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Exploring the Use of Think Tank Groups to Improve Department Work Culture at a Regional University in the USA

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Abstract: Background: Little is known about the use of think tanks at universities, but based on the benefits observed in other fields, they could potentially be used to encourage relationships, promote faculty development, and inspire research collaborations. The purpose of this study is to explore faculty opinions of think tanks at a regional university (USA).

Methods: Faculty that participated in a think tank session during the preceding year were interviewed using succinct, conversational, open-ended questions. Two researchers labeled responses according to recurring themes; a third researcher resolved any discrepancies.

Results: Six interviews were coded. Central themes emerged: benefits with relationships, personal/professional development, and generation of research ideas. Participants also shared barriers to attendance, such as scheduling.

Conclusions: Participants in this study mentioned both professional and personal benefits. Think tanks provide a flexible environment that can encourage collaboration, create an open environment for discussion, and promote the advancement of teaching practices and research projects.

Paper: Background:

Think-tanks have gained popularity over the last few decades and have been extensively researched in the realm of policy analysis and scientific expertise (Struyk, 2002). While there is no standard definition for think tanks in the scientific literature, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines think tanks as “an institute, corporation, or group organized to study a particular subject (such as a policy issue or a scientific problem) and provide information, ideas, and advice” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2018). The structure of think tanks can vary greatly to suit the needs of a particular group (Struyk, 2002).

Think tanks are rapidly emerging and are becoming more commonly used in many fields of work, including academia. However, little is known about the use of think tanks in higher education to support faculty growth and organizational culture. Based on the benefits of think tanks in other fields, it is likely that they could be used as a valuable tool to encourage relationships, promote faculty

development, and inspire research collaborations. The purpose of this study is to explore faculty opinions on and discuss potential benefits of think tanks within a health sciences department at a large regional university.

Methods:

After the research protocol was approved by the university's institutional review board, participants (n = 7) were recruited to participate in this qualitative study. Participants were faculty from the Health Sciences Department of a large regional university (student population more than 30,000) in the Southwest USA who agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews. The Health Sciences Department consists of multiple disciplinary areas including public health, allied health, fitness/wellness, nutrition, and physical education/teacher education. Both undergraduate and graduate programs are represented. All department faculty (N = 25) were contacted via email to participate in the study. To be eligible for participation potential participants needed to have taken part in a department think tank during the previous academic year (2017-2018; n = 19). Data collection began in August 2018 and concluded in October 2018.

The researchers designed semi-structured, open-ended interview questions (Morgan, 1998) that were configured from variables reported in the literature regarding workplace satisfaction and workplace relationships (Sageer, Rafat, & Agarwal, 2012). Interview questions were designed by researchers to be succinct, conversational, and open-ended. Further, questions were designed to dictate no specific response and create a free-form for participants to stimulate the discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Researchers transcribed the six audio-recordings verbatim. A two-step process was used to code the data (Creswell, 1998). Open coding was used for the first step. During this step, two researchers simultaneously but separately grouped data similar in theme into a category and assigned a label capturing its theme. After this was completed, the two researchers reviewed the categories and labels that were created. Any discrepancies in either the composition of the categories or the assigned labels were discussed with a third member of the research team until all three investigators were in agreement. After agreement among all investigators in the composition and labeling of each category was reached, the second step in the coding process took place. In this step, axial coding was conducted. This process consisted of relating categories to the central phenomena of interest (Creswell, 1998). Thus this step involved relating the categories created during open coding to the original questions from the interview guide. As part of this step, relationships among categories were assessed, and categories found to be similar were combined.

Results:

Interviews were conducted with seven think tank participants, although one interview was not recorded and therefore not included in the results or discussion of this paper. Of the six participants included in this analysis, five are female faculty members and one is a male faculty member. The length of service at the university ranged from nine months to 19 years.

Most participants discussed the benefits that they gained from attending the think tank sessions during the previous year. The benefits discussed were both professional and personal in nature. They ranged from concrete output created by the think tank groups to the generation of new research

ideas or simply discussing a topic in greater depth with other interested faculty members. Furthermore, relationship-building was one of the key strengths outlined throughout interviews. The faculty that participated noted that their interactions were strengthened between other faculty, students, and their department.

Participants also discussed aspects of the think tank sessions that they felt were not ideal. Many of the participants specifically mentioned the scheduling, structure, and purpose of the think tank sessions as areas that they felt could be improved. Although many participants indicated that they enjoyed that the think tank meetings were an opportunity to generate and discuss ideas, some participants also expressed a desire for the think tanks to incorporate more structured requirements. One common suggestion was that the think tanks should set concrete goals that the participants should achieve each academic year.

Conclusions:

Participants in this study mentioned both professional and personal benefits of participating in department-level think tanks. The think tanks provided opportunities for members of a multi-disciplinary department to discover new ideas to inform their teaching or research. In addition to professional development, participants discovered resources that also supported personal wellness and development during the think tanks. Several participants mentioned how interacting with their colleagues in think tank sessions enhanced cohesiveness of the faculty to form a more positive work environment.

Overall, think tank sessions provide a flexible environment that can encourage collaboration, create an open environment for discussion, and promote the advancement of teaching practices and research projects. Think tanks can be tailored to fit the individual needs of an academic institution or department so that they can be an effective tool for many different groups or situations. Universities should individually decide the guidelines and expectations they would like to implement for think tanks at their institution, but leave some decisions open to the group so that the needs of the participants are addressed appropriately.

References

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