

Lisa: Hi, I'm Lisa Hernandez. And I am one of your hosts for the Scholar Strategy Networks, No Jargon. Each month we discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers, without jargon.

For this month's No Jargon episode, we are excited to share something a bit different with you. Instead of our usual deep dive into a scholar's research, you will be hearing from the Scholar Strategy Networks Executive Director.

Paola Maynard-Moll, also known as Pao, is interviewed by Robert Perkinson, an Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Hawaii Manoa, and co-leader of Hawaii SSN chapter for his Better Tomorrow Series at the university.

In the interview, Pao shares insights on how Scholar Strategy Network, or, SSN, helps scholars make an impact on public policy by building connections with policymakers, journalists, and community organizers. If you have ever been curious about how our organization works and some stories that show the network in action, this is the episode for you.

We are grateful to Robert for letting us feature this podcast on No Jargon. Here is their conversation.

Robert: Aloha Kākou. Welcome to the Better Tomorrow Series podcast. We are a joint venture of the University of Hawaii Manoa, the Hawaii Community Foundation and Kamehameha Schools. We dive deep into some of the most important social, political, and scholarly problems of our time, issues of importance to Hawaii and the world.

From climate mitigation to microbiome research to health equity, we try not just to spotlight good ideas, but also to give them little nudges forward. Our hope is to catalyze conversations that matter. I'm Robert Perkinson, coordinator of this series, and we're so pleased you're joining us.

In this episode, we're going to talk about a question as old as well, Plato. How evidence and reason shape governance.

No one in this day and age is proposing that philosopher kings rule. But about a decade ago, a group of social scientists at Harvard led by Theda Skocpol launched an ambitious initiative to give scholars the tools and support they need to achieve a modicum of influence. Thus, was born the Scholars Strategy Network, which brings together thousands of policy oriented academics organized into thirty-six chapters scattered from Maine to Hawaii.

Its executive director is Paola Maynard-Moll or Pao for short, and I sat down with her in Georgetown at the organization's national convening. We talked about obstacles, the narrow incentive structures of tenure, as well as the disinformation and demagoguery that infect current political debates. We also talked about how scholars with skills, relationships, and resources, and how solid, actionable research findings that are translated into language that everyone can understand can still sometimes carry the day. That we at least try to bring research and reason to bear, contends Pao, is as vital to democracy as it ever was.

Thank you so much for joining us.

Paola: I'm delighted to be here Robert, thank you so much for inviting me.

Robert: There are so many ways to affect social change in the world.

You can organize street demonstrations, you can launch petition drives, organize a group of nonprofits to design a campaign, you can run for office. How does research fit into the picture, academic research, and why do you think it really matters?

Paola: I see as one instrument in a very big symphony, all of those modes of informing social policy of making social change are incredibly important. And research is simply one piece in that much larger symphony of trying to make change happen.

I think that there's an interest among a lot of people, both in the policy making space and in the social movement space, to use research as a third party validator of what good social policy is.

So being able to say that we don't just believe in this because we have a gut feeling, but saying we, social movement organizations, we, people who are in the streets, we, people who are nonprofits coming together in a campaign can then point to research as one additional piece of information that can convince a decision maker about why this is important.

Kind of hand in hand with the lived experience of the people who they organize.

Robert: At least since the progressive era, I guess even before, since the rise of modern universities, academics have been trying to deploy scholarship in such a way that might affect public policy and governing. But the Scholar Strategy Network is a relatively new type of experiment in this space.

How did it come about?

Paola: So about 13 years ago now, there was a group of academics who recognized this challenge, recognized this problem that they had been trying to make social change happen. They'd been trying to inform policy, but weren't seeing the types of successes that they thought they should be seeing given what they knew and the like knowledge they had both of policy, but also politics.

So they came together to think, what could an organization that is designed to do social change to inform social policy, what could it look like? And the interesting thing that they did, which makes a lot of sense given that their academics, is that they went back to their own research and they said what social movements, what types of organizations in the past have had success in moving social policy?

And the answer based, in large part on our founder Theda Skocpol work, is that organizations that are member based, that have real members that have put some skin in the game in some way that have evidenced that they're into this and that

they wanna do something incredibly important. And then secondarily, a federated organization, so an organization that has a small national team, but for the most part is based in the states that are based in communities that could try lots of different experiments to see what works and what doesn't. So the very beginnings of SSN and something that is still incredibly important to how we do the work that we do, is that we are a federated organization.

We have all of these chapters that get to try this experiment of connecting research to policy, of organizing academics in a place to then inform the policy makers, civic organizations, decision makers in that place. And then we all get to learn from each other. So all of those nodes of that network get to experiment and come back to the hive, and say this is what worked and this is what didn't. Now you can try it and learn more or fail differently.

Robert: Yeah. It's an interesting approach for a variety of reasons, but one I think is that Washington is such a magnetic gravitational force for researchers, and so there's all sorts of organizations that support policymaking NDC, but that's the arena that's hardest to affect whereas a federated organization might allow you to deal in municipal policy making.

Paola: I'll say this, so my own background, prior to working at SSN, I worked as a state legislative staffer. I was in Massachusetts in the state legislature there—

Robert: —And you were a lawyer before that.

Paola: I went to law school and I was one of those people that went to law school fully knowing I would never actually practice private law. I really wanted to go into public service. So I knew from the beginning of law school that I was likely to end up in either government or in some sort of policy field.

I went right from law school to the Massachusetts legislature, and I was on the committee staff, the revenue committee. So I did tax policy for the state. So I'm a huge believer in the fact that there is so much to be done at the state level and at the local level too.

So I totally agree with you, so many of the scholars who come to join our network want to do federal policy, and oftentimes part of what we do is think with them well, is that really the venue that you can have the most impact in given your research given where you live, given windows of opportunity and the case that we often make, if the research says is something that can be applicable to a state context, is that at the state level there's so many openings to be able to inform policy. The door is just so much more open. The legislators, their staffers, policy makers of all types are so much more accessible and they don't have quite as many people beating down their doors to share research.

So the people who do show up are welcomed and a lot of times the policy makers and staffers are so happy to see them. And to give one little piece of my own background, so when I was in the legislature, I cared so much about tax policy. I did, I thought that it was fascinating stuff. I thought that tax policy linked so directly to economic inequality issues and the solution for a lot of those issues could be done through tax policy.

Despite the fact that I cared so much, I had a J.D. I was not an economist, I was not a fiscal sociologist. I cared a lot, but I lacked a body of knowledge that I think would've made my work there so much better. And I also didn't know how to access that knowledge. It never occurred to me that I should go figure out what, like the top 10 academics at the local university you're talking about.

There's so many people who are absolutely brilliant doing this work, but I as a staffer in the relevant committee have no idea how to find these people. So when I learned about the Scholar Strategy Network as a staff person, I was like, this is the answer. And I often think that the work that I do now and the work that this organization does, it's for previous me from 10 years ago.

Robert: Well, it's interesting that the organization was founded by academics looking to get the research out, but now you're running it coming from the government.

What did you bring to the founding academics and what kind of perspective or ideas did you bring that they didn't have?

Paola: Yeah, so interestingly, most of our staff is not academics, and so I'll speak for myself, but I think this is true of most of our staff, is that we have a perspective of what translates, what lands, and how to speak about an issue in a way that is divorced of academic jargon that would likely be better received by a policymaker or a journalist or community organizer.

So whenever I talk to our members, say if someone's preparing to testify, to practice your testimony with me, talk it over with me and I'll be able to point out the moments that are like, I don't understand you. And if I don't understand you, likely whatever legislators listen to you, it's not gonna understand you either.

Robert: I think the jargon is important, but it also must be the framing. What have you learned about what makes people effective in their ability to communicate?

Paola: Sometimes the lessons in my time at SSN that I've learned are the ones that I go back and say, duh, of course. So when we started the organization at the beginning of it, a lot of the work was about translation and dissemination. So exactly this, that I was just talking about, about de-jargoning work and then disseminating it and putting it out into the universe—

Robert: —like a dandelion seed.

Paola: Yeah. Let's see what the wind carries them. And we realized that that was incredibly important and still is, like it's important to put these things into accessible language. But we were missing an essential third piece a few years in, because we worked with some researchers that actually studied this.

It's again, one of those things that when you realize what you're like, so that the essential piece that we were missing was around relationship building, which honestly, more than anything else goes back to organizing principles like community organizing principles. Academics needed to build relationships with the

policy makers and community organizers and journalists that they were ultimately wanting to inform so that then they could become trusted resources of information.

So I often use this analogy. Pretend that you're gonna buy a new car. You might consult some sources of research, right? Like you might look at Kelly Blue Book, you might look at some articles, but odds are you're also gonna ask your friend that has a similar-ish car to what you're thinking of getting. What do they think? Are they an expert in cars? No. But you trust them. That is your one trusted source that you keep going to. And the representative that I worked for when I was in the legislature had two academics in his district who showed up to all his town halls who came to testify in the legislature, who would show up at events that he did.

He would go to those two academics for everything. One was a social movement scholar and the other one was an economist. An economist. He came to them about everything,

Robert: So they got a lot of influence actually.

Paola: They got a lot of influence, but they also were, to their credit, good brokers for others.

They were pretty good, usually about saying, listen, I'm not the person to help you solve this transportation problem.

Robert: Like a little SSN.

Paola: Yeah. And, honestly, I think back to that all the time. These are two people who were trusted sources. My old boss used to know people who were smart and who would guide him to other smart people.

So that basically is what we have learned as an organization about how research informs policymaking that we try and replicate. How do we put academics in those spots?

Robert: Okay. So there's those three pillars. It sounds like the translation of scholarly research into a public forum, the dissemination of it or the publication of it, and distribution and the relationship building so that the people who are positioned to act on it might actually listen and have access to it.

How specifically do you make that work across the programs that SSN runs? It's really scaled up a lot.

Paola: So I'll walk you through the life course. So a scholar joins SSN by doing two pretty straightforward things.

Filling out a profile form, which is a way for them to explain to someone who might drop by our website, who they are as an academic, what they specialize in, how they wanna be known as a public scholar. And then the second piece is writing some form of useful written contribution, so that can be a policy brief that's two pages, that can be an Op-ed that gets published, that can be written testimony that they submit for legislative hearing, and we help them do that writing. But then importantly, we help them figure out who needs to know this. Now that you've written the Op-ed, now that you've written the policy brief, who should know about this?

Let's build that list together. Let's figure out who are the policy makers, who are the community organizers that you are going to then proactively share this piece of writing with to make sure that you introduce yourself as someone who is an academic and knowledgeable, but also absolutely here for engaging and becoming a trusted resource.

And then you repeat that process. So a lot of the relationship building pieces of this are about repetition. You show up one time, you send an email with a resource and an introduction one time and you show up again. So we help people follow through on that and build the types of relationships that put them in those positions of being a trusted resource.

Robert: It's a lot of benefits. You edit people's Op-eds which is a tremendous service. You're developing a database of decision makers and policy influencers in different important municipalities.

Paola: So some of this we develop over time ourselves, but some of it is available in databases that you can get as a nonprofit or you can get as an organization that wants to inform policy. So especially at the federal level, all of this information is available in databases that you can sign up for.

Some federal levels are harder to get. So that's stuff that we have built over time and some of that is through our national teams working with different policy makers, different community organizations, and some of it, and this is still stuff that we're trying to prevent. Some of it is connections that our chapters make over time with their own local policy makers and civic organizations.

So we do our best to try and collect that information so that we have a sense of who we've already, our members have already had touch points with, that we can then keep coming back to to do some of that repetition that I was talking about. It's a long work because there's many, many, many, at some point I knew this, how many legislators there were in the country...it's thousands. It's absolutely thousands.

Robert: Not counting city councils.

Paola: Right. Or school boards, which are local. Not a lot of older people, all of that. So yeah, at some point I knew that number. I don't know it anymore, but we try to build this database of people who we know that we've engaged with and who have proven themselves to care about research in the policymaking process. I think that matters a lot, right? Because there are folks who welcome and are eager, like I was 12 years ago as a state staffer, eager to connect with researchers as one of these instruments in the symphony of trying to figure out what is the right decision that they should make.

Robert: So the grand hope of the symphony, of course, is that everyone claps and you get a lot of reviews and you sell out the season, which in this case, I guess means some bill or some great idea to solve a public problem gets implemented that might not have been implemented were it not for the production of the really solid research on that problem and SSNs assistance and kind of getting it into the hands of the people who needed it.

What are some examples of times when all of the instruments have harmonized properly?

Paola: I love how we're stretching this metaphor and I think it's still working really well. Okay, so I have two really good examples to share with you from our chapter network and some really cool stuff that they've done, one from Alabama and one from Maine.

I'll start with the Alabama story. In Alabama, there was this one particular policy, sometime back a few years back that routinely suspended driver's license for anyone who could not pay a traffic fine on time. So it ended up having the effect of having a lot of low income Alabamians with traffic violations, having to choose between driving to work illegally or losing your job.

So it was a policy that the state had identified as something that was bad but had not identified really how to fix it. So that was the challenge.

Robert: Which is not small in economic inequality and poverty. It's certainly not what some middle class people might seem like, petty and small amounts of money, but it can send you spiraling,

Paola: It can send you absolutely spiraling and then have like add on implications. So back in January, 2022, a member of ours, the leader of our Alabama chapter, Pete Jones, attended a series of SSN workshops that we did. We often do these workshops on how to understand policy making and how to inform policy making, big ground level setting on how to engage in this world.

He let us know that what he learned really inspired him to take that next step of getting involved with a local civic organization. He realized like it doesn't have to be all on me. Actually, it's even better if I work with a local community organization that is already well-versed in the policy area, and well-versed in who the correct players are in the legislature, who is in a position to do something about this.

So the organization he worked with was Alabama AppleSeed. They're also part of a federated network, which is really wonderful, and the two of them together were able to identify that the main concern the legislators had was trying to figure out, what do we do here? How much does it actually cost us as a state to have each person not have a license?

If we do away with the fines, are we gonna lose money as a state? And between Professor Jones and Alabama Appleseed, they were able to figure out that the state was actually losing money by continuing to implement these fines and fees because these folks were not being able to go to work. They're not not buying gas, not paying income tax, not paying sales tax.

So they were able to calculate it to a person, this policy of implementing these fees and fines. Yes, you might be collecting some amount of numbers and fees and fines themselves, but you're still at a loss of \$804 per person.

Robert: So it wasn't like, oh, poor people are being mistreated that won the day in Alabama.

Paola: No, it was the economic argument, and it was something that the folks at Alabama AppleSeed knew, right? They knew that that wasn't gonna be the frame that carried the day, that the economic frame. The economic information was going to be the most helpful, and they just needed someone who could do that economic analysis.

So that was the moment in which an academic could partner with a civic organization and both could leverage their own expertise, right? The academics expertise and skill set, and trying to crunch these numbers and be able to come up

with a persuasive backable piece of information. And then the civic organization with its own expertise, and who are the correct players? What is the correct framing to use?

Robert: That's kind of a fourth pillar really, if you're not just developing the relationships with journalists and academics, but also coupling with NGOs that are running policy campaigns.

Paola: We advise academics that, yes, you can oftentimes go right to the source and absolutely sometimes you should go work directly, work with a decision maker, policy maker, but also working in concert with community organizations can be incredibly powerful, especially if you understand that you each have your own part to play, you each have your area of expertise in trying to make social change happen.

Robert: So what happened in Maine?

Paola: So Maine is a really robust chapter of ours. So two scholars from very different disciplines. One was an engineer and the other one was a political social scientist.

They were very different disciplines, but they had this overlapping interest in PFAS forever chemicals. So they got together, they met through their association with our local chapter and they authored an Op-ed, which our team helped them with that addressed the challenge of what to do about PFAS forever chemicals in the state of Maine.

Our chapter in Maine has a standing relationship with a local newspaper, the Bangor Daily News. And they were able to then easily slot into one of the every other week spots in that local newspaper, which is read by a lot of decision makers in the state. But then the chapter helped those two scholars go one step further and proactively share the Op-ed with the legislators in the relevant committees.

So not just leaving it up to chance that the Op-ed will make its way to the correct eyeballs, but making sure that it did. Then the two authors received a lot of gratitude from legislators across the aisle about how this is a really helpful piece as we think about this challenge. But one legislator in particular, Stacy Brenner, who was at the time chair, the Natural Resources and Environment Committee in the Senate, had just received this Ad Hoc placement to chair a committee that was tasked with deciding what to do with \$60 million that the state had gotten an emergency funding to address this problem and climate.

Robert: There's a lot of EPA money for that.

Paola: There is. Correct. So she was especially thankful to receive this information at exactly that time and to be made aware of two academics who knew a lot about this subject from two very different backgrounds, right. From a more STEM engineering background and from a more social scientist background that she could then bring them in. She asked them, oh, I'd love to meet with you and talk this out further. So that it wasn't just, here's an Op-Ed. That's a very short 700 words that I'm learning from, but let me ask you questions.

They then were able to form this relationship as a trusted resource with this policy maker as she's tackling this problem. So this is something that I know is still ongoing. I don't know what the ultimate conclusion was, but certainly the decision that will be made by this legislator and that committee will be informed by policy, which at the end of the day is our goal. Right? Is that at every level of government? Decisions are informed by good research.

Robert: Two obstacles come to mind. Although this is very promising. One is that, so this is an amazing story in Maine of these two academics who helped move \$60 million to go toward improving the health and safety of their population. But it's not something necessarily in most universities that's built into the tenure and promotion process. You might be better off having published one extra article in a journal that six people had read rather than moving \$60 million.

Do you have thoughts or does SSN have thoughts on either supporting academics who aspire to influence or even pressing universities to reconsider how they conceive of their incentive structure that might facilitate some of this work?

Paola: Have a short term answer and a long term answer. So in the short term, part of why I think we exist as an organization is because there is a group of people in the academy for whom doing this type of work is as essential as breathing. It's people that have a kind of internal motivation. They got into academia because they wanted to not just study, but to solve social problems.

We exist to help those people be able to do this work that they really want to do anyway in a way that takes up less of their time and energy.

So instead of spending hours, days, weeks, trying to figure out, how do I write this piece in a way that will be accessible to the people who I want to inform and how do I find the people that I want to inform. We're here to shortcut a lot of that so that it's not work that's done by an academic who already has so many other things on their plates and so many other incentives that they need to pay attention to.

Robert: Right. You're like the back office staff they don't have.

Paola: Exactly. That's exactly right. So we shortcut it and we also like to give folks baseline skills that once you try it a few times, you get better at it and you figure it out, and it's easier to fold into your work, right? Like some folks who've been with us for a long time don't really come to us anymore for help with editing a piece or figuring out who to talk to because they've figured that stuff out. And they've also figured out how to fold this work into their academic work in a way that does a little bit more double duty. To make it a little bit easier to justify in a tenured promotion file, for example.

So that's my short term answer is like, we shortcut a lot of this. And I think the reason that one of the benefits or reasons that we do that is because I think it's really important that we not lose these folks from the academy.

I really think that having the presence of people who want to not just study, but solve social problems in the academy is incredibly important. So I don't want those scholars to drain out.

And then the more long term thing that I'm thinking about the SSN has thought about is that a lot of academics join an organization when they're early in their careers because they're people who got into the academy because they wanted to engage in this way.

So they joined SSN when they're early in their career. But the longer we exist as an organization, the deeper into their own careers, those scholars will be. And the more likely it is that more and more of them will be in positions of authority and power in their own institutions, that they'll say, of course it is part of my department or my college's mission, that the research we produce here be used for social good, be used to inform public policy in a way that will benefit society and not just the academy.

Robert: And most universities on paper claim that they give people tenure and promotion based on research, teaching, and service. In equal proportion. It's just that in practice at research universities, anyway, teaching is kind of a box to check and, and service really is some paragraphs to kind of throw together but it doesn't necessarily have to be that way. The service segment could be real.

Paola: So here's the thing, as a non-academic. I'm not an academic. I came into the world of the academy through my work at SSN, something that I did not know about and have come to learn is that the service piece of a lot of tenure promotion is service to the academy or service to the institution. And something that I've heard members of ours echo to me is, is that the box where a lot of the public engagement work should sit? Certainly the service category could expand to include not just service to your institution by serving in certain committees or by doing mentorship work, but it could expand to also include helping to change policy in a way that reflects very well on the institution.

But I've also heard some members of our members of SSN argue for there being another category that is about how your research can inform policy.

Robert: Oh, a fourth area. You could call it teaching too. Yeah, absolutely. If you're teaching the public. And also research, like one reason that presumably people weigh publication or that we measure citations, for example, is a measure of influence. So you could also integrate it into all three areas.

Paola: And I know that the measure of influence is something that when I talk to folks who think a lot more than I do about the tenure promotion pieces, that's something that is brought up as a challenge, which is how can you measure the influence you have in an ultimate policy decision? And that's incredibly hard to measure.

So, like we said right in the beginning. This is a symphony. There's lots of things that inform anyone's given policy decision, and sometimes it's really crisp to be able to track the influence that a researcher had in an ultimate decision. So two examples that I gave, I think do the pretty clean line between something that the researcher did that informed the ultimate decision, but it is rarely that simple.

Robert: And it might take years.

Paola: It might take years. Right. When I was in the legislature, my boss used to joke that from a good idea to past public policy, it was about seven years. The legislature was mostly like enshrining growth.

Robert: So another obstacle though, of course, is that people are like trying to dig up and set your tree on fire or throw rocks and pies at your symphony. SSN is kind of predicated on the idea that good ideas and reason debate ought to be able to carry the day. But we live in a period of anti-vax idea metastasis, and lots of people are willing to risk their lives and go to jail to support a fictional election stealing conspiracy.

How do you think of how this work fits into a media and a political landscape that at the moment has been drained in some ways of facts and reasoned debate?

Paola: I'll give you what might be more of like my own personal answer and I think it probably reflects what a lot of folks in our network under that too.

Maybe it's just that I'm a bit of a Pollyanna. I'm like a forever optimist. I believe that there are still so many open doors for engagement. There are so many places in government, in policymaking, in community organizing where people are trying to do good.

There are so many folks in federal, state, local policy that are trying to do good, trying to make good policy happen, and it's just a matter of connecting with those folks and a little bit ignoring the noise.

If you know that there's no hope in you being able to convince someone who's just here to be bombastic, you can still make such good policy happen, and that helps so many people by informing the policy makers and decision makers of Chicago, right? Chicago's the third largest city in the country. So many people live in Chicago, you can have such an impact on so many individual people's lives by finding those open doors, those policy windows, that as a researcher you can still grab onto and take a hold of and move things forward.

Robert: Well, thank you so much for your work in identifying those open doors and helping people push through them. It's a really important contribution and I. Should say, I've become part of this as well in Hawaii.

Paola: We're delighted to have you.

Robert: So thank you so much for joining us.

Paola: I am delighted to be here.

Thank you so much for having me and love the work that you're doing, and I'm so excited to see more.

Lisa: And thanks for listening. For more information on how you can join the network, visit scholars.org

No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide organization connecting journalists, policymakers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy.

And the producers of our show are Wendy Chow, our newest member, and we're so excited to have her producing today's episode with Dominik Doemer, our audio engineer is Peter Linnane, and if you liked the show, please subscribe and rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your shows. You can give us feedback on X, formerly known as Twitter, @NoJargonPodcast, or at our email address, nojargon@scholars.org.