

America's Policy Problem

America faces many pressing public challenges. The nation needs sound policies to meet them. From Washington to state capitals to city halls, public debates and public policy are rarely informed by the best research and evidence. Too often, debates are not even grounded in facts.

The Promise of America's Universities

America's universities are the best in the world. They employ 1.5 million professors and researchers. But, with notable exceptions, the best scholars are seldom involved in public policy debates.

The Scholars Strategy Network links scholars to public policy debates

The Scholars Strategy Network seeks to improve public policy and strengthen democracy by organizing scholars working in America's colleges and universities, and connecting scholars and their research to policymakers, citizens associations, and the media. SSN is:

Creating ideas – SSN members are finding solutions based on rigorous analysis to the most pressing problems facing our nation.

Spreading ideas – We make what we are learning available to everyone, and connect scholars to policymakers and citizens, from the White House to local city halls.

Media and communications – SSN helps scholars use television, radio, print, and online media to bring facts, evidence, research, and new policy ideas to the public.

Cost efficient – Instead of paying for costly full-time staff researchers, SSN is organizing hundreds of volunteer university scholars to break their knowledge free from limited academic circles.

Fifty states – SSN scholars have more credibility than out-of-state experts in state and local debates because they live there.

Developing leaders – SSN helps young scholars become powerful long-term players in public life.

“If you are interested in substance, on virtually any topic under the political sun by America's leading academics, you should be visiting SSN regularly.”

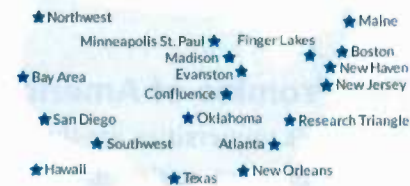
– Michael Tomasky,
The Daily Beast,
September 24, 2013

Research people can easily access

Members write two-page briefs that use vivid, everyday language to explain research findings or summarize what is known about an important topic. With a fast-growing library of over 500 briefs, SSN's website – named the “Best Politics Website” in 2012 by the Interactive Media Council – helps reporters, policymakers, staffers, and civic advocates find innovative research and connect to scholars willing to do consultations and public presentations.

500+ members in 43 states – and growing fast

Since October 2011, 538 scholars have joined the network, in 165 universities located in 43 states. There are 19 chapters across the country.



Impact through the media

Reporters and editors are eager to feature scholars in the news – SSN helps scholars make the most of those appearances. Members have been cited in the news at least 1,400 times over the past year. National staff help scholars prepare for interviews and edit and pitch OpEds, which have been featured in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *CNN.com*, *Salon*, *Talking Points Memo*, and dozens of regional papers and other sites.

Accomplished and committed leadership

SSN Director **Theda Skocpol**, former Dean of Harvard's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, has served as president of the American Political Science Association and been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the National Academy of Sciences. Other steering committee members include **Jacob Hacker**, Stanley B. Resor Professor of Political Science and Director of the Institution for Social and Policy Studies, Yale University; **Lawrence Jacobs**, Walter F. and Joan Mondale Professor and Director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance, Humphrey School, University of Minnesota; **Suzanne Mettler**, Clinton Rossiter Professor of American Institutions, Cornell University; and philanthropists **Robert Bowditch** and **David desJardins**. More than three dozen additional scholars serve as co-leaders of SSN's regional chapters and topical working groups.

MEMBERSHIP IN THE SCHOLARS STRATEGY NETWORK

What Does It Entail?

The Scholars Strategy Network (SSN) welcomes scholars who are committed to engaging the public beyond the university in order to advance effective and democratically sustainable progressive solutions to the major challenges America faces – including fostering jobs and vibrant economic growth; advancing health care reform at the national and state levels; improving environmental, educational, and social policies; reforming immigration; and revitalizing democratic government and citizenship. SSN is not a beltway-focused think tank; members remain at their “day jobs” in colleges and universities across the United States and are attuned to the concerns of their communities and regions. SSN Members draw on the best research and ideas, not only to pinpoint relevant facts and findings but also to formulate promising policy approaches and articulate democratically sustainable political strategies for realizing them. Through outreach to their fellow citizens, community leaders and government officials at the regional and national levels, SSNers take on the formidable challenge of engaging and shaping public opinion and policymaking.

Most SSNers join a regional network where Members and affiliates take part in recurrent meetings and events, but individual scholars can also join SSN apart from a regional group. Becoming an SSN Member is a meaningful commitment. More than a debating society, SSN enables research-oriented scholars to help shape effective, democratically sustainable responses to pressing public challenges. Achieving this goal depends on the active engagement of all Members and requires building bridges to policymakers and civic leaders. In return for active commitment, SSN offers Members opportunities to reach interested interlocutors in the policymaking community and in civic groups and the media. Each Member commits to write, speak, and join forces with others. In return, each Member can expect support for injecting important findings and ideas into the public domain, as well as new opportunities to influence public policy and debates. Here is how the two-way relationship works:

What Members Can Expect from SSN

Beyond access to SSN activities, each Member will be featured on the SSN website with a profile that includes a picture and a description of those areas of his or her scholarly expertise and civic involvements that contribute to the SSN mission. Using these Member profiles, SSN will help each scholar find audiences beyond the academy for key policy insights -- by making Members’ ideas and potential contributions accessible to the media, and by sharing succinct encapsulations with policymakers and their staffs and with civic leaders and political advocates. SSN will feature Members’ ideas and findings in SSN publications, support Members in placing OpEds, and serve as a gateway for invitations to speak at relevant civil society forums and consult with the press and public officials. Further, SSN staff will provide editorial and graphics support to Members as they reformulate their research findings and ideas for non-academic audiences. As a Member develops accessible written products and becomes known through SSN outreach activities, he or she can expect invitations to take part in policy briefings, workshops, and discussions.

What Each Member Commits to Do

Upon joining, each Member will provide information for his or her web profile, and commit to keeping it updated in cooperation with SSN staff. Each new Member will also be invited to draft a short *Key Findings* brief encapsulating central ideas and findings from an appropriate (previous or current) scholarly publication he or she would like SSN to feature.

Each year, a Member commits to continue to contribute in one or more ways:

- *Creating written products:* At least once a year, SSN Members prepare a Strategy Brief or a Basic Facts or Key Findings summary. SSN provides templates for each of these presentations. All SSN written products are engagingly written in vivid, everyday English -- geared not to impress other academics but to pique the interest of and be useful to policymakers and civic and political leaders who regularly speak with everyday Americans. Such publications are at the core of SSN's mission and outreach activities.
- *Educating and responding to policymakers and public leaders:* Written products may serve as an entrée, yet policymakers and leaders of publicly engaged groups will often want to discuss ideas and findings with relevant SSN experts – and ask for further information that meets their needs. SSN will offer expenses-paid opportunities for Members to speak and take part in group sessions.
- *Reaching out through the media:* SSN will offer support to Members who can contribute by writing and placing OpEds and blog postings and by discussing issues with interested reporters.
- *Taking part in regional network activities and membership recruitment:* Members can participate regularly in regional networks and help to develop regional events and outreach. Members can also pitch in by reaching out to potential new Members and interested people in the media, public office, and civic life.

How to Apply – and Alternative Ways to Be Involved

University-based scholars considering SSN membership should consult the SSN website at www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org for further information. For answers to questions and for information on how to apply, contact SSN Director of Member Relations Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich at eghediehrlich@fas.harvard.edu.

The status of *SSN Affiliate* is available to people outside the academy and to college and university scholars who are interested in SSN but as yet unsure if they want to commit to full membership. Affiliates hear about and attend SSN events and discussions. SSN regional groups typically have numerous active participants from government, nonprofits, think tanks, foundations, political groups, and the media. In addition, university-based researchers, professors, and graduate students become *SSN Affiliates* to explore SSN activities and learn more about the opportunities open to full members.

How to Write a Two-Page SSN Brief

SSN Briefs are tools for scholars to introduce ourselves and share the highlights of our research with fellow citizens, members of the media, and policymakers in ways they can immediately understand and use. Briefs do not “dumb things down,” but they are never written in abstract or insider language. Instead they use clear, everyday language, free from jargon.

There are two main types of SSN briefs: Key Findings and Basic Facts. Both are no more than two pages long. Key Findings briefs present the core ideas and findings of a book or article, a doctoral dissertation, or a paper presented at a professional conference. Basic Facts briefs draw on a scholar’s own work plus the work of others to highlight the most important things civic leaders and members of the public need to know about an important topic. Oftentimes, they include specific policy recommendations.

Briefs are fun to write once you get the hang of it. The first step is to submit a rough draft of up to two and a half single-spaced pages to the SSN office. A typical finished brief usually has around 950 words; for a first draft, we request 1000 to 1200 words. If you have a particularly important chart or illustration, a smaller word count may be appropriate.

Here are steps you can take to make your draft effective and speed the editorial process:

1. Start with SSN’s website, where you can look at SSN briefs that cover topics or publications similar to yours. Check out titles, language and examples, subheads and bullets. Imitation of good examples is the best way to learn any new format.
2. If you work from an academic publication, realize that you will be writing in a different language. Insider jargon, abstract concepts, or ideological terminology – none of that will work. Think instead how you would talk with a neighbor or your Aunt at Thanksgiving Dinner. You have to catch their attention, say why the subject matters, and spell things out step by step. You can indicate how you did your research, but very briefly.
3. Each brief needs an opening paragraph to draw in readers and signal where you are headed. Beyond that, you have two or three subsections, each with a clear title. You can use bullets to list examples or give specifics, but don’t over-do it.
4. Include specific policy suggestions related to your argument, if appropriate. Now that the reader understands your argument, what can he/she do about it?
5. If necessary, write the argument in scholarly terms and then spend time translating each part into everyday language. Use active, short sentences, short paragraphs, specific examples, and common-sense ways of saying things.

6. Prune excessive out wordiness. Scholars often repeat things for precision, but that is not necessary in a brief.
7. Come up with a title, perhaps a question or a simple declaration, that vividly captures the essence of your argument. Like a headline, a good title fits on one line.