often as Heritage.

State and Local Impact

We noticed one final trend: an increasing focus on state and local work and impact. In our discussion with CAP's Sargrad (2016), we asked what he saw for the future of education policy and think tanks. He said they already are and will be increasingly targeting state and local districts to provoke change. Heritage's Reim (2016) expressed similar thoughts as Heritage builds coalitions on the state level and conducts research on state and local policies. In terms of education policy, this seems to make a great deal of sense. So much of education policy, even when dictated by the federal government, is operationalized at the state and local level. How these entities implement policies, their success rates, and their potential for improvement can only be observed in the field. The notion that state and local governments are the innovators and incubators of ideas in governance seems especially true in education policy.

CONCLUSION

The advocacy think tank model and each think tank's missions directly related to every aspect of the work each did—from the type of outputs, to their methodology, to the topics chosen, to the method of achieving impact. As advocacy think tanks, CAP and Heritage emphasize persuasion, action, and impact. We saw this demonstrated by how quickly they responded to current events, media, and politics. Both of their missions stress the goal of influencing policy. They both hope to shift the policy agenda of the media

and the public. They also groomed policy makers and aimed to testify on Capitol Hill. The think tanks' missions also closely linked with their chosen topics. Heritage's mission to promote traditional American values, individual freedom, free enterprise, and limited government shows in their topic choices: school choice, education savings accounts, and limiting ESEA's reach. CAP, meanwhile, has a mission of progressivism and improving the lives of all Americans. We saw this reflected in their emphasis on disadvantaged students, strengthening ESEA, and improving teacher compensation.

We wanted to examine CAP and Heritage against an independent education-only think tank. This task ended up being more difficult than expected. Many solely education-focused think tanks are university-affiliated and, therefore, not a standalone, independent think tank. The National Education Policy Center is at the University of Colorado, and Stanford and Harvard have education think tanks as well. In future research, we would like to include more models, such as an unaffiliated think tank like the Brookings Institution and perhaps an unaffiliated think tank that specifically focuses on education such as the Learning Policy Institute (LPI). Once LPI has been around for five to ten years and has produced enough work to analyze, it will be interesting to see what impact, if any, they have had. Their mission is to "conduct and communicate independent high-quality research to shape policies that improve learning for each and every child" (LPI 2016). In the meantime, the practices of these two major advocacy think tanks show their intensely mission-driven work to influence public policy in Washington and around the country.

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Appendix A: Individuals Interviewed

- Heritage: Mary Clare Reim, a member of the Education Policy team, April 15, 2016
CAP: Scott Sargrad, Managing Director of the K-12 division, April 22, 2016

Appendix B: Think Tank Events

- Heritage: "Why the Future of Religious Freedom in Higher Education Matters for All Americans," April 13, 2016.
CAP: "Harnessing the Talent of DACA and Unauthorized Students at the K-12 Level," March 30, 2016



CALLIE MCLEAN is a second-year Master of Public Administration candidate at the Trachtenberg School, with a focus on public budgeting and finance. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2007, majoring in Journalism and Political Science. She currently works as a Pathways Intern in Management Analysis at the Office of Chief Counsel to the IRS. Callie enjoys costuming, sci-fi and fantasy, and UNC basketball. Once a project manager for history museum exhibits, Callie values the stories of our past and preserving cultural resources representing all people for future generations.



LILY ROBIN is a second-year Master of Public Policy candidate at the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration at the George Washington University, where she is focusing on social policy analysis. She graduated from the Gallatin School at New York University in 2013 with a Bachelors of Arts in individualized studies focused on the school-to-prison pipeline, and a minor in law and society. Lily worked in juvenile justice at the Legal Aid Society and civil law at the New York City law department after graduating. She currently works at the Partnership for Public Service, doing research and evaluation.

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