



Chapter Spotlight: South Carolina SSN Heads to the State Capitol

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Over a decade ago, Professor [Ken Kolb](#), a sociologist at Furman University and the South Carolina SSN chapter leader, joined forces with State Representative and Furman colleague [Chandra Dillard](#) to save a pedestrian bridge that was vital to an underserved community. By combining Chandra's deep local connections and advocacy with Ken's research, their collaboration provided proof of the bridge's critical importance to the community and ultimately helped them secure its replacement.

Now, their partnership is heading to the state house. On January 28th and 29th, Ken and Chandra will lead a visit to the South Carolina State Capitol, bringing academics and legislators face-to-face to build relationships like theirs and explore new ways to make a difference in South Carolina. The following conversation with Ken and Chandra has been edited for length and clarity.

Q&A

What are your goals for the upcoming visit to the South Carolina State Capitol?

Ken: As an academic, I want to provide policymakers with the evidence they need to push for change, but I don't necessarily speak the language of policy and legislation. I need help learning how to translate my work for that audience to make it useful and I want to provide opportunities for others to learn those skills as well.

So, my first goal is to generate interest amongst academics in the state of South Carolina to get more involved in the policy process. I want to identify and support those who are already doing this work, and then provide the resources and opportunities for people to develop the skillset to be more involved.

The South Carolina chapter is small. We started right before covid, which wasn't necessarily the best timing, and we have survived, but now I think we're in a position where we can thrive. So this will be the first face-to-face meetup in the state. We'll have a dinner with both academics and legislators on January 28th, and then the next day a visit to the Capitol and meetings on January 29th.

Chandra: In working with Ken on this event, I hope to demystify what goes on in the legislature, what our process is, and how you can speak legislative speak. But I also want my colleagues to know that there are partners out there, like our academic institutions, who can provide information to move an issue from just a problem to a solution or to create an opportunity with data, whether it's statewide or for their specific community.

What types of issues will this visit focus on?

Ken: It depends on the expertise of those who are coming, but so far there's been interest in the things that people need to get and keep good jobs, which is job training, transportation, childcare, and housing. Those are the basic tools that provide stability, that enable people to develop strong families and to move up the economic ladder. So the goal is to identify the interests of the academics and then the policy areas of the legislators, find where those two overlap, and work from there.

Chandra: The issues that Ken has raised are always important to any community and as we look statewide. But there could be some local nuances too, where a community is struggling in some way or trying to find an opportunity on a matter that is unique and they just can't crack that nut. A lot of policy is very local, as policymakers we often work at the grassroots level, so there may be opportunities there that will come up.

How did you come together to collaborate on this event?

Ken: Well there's the short story and the long story. The short story is I had to pick a date and honestly, I didn't understand the calendar and I had to sit down with Chandra to figure out on which days is the legislature in town and when would be a good time to meet, so that was just the logistics of it.

But the long story is that I have worked with Chandra for a while. We started working together in 2012 in a neighborhood and on an issue that she had been fighting for, for years. I rode my bike one day across town and I found this bridge that had a tractor trailer parked in front of it blocking it, and it didn't really make any sense to me. So then I started asking around and I got in touch with Chandra and members of the community. I had a sociology class at the time that was interested in doing some local community-based research and wanted to get them involved. And I'll let Chandra take it from there.

Chandra: I think it's pretty unique that Ken and I both work at Furman University. So I wear two hats, his colleague here at Furman, but also as a state legislator. Through that connection, we have built a relationship and that is very important to the legislative process, building relationships.

The project Ken is talking about that brought us together in 2012 was the Hampton Avenue pedestrian bridge. Ken came along when we were about at our wits end. This bridge had a 20 year plus history of being unrepairable and unsafe. It had finally come to the end of its journey when the South Carolina Department of Transportation wanted to take it down.

In 2008, I was elected to the legislature and this was the first big issue I had to face. At that time, there was a state senator who was taking lead on it, and we were all supporting him, but we kind of went to the end of our rope on that too. But I refused to give up and in 2012, I got a different idea. Ken had called me and he said: "What do you know about the Hampton Avenue bridge?" So I gathered up all my stuff and headed across campus right to his office and laid it out.

The community and I, we were pleading our case. Anecdotally we knew the importance of this connection and what it meant to the community, but we didn't have any data to back it up, like knowing that if it were gone, people would have to walk one and a half miles one way. We didn't know how many people were actually going to have to do that, how many people in the neighborhood did not have cars. And that's where Ken and his students came on board with a survey to help us really quantify what we already knew.

That data began to make things real for the other decision makers we had to work with and eventually found its way into a Title VI civil rights complaint, which got federal attention. And that is what really led to mediation. We now have a new bridge, the bridge was dedicated in March of 2020, the week before the world shut down with Covid.

So it was the data that really gave us the traction because it was undeniable at that point. You could take the bridge down, but you need to take it down knowing the inconvenience, the desperate impact on an already underserved community, and it just didn't look good to do that. So people were willing to come back to the table and say, we've got to do something.

What lessons did you learn from this collaboration for the ways that academics and policymakers can work together in South Carolina?

Ken: I think from an academic perspective, this was my first lesson that simple data can tell a really big story. Academics hold themselves to really high standards of what we're willing to present to our peers in terms of our data and findings, but you can really kickstart public conversations with just simple, basic, descriptive statistics.

Academics are so interested in providing all the context and all the footnotes and all the caveats and all the nuance of every single issue that we kind of lose ourselves when it's really just a big takeaway. 57% of southern side residents did not have access to a vehicle. And when you take away a pedestrian bridge and you increase a walking distance from one tenth of a mile to one and a half miles, that's going to have a profound impact on their life.

I was just surprised because as a trained academic, I never really thought that those kinds of numbers were enough. But they were in a sense, almost more than enough. If anything, I've probably waited too long to jump in and try and contribute to this debate. So that's the lesson that I give a lot of my academic colleagues: if you want to get involved in policy debates, find the simple numbers that tell the biggest story and you'll be

surprised that you can really move the needle in ways that you didn't think you could.

Chandra: I think that South Carolina has great academic institutions, but often they are overlooked for the data that could be so helpful. As policymakers, we're surrounded by staff, we're surrounded by other people who do research, but it may not come in a form we need. Like Ken said, we just need simple information. When we are trying to change decisionmakers' minds or we are trying to create policy, I think the simplest data is most important.

We talk to a broad range of people from different walks of life. Being a policymaker is like trying to educate people and I think that's the beauty of this because academic information is not biased. It is nonpartisan, which makes for even better support for your argument. And so, my hope would be that my colleagues would have another tool in the toolbox that they could think about when they have issues to approach. You don't have to fear a college professor. I want to demystify the ability to work together and how it can be mutually beneficial.

In what ways does your story highlight the value of this mutually beneficial relationship building?

Ken: We both work at Furman, so in large part our institution provided the relationship from the beginning. And then Chandra had the connection with the neighborhood and brought me into the neighborhood, and then I started working with the neighborhood and we developed a track record. So, for me as an academic to move into a neighborhood that's not my own, I need a little help. I need someone on the other side, ready to open the door for me, and Chandra was there.

Now it's the same thing in Columbia. I've never been to the Columbia State Capitol for any sort of legislative work and it's a little daunting, and it really is comforting to have a friend who you have a track record with that can help you do this, especially when you're trying to venture into new areas. And that's really what the Scholars Strategy Network is about, getting academics to test the waters of a new area, to apply their skills and expertise. It can be nerve wracking and so those kinds of relationships can go a long way.

Chandra: I talk to a lot of groups and when I have the opportunity to share what makes the difference in policymaking, it is the relationship. It's the relationship with your neighborhood and with the people who are trying to help you. Trust and credibility are so important in this space, and I hate to say but sometimes that's sorely lacking. I hope that the day and a half that I spend with Ken and his group, we'll share our story and demonstrate what a real relationship looks like between a policymaker and an academic faculty member. You know, people think we're not real people, legislators. I'm here again to demystify all of this and it works both ways.