



Chapter Spotlight: Alabama SSN Brings Scholars and Advocacy Groups into One Room

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The recipients of Scholars Strategy Network's inaugural [Outstanding Chapter Award](#) have many accomplishments to be proud of. Over the past five years, they have initiated a host of successful projects, captured the attention of academics and stakeholders alike, and as was highlighted [in a previous spotlight](#), even helped pave the way toward state policy change. And it's precisely their skill of bringing researchers, policy actors, and civic leaders into the same space that is currently serving as a successful model for their future projects.



Peter Jones

In early 2022, Alabama SSN co-leader [Peter Jones](#) and civic organization [Alabama Appleseed](#) led a panel discussion, structured as a Q&A, for a room full of researchers. The goal was to bring together this nonprofit group from the local area to discuss problems facing their community (such as racial and economic injustice) and give academics the space to learn how they could support the efforts of nonprofits to combat those problems. Jones, along with co-leader [Peggy R. Biga](#), coined the event their "Policy Palooza" – a name which, according to Jones, was supposed to be temporary.

"That's the worst name in the world to me," Jones remarked with a hearty laugh. "I thought we would think of a better name later."

Instead, the name not only stuck – but was then followed by a Policy Palooza 2.0 in December of 2022. Making use of their partnership with the Lister Hill Center for Health Policy at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, the chapter leaders followed the same model of bringing together researchers, nonprofit groups, and local policymakers to brainstorm and workshop best ways to collaborate. This time the conversation centered on key health policy issues in need of academic support, and what data sets could help address each issue.

Biga found this targeted approach immensely useful. "Even though it was still open discussion and without a real set agenda, there was at least something that everyone knew they were bringing to the table and they had time to think about it...We were able to come up with a good quality list of ideas, and from there we drew interest from scholars to set up partnerships [with the nonprofits] and ended up with three applications."

Alabama SSN accepted two of those applications, which have now turned into chapter-funded projects.

One of those projects is led by [Dr. Susan Caplow](#) (University of Montevallo) who focuses on environmental sustainability through a health lens. “She spent over an entire semester driving around the state of Alabama meeting with environmental advocacy groups to build a network of advocates who can discuss sustainable energy needs across the state,” Biga shared. And while Dr. Caplow is building a network as part of her project, Biga pointed out that it will tie into their own relationship building as well. “It fits our chapter goals of increasing the network and building more partnerships with stakeholders.”



Peggy Biga

The other applicant accepted is [Dr. April Jones](#) (Tuskegee University) whose work focuses on health disparities. The project being funded is in fact led by undergraduate students working with mental health and substance abuse support networks, focusing on Black women's birthing and death rates. “What they’re doing is building a community outreach project that is connecting support services for wellness education for Black mothers, as well as mental health support and substance abuse support,” Biga said.

According to Jones, Lister Hill will be convening the two groups soon to provide them the chance to do a readout and share the details of their projects. Local policymakers, advocacy groups, as well as other academics, will all be encouraged to attend. “The goal is really twofold; one is to actually share what they found, but two, is to show the model and let other folks know, we did this for X dollars, and these are the outcomes,” Jones explained.



Maura Mills

Jones, Biga, and newer chapter co-leader [Maura Mills](#) shared that based on the experiences they've had thus far, they are open to considering a Policy Palooza 3.0 and according to Biga, would again select a specific topic to focus on while still letting conversations between scholars and stakeholders remain unstructured.

And while Jones may still not be a fan of the name, he admitted that “Palooza” is actually fitting, for what these events are. “It really is like a music festival of sorts,” he said. “It’s this celebration of a bunch of different people in one room.”

Learn more about the Alabama chapter [here](#).