

CONNECTION

NEW ENGLAND'S JOURNAL
OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

CONNECTION: NEW ENGLAND'S JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT is published four times a year by the New England Board of Higher Education, 45 Temple Place, Boston, MA 02111. Phone: 617.357.9620 Fax: 617.338.1577

Vol. XI, No. 2 Summer 1996

ISSN 0895-6405

Copyright © 1996 by the New England Board of Higher Education.

Publisher: John C. Hoy

Editor: John O. Harney

Assistant Editor: Susan W. Martin

Publications Manager: Charlotte Stratton

Art Direction, Production, Printing:

The Media Shop, Inc., Boston, MA

Subscriptions and Advertising Sales Coordinator:

Christine Quinlan

Subscription Information: \$16 per year (4 issues); regular issues \$2.50 each; annual FACTS issue \$12.

Advertising rates are available upon request.

CONNECTION is printed in New England and distributed by Bernhard DeBoer Inc. CONNECTION is indexed by PAIS International (Public Affairs Information Service). CONNECTION is available in microform, paper and electronically from University Microfilms, 800 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. A cumulative index of CONNECTION articles and abstracts of recent articles are accessible on the World Wide Web at <http://www.nebhe.org>.

The **New England Board of Higher Education** is a nonprofit, congressionally authorized, interstate agency whose mission is to foster cooperation and the efficient use of resources among New England's approximately 260 colleges and universities. NEBHE was established by the New England Higher Education Compact, a 1955 agreement among the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.

Chair: Eleanor M. McMahon,
Distinguished Professor, Brown University

President: John C. Hoy

CONNECTION Editorial Advisory Board

Kenneth Hooker, Columnist, *Boston Globe*, *Chairman*

Richard Barringer, Director, Edmund S. Muskie
Institute of Public Affairs

David Buchdahl, Regional Director,
Community College of Vermont

Laura Freid, Publisher, *Harvard Magazine*

Betsy Keady, Market Director, The Forum Corp.

Arnold Koch, Arnold Koch and Associates

Thomas L. McFarland, Director,
University Press of New England

Ian Menzies, Hingham, Mass.

Neil Rolde, Sewall's Hill, Maine

As the federal government abandons its social welfare responsibilities, the locus of policymaking will shift from Washington to state capitals. At the same time, the state- and regionally oriented public policy "think tanks" that dot the New England landscape may be expected to assume some version of the role played previously by big national policy research groups such as the Brookings Institution and the Heritage Foundation.

But how effectively the New England states handle their expanded responsibilities — and how much these think tanks contribute to policy development — will depend on that rarest of New England commodities: regional collaboration. The six states, after all, face common policy dilemmas in areas from education to international trade.

Sensing that a pivotal moment is approaching for both regionalism and policy research, the New England Board of Higher Education and the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Massachusetts at Boston have launched a regional examination of New England's public policy think tanks.

The first challenge for us was trying to determine just what constitutes a policy think tank. In a series about the well-known Washington policy institutes such as Brookings, Heritage and the American Enterprise Institute, *Christian Science Monitor* columnist Rushworth M. Kidder defined think tank as "a kind of university without students." But that won't do. Many New England policy institutes are based on university campuses, and several offer degree programs. Students are integral parts of these institutions.

Foundation executive and historian James Allen Smith noted in his book on policy elites that think tank "is a curious phrase, suggesting both the rarefied isolation of those who think about policy, as well as their prominent public display, like some rare species of fish or reptile confined behind the glass of an aquarium or zoo." But most scholars in New England think tanks are neither cloistered nor prominently displayed.

Further complicating the research, many of New England's campus-based policy centers incorporate other distinct policy institutes and vice versa. The McCormack Institute, for example, encompasses the Center for State and Local Policy, the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy, the Center for Democracy and Development and the Center for Social Policy Research.

In addition, hundreds of New England advocacy groups, watchdog agencies and professional organizations operate on the edge of the think tank world. Take the Boston-based Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development. A policy think tank? Not in a strict sense. For while the think tanks are characterized by the involvement of detached scholars and professional experts, homeless women have led the institute's research on homelessness. (One institute trustee observed that the group's work "is a radical departure from the way most public policy research is conducted — by researchers who have little direct experience with the problem being studied.")

Ultimately, New England's policy think tanks defy rigid definition. What we can say is that they share an interest in informing and influencing public policies through research. Most produce journals or other periodicals, as well as occasional reports. A few have the capacity to conduct high-quality survey research. Many hold conferences, and some sponsor awards programs to encourage replication of "best practices." Most are nonprofit. A few have endowments, and some receive state appropriations. But most rely on foundation grants, government contracts and the generosity of affiliated institutions for their survival.

This issue of CONNECTION marks the early stage of NEBHE's assessment of New England policy think tanks, a subject about which remarkably little has been published. We thank our distinguished authors for advancing the discussion. Special thanks also to Irana Hawkins, a recent graduate of the Program for Women in Politics and Government at UMass-Boston, whose hard work was instrumental in the early research.

John O. Harney is the editor of CONNECTION.