



New Member Spotlight: Niki vonLockette Builds Relationships at White House Event

JULY 31, 2023

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The core of the Scholars Strategy Network's mission is helping researchers connect and build relationships with policymakers, civic leaders, and the media to improve policy and strengthen democracy. Relationships are crucial for researchers to have a sustained impact and position their research to be utilized when it matters most. And one of SSN's newest members, Professor Niki vonLockette, took that goal to heart when she joined the network earlier this year.

As an Associate Professor of Public Policy and African American Studies at Pennsylvania State University, vonLockette studies the impact of residential segregation on unemployment and wages for Blacks and Latinos in metropolitan areas, as well as the effects of workplace occupational segregation on worker attitudes. Given the clear policy relevance of her research, she has sporadically connected with policymakers and civic leaders working on these issues throughout the years. But it was the process of joining the Scholars Strategy Network that helped her take these connections to new heights.

Earlier this year, vonLockette attended one of SSN's monthly member workshops, this one focused on teaching scholars how to maximize their outreach to policymakers and civic leaders in order to build relationships for the long run.

"SSN's workshop was really valuable to me in that it concretized the process of building these relationships, breaking it all down into small tasks," said vonLockette. "Getting my work out felt like this huge daunting task, but I was truly impressed with the way in which SSN transforms that very amorphous, intimidating process into clear, actionable steps in a way that I would never have imagined."

Following the workshop, vonLockette quickly utilized these learnings, reaching back out to contacts she had been in touch with years earlier, but hadn't heard from since. One person she knew she wanted to reconnect with was a fellow researcher at Penn State who was working to organize an event with the White House for their [Year of Evidence for Action](#), an initiative to make evidence, data, and science central at the highest levels of federal decision making. Though most attendees would be virtual, vonLockette was in DC at the time, and as a result of her outreach spent a day at the White House executive building attending the event. Among a small group of several dozen attendees, she had the chance to meet and get to know representatives from the White House, federal agencies, DC think tanks, and fellow policy-oriented academics.

"A big portion of the event was virtual, but I was the only faculty member from Penn State who wasn't already organizing the program who was there in person. It was a really great opportunity to have these in-depth conversations with people I would normally never get the chance to speak with," said vonLockette.

To complete her SSN membership application, vonLockette next turned her attention to writing a policy brief about her research. After attending one of SSN's writing sessions, vonLockette published her SSN brief, "

[Understanding Systemic Discrimination to Address Persistent Inequality](#)” that highlights her ongoing, expanded research into systemic discrimination as a root cause for inequality in America, as well as a systems approach to combating this discrimination. She is now using the brief to reach back out to contacts she met at the White House and further build her relationships. As a result, she’s already starting to work with the Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative at Penn State on “dream initiatives” related to her work.

Reflecting on the value of having clear tools to build relationships, vonLockette shared, “I was waiting for those people to contact me and they weren't going to. You know this is something particularly that women do and we know some people of color do. It’s this idea that we don't belong here, this imposter syndrome. And our work is marginalized within the academy anyway, so it kind of confirms our worst fears...But the workshop said, just reach back out to them. Have you asked those people if they want to reconnect? And that was really helpful to hear and has led to some great opportunities.”

Learn more about SSN membership, including the monthly member workshops and writing sessions, at scholars.org/membership.

NIKI VONLOCKETTE

Pennsylvania State University



VonLockette's work examines the impact of residential segregation on unemployment and wages for Blacks and Latinos in metropolitan areas. She has served as consultant for the U.S. Departments of Labor and Commerce and the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. She has contributed to the New York Times debates on low-wage workers.