

GRAD Guide to Think Tank Careers

OVERVIEW

Think tanks are dynamic research organizations that seek to influence policymaking on regional, national, and international scales. While the priorities and political alignments of each think tank differ, potential areas of focus include economics, security, defense, education, the environment, public health, and international relations. Think tanks of various sizes are located across the world with the majority situated in the US and Europe. Overall, think tanks bridge gaps between policymakers, academics, and the public; they are settings suitable for individuals passionate about current affairs with strong research, writing, and communications skills. In this guide, you'll gain a better understanding of this broader career area and learn how to shape your skills and experiences for think tank researcher roles.

POSSIBLE ROLES AND JOB TITLES

Think tanks offer a wide variety of employment opportunities that span areas of research, communications, programs, administration, and development. Regarding research roles, senior research positions are held by esteemed subject matter experts with advanced graduate degrees and/or extensive professional experience. Job titles at the advanced level include **senior fellow** or **fellow**. Affiliated senior researchers are often known as **nonresident fellows**. Newer graduates or individuals at earlier career stages would likely assume supporting roles as **research assistants, analysts, or associates** (titles vary between institutions). Note that at some think tanks, there may be additional tiers within these categories such as “senior research assistant” or “senior analyst.” The level at which you enter will depend upon the intersection of your subject matter knowledge, academic credentials, and related work experience. While research assistant positions might attract undergraduate degree holders, research analyst and associate positions are possibilities for recent master's and/or PhD graduates. If you have sharp project management skills (and enjoy such work), look out for **project or program coordinator/manager** roles, or hybrid programming–research positions. To get a better sense of the structures and hierarchies of specific think tanks, check out their websites — many include employee profiles. Also, keep an eye on current think tank job postings to help you determine the level at which you might enter. To find out more about **internship opportunities** for graduate students, see page 4 of this guide.

The notion of a lengthy think tank “career” is slightly misleading: it is common for employees to work at think tanks for several years before transitioning into government or public sector roles, or for individuals to enter think tanks later in their careers. Others, too, might move in and out of academia. A hypothetical research analyst with a master's degree, for example, might gain experience at a think tank before embarking on a PhD and later returning to the think tank world; a renowned scholar might join a think tank as a senior fellow at a later stage in their career. Think flexibly about your longer career path through the world of policy work — your skills will be valued in multiple areas.

TIP: When researching individual think tanks and looking for jobs, make sure that the priorities and political alignments of the organizations under question resonate with your own values.

QU: I'm not a US citizen. Can I apply to work at a think tank in the US? It depends. While some think tanks have the capacity to sponsor visas, others do not. For clarification, reach out to the HR team at an organization of interest. As think tanks exist all over the world, there may also be exciting opportunities in your home country.



SELECTED THINK TANKS IN THE US*

Think Tank	Type/Stated Affiliation	Sample of Priorities
Brookings Institution	Nonprofit/nonpartisan	Foreign policy; economics; development; governance; metropolitan policy
Peterson Institute for International Economics	Nonprofit/nonpartisan	Economic policy
Center for Strategic and International Studies	Nonprofit/nonpartisan	Climate change; cybersecurity & technology; defense & security; economics; energy & sustainability; global health; human rights; international development
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	Nonprofit/nonpartisan	Disorder; governance; geoeconomics & strategy; technology & international affairs
Urban Institute	Nonprofit/nonpartisan	Economic & social policy; urban issues
Center for American Progress	Nonprofit/nonpartisan	Energy; domestic security; economic growth; immigration; education; healthcare
The Heritage Foundation	Nonprofit/conservative	Domestic public policy
Atlantic Council	Nonprofit/nonpartisan	International affairs; politics & diplomacy; security & defense; economy & business; energy & environment; resilience & society; technology & innovation
Wilson Center, FKA Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars	Nonprofit/nonpartisan	Regional studies; global issues
RAND Corporation	Nonprofit/nonpartisan	Social & economic policy (domestic and overseas); national security
Stimson Center	Nonprofit/nonpartisan	Defense & international security
Council on Foreign Relations	Nonprofit/nonpartisan	Foreign policy

*The think tanks included above are drawn from the “Top Think Tanks in the US” section of the “2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report” (University of Pennsylvania, pp.90-96) The specific list from which these organizations are drawn begins with the Peterson Institute (ranked no.1 in the US) and includes 110 think tanks; Brookings is recognized separately at the outset as the “United States Center of Excellence for 2016-2019.” The think tanks featured in the table above vary in size from smaller organizations like the Peterson Institute with around 70 staff members to larger organizations like Brookings (300+ staff), Urban Institute (500+ staff), and RAND (1800+ staff). Information on staff size, priorities, and type/stated affiliation was drawn from each organization’s official website in Jul. 2021.

OTHER THINK TANKS WHERE ALUMNI WORK

- [Aspen Institute](#)
- [United States Institute of Peace](#)
- [Mathematica](#)
- [Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#)
- [Cato Institute](#)



SKILLS TOOLBOX FOR THINK TANK RESEARCH POSITIONS**1. RESEARCH SKILLS**

- **Subject matter expertise:** does your specialist knowledge of an issue or region mesh with the interests of a specific think tank and the programs it supports? If so, think critically about the insights and perspectives you can offer. Think tank researchers work in a fast-paced environment: you'll be expected to keep up-to-date with the emerging trends in your field and understand how current events affect policymaking decisions. **For certain positions, foreign language skills are also required.**
- **Knowledge of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies:** depending on the institution at which you work, your research will be conducted using a variety of methodological and analytical approaches. Informational interviews will give you a better sense of what is expected in this area, and an idea of the skills you could acquire “on the job.” Ask, too, what technology skills are necessary or desired for a particular role.

2. WRITING SKILLS

Think tanks publish extensively, and as a researcher, writing will be integral to your job. Presented in a variety of formats, think tank writing is geared toward audiences from policymakers and academics to members of the interested public. Formats might include op-eds, short essays, articles, and reports. **Importantly, you will be required to produce high-quality, concise, and accessible writing with a quick turnaround.**

TIP: to prepare for writing at a think tank, try writing a handful of op-eds (c.750 words) or short, public-facing pieces about policy issues. Get your name out there as a publicly engaged expert! Learning how to present a complex and persuasive argument succinctly to broader audiences takes practice. Also, having a few pieces “out there” will look great on your resume when applying for jobs. For examples of writing produced by think tanks, visit the websites of organizations that interest you.

3. COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS

Think tank researchers share their work with both expert and nonexpert audiences via outlets such as writing, social media, media interviews, and public speaking. To develop your communications skills during your time at graduate school, seek opportunities to present your research to differing audiences in a variety of formats.

4. PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE SKILLS

In day-to-day life at a think tank, project management and administrative skills are vital for researchers. Whether you are supporting programs led by senior fellows or leading your own projects, the following skills are essential: time management, attention to detail, problem solving, leadership, and teamwork. To develop your skills in these areas, seek work experience opportunities around campus or in the wider community. Experience at a policy-focused organization is a bonus!



QU: I've heard that think tanks raise their own funds. Will fundraising be a part of my role?

Depending on the institution, think tanks are funded by sources such as private donations and foundations, and by grants from entities including universities or the government. Although think tanks generally have dedicated development staff, senior researchers often play key roles in the fundraising process. Junior researchers might also be expected to provide a little support in this area. To learn more about the fundraising procedure at a specific institution, hold informational interviews with current employees.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROFESSIONALS

To get a sense of how the think tank world works and to build professional connections, networking is essential. Likewise, as a think tank researcher, networking will be an important part of your role as you strive to influence policymakers. How, then, might you get started?

- **Arrange informational interviews:** search for alumni working at organizations that interest you using the [alumni directory](#), [Wisr](#), and [LinkedIn](#). For more information on informational interviews (and for sample outreach messages), see this [UChicagoGRAD presentation](#).
- **Make connections via on-campus career events:** Over the past few years, UChicagoGRAD has organized several think tank-focused career exploration treks, conversations with alumni, and panel discussions at [GRADUCon](#) (the annual career exploration conference). Visit [GRAD Gargoyle](#) for event listings.
- **Locate off-campus think tank events:** search the web for events near you (think tanks often advertise them on their websites). If you are based in the DC area — the major think tank hub in the US — there will be many events that you can attend. Based in Chicago? Check out events hosted by the [Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#) — a think tank with a significant amount of public programming. Look out for virtual event opportunities, too.
- **Explore internship opportunities:** see below!

INTERNSHIPS

Getting an internship at a think tank is a great way to get your “foot in the door” and build your professional network. Think tank internships (both paid and unpaid) are highly competitive. While many internship programs are aimed at undergraduates, there are still multiple opportunities for graduate students (and individuals who recently completed graduate programs). The best way to search for internships and determine your eligibility is to explore the online job boards/dedicated internship webpages of organizations that interest you.

RAND Corporation, for instance, offers a particularly robust set of graduate student internships and fellowships. Other organizations with opportunities for graduate students include **Brookings**, **Center for American Progress**, **Atlantic Council**, **Wilson Center**, **Stimson Center**, **Council on Foreign Relations**, **Chicago Council on Global Affairs**, and **Hudson Institute**.

Need full or partial funding for an internship? Check out [UChicagoGRAD's Graduate Global Impact \(GGI\) Internship Program](#) to see if you are eligible.



FINDING JOB POSTINGS

- Search for job postings on the websites of individual think tanks.
- Use the job search features on sites such as [LinkedIn](#), [Glassdoor](#), [Monster](#), [Idealist](#), and [Indeed](#).

NEXT STEPS AND ADVICE

- Seek out policy-related work experience and explore internship opportunities at think tanks. Take the time, too, to enhance your administrative and project management skills.
- Cultivate your voice (and build your profile as) a publicly engaged expert. Practice public-facing writing and speaking.
- Build your professional network by connecting with think tank professionals.

You see an appealing job posting and decide to apply. Make sure you tailor your resume and write a strong cover letter. Need help or inspiration? See UChicagoGRAD's guides focused on [resumes](#) and [cover letters](#).

You land an interview for a research position at a think tank. Do your homework! Make sure that you understand the wider scopes and objectives of the organization under question AND the specific programs that interest you.

SELECTED ALUMNI PROFILES

- [Alexandra Stanczyk](#) (PhD, Social Service Administration), Researcher, Mathematica
- [Amanda H. Blair](#) (PhD, Political Science and Government), Research Officer, United States Institute of Peace
- [Clint Work](#) (PhD, International Studies; MA, International Relations), Fellow, The Stimson Center
- [Martha Ross](#) (MA, School of Social Service Administration), Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution
- [Zeenat Rahman](#) (MA, Middle Eastern Studies), Director, Inclusive America Project, The Aspen Institute
- [Reja Younis](#) (Masters, International Relations), Program Manager and Research Associate, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
- [Brittany McGhee](#) (Masters, International Relations), Assistant Director, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- To learn more about possible pathways from a PhD program to the policy world, visit The Versatile PhD. For access, log in to [GRAD Gargoyle](#) and click "Versatile PhD" in the quick links. Once directed to the website, click the "Policy" tab within the PhD Career Finder.
- For a detailed ranking of think tanks within the US and worldwide, see the [2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index](#) (University of Pennsylvania).
- For a selected list of think tanks focused on foreign policy issues, visit [this resource](#) created by the US Department of State.
- Explore [On Think Tanks](#) — a global platform for think tank information, news, and views.

