



## Chapter Spotlight: Florida SSN Runs Workshops with Local Policy and Media Experts

FEBRUARY 8, 2022

Dominik Doemer

"As a state legislator and a doctoral student at UCF, I know there are disconnects between research and policy making; it's great to have the opportunity to show researchers how their work can support our efforts in Tallahassee to craft and pass policy that supports everyone." - Anna Eskamani, Florida House Representative

When it comes to understanding how your state government works, there's no better guide than a state legislator. And when you're looking to understand the OpEd process, the opinion page editor of one of the largest newspapers in your state is a most valuable resource. Having access to such contacts is far from easy, which is why the Florida SSN chapter has been hard at work over the last year to host multiple local workshops that connect their chapter members to policy and media experts in their own communities.

A screenshot of a Zoom meeting. On the left, there are four small video thumbnails of participants. The main area shows a presentation slide with a blue background and white text. The slide title is "SCHOLARS STRATEGY NETWORK: FL CHAPTER". Below the title, it lists "Heide Castañeda and Elizabeth Strom, co-leaders" and "Atte Penttilä, graduate fellow". To the right of the slide is a graphic with the Scholars Strategy Network Florida logo and the text "FLORIDA POLICY 101: HOW YOUR RESEARCH CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE". Below this, it lists the speakers: "The Honorable Jennifer Webb" and "The Honorable Oscar Braynon". At the bottom right, it says "January 19, 2021 2-3.15 PM | GoToWebinar".

*Former state legislators Jennifer Webb and Oscar Braynon meet with Florida SSN members.*

The first of these events featuring local speakers was organized for January 2021 in partnership with [The Impact Project](#). Together, they hosted a [Florida state legislature 101 training](#) ahead of the 2021 legislative session, featuring former Florida House Representative Jennifer Webb and former House Representative and State Senator Oscar Braynon. Webb and Braynon discussed the who, what, when, and why of Florida's legislative policymaking process, giving attendees the basics they needed to understand and get involved in the 2021 legislative session.

“So many of us who are in the academic world know absolutely nothing about Florida government. Many of us are not from Florida and it's a big state, so it feels very diffuse even if you live here and are trying to pay attention. Plus the Florida legislature only meets in session for 2 months out of the year, so it's just a firehose of stuff happening. I thought if I feel that way, others probably do as well, and that's why we wanted to organize these trainings,” said Florida chapter co-leader [Elizabeth Strom](#).

Following up on this training, SSN Florida decided to dive even deeper in November, holding a training on [Conducting Research to Impact Policy](#). The event featured State Representative Anna Eskamani, who in addition to representing the 47th district is also getting her PhD in Public Affairs. Attendees also heard from Sadaf Knight, Chief Executive Officer, and Alexis Tsoukalas, policy analyst, of the [Florida Policy Institute](#).

The event focused on what exactly legislators are looking for from academics and techniques for making research meaningful and of interest to state policymakers. That's because as Knight said, “Achieving policy change begins with sound research and grounded partnerships.”

Representative Eskamani reflected on the event: “As a state legislator and a doctoral student at UCF, I know there are disconnects between research and policy making; it's great to have the opportunity to show researchers how their work can support our efforts in Tallahassee to craft and pass policy that supports everyone.”

Florida SSN co-leader [Elizabeth Aranda](#) said that hearing from Representative Eskamani about, “the importance of our work was significant, because you don't want to feel so discouraged by politics that you stop trying. Hearing from her that your research does matter and these are some of the ways that you can really grab our attention, I thought was really helpful and encouraging.”

Finally, in January of 2022, the Florida chapter hosted their third local workshop, this time focused on writing OpEds for local and national media. The event was inspired by their ongoing partnership with the [Tampa Bay Times](#), which regularly publishes opinion pieces written by Florida SSN members. Participants heard from Tampa Bay Times Deputy Editor of Editorials Jim Verhulst, as well as prolific OpEd writer and SSN member [Alex R. Piquero](#) and Tanya Vomacka, the Director of Strategic Communications and Engagement at the University of South Florida. The event focused on what makes for a compelling, research-based OpEd and how to get your work to stand out to an editor. Following the panel, attendees had the opportunity to workshop

their ideas for OpEds in small groups and receive personalized feedback from Verhulst.

“The opinion pages of an organization like the Tampa Bay Times are always seeking informed analysis on the issues of the day. What better place to look for it than the academy? We joke that researchers and academics “know something that I should know.” Our job is to help them share and to translate their research and knowledge into short essays that are accessible to a general readership,” said Verhulst.

Looking forward, the Florida chapter is hoping to capitalize on the momentum from their most recent training by setting up OpEd writing office hours where researchers can workshop their ideas and get feedback on their drafts. To learn more about the Florida chapter and their members, visit their [chapter page](#).