



## Chapter Spotlight: Hawaii SSN Fosters Collaboration between Researchers and State Leaders

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The Hawaii SSN Chapter has developed novel ways to draw university researchers and policymakers into dialogue with each other, with an eye toward bringing actionable ideas into policy conversations with those positioned to act on them and a focus on learning from each other.

This month, we talked with [Robert Perkinson](#), who co-leads the Hawaii SSN chapter with sociologist [Krysia Mossakowski](#). Perkinson, a political and social historian and professor of American Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, has dedicated his career to driving social change and influencing public policy. His journey from a passionate college activist to an academic and public scholar has been marked by a commitment to altering conversations and making tangible impacts. Perkinson discussed the chapter's innovative approaches to engaging with policymakers and his vision for the future of the Hawaii SSN chapter. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

### Q&A with Hawaii SSN chapter co-leader Robert Perkinson

#### What inspired you to become a publicly engaged scholar and get involved with Hawaii SSN?

That's a very interesting question. I'm now old enough that I'm starting to think of my life in terms of chapters. I realize what I've always been trying to do is find effective ways to make social change. I tried to do that as a kind of screaming anarchist in college. I tried to do it as an academic, aspiring to affect public policy conversations. The book I wrote about racism and mass incarceration [*Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire*] was an experiment in trying to alter the conversation. Hawaii is very small and politicians are accessible. It's relatively easy to get their ear. I run the University of Hawaii's main speaker series, and I have similar aspirations for that. The mission is to bring good, actionable, viable ideas into policy conversations and plant them with people who are best positioned to act on those ideas.



*Lt. Governor Sylvia Luke (center left) joins Robert Perkinson (center right) and colleagues for a Better Tomorrow Series public forum on child welfare.*

**What events have you coordinated while wearing these two hats? How has that worked, and how do you see that going forward?**

The university here has the Better Tomorrow Speaker Series, which spans fields from anthropology to zoology. We have funding from the largest endowment in the state and the Hawaii Community Foundation. We put on various events, from policy briefings to public lectures and podcasts. We always look for places with policy relevance and work together with SSN to bring in members and local experts. We try to connect all those groups with policymakers. It's been a synergistic relationship, and we've also started running more singularly SSN events with members of the legislature.

**What stands out to you from those events?**

They are proving to be effective moves in a long game. We've tried to set up forums with legislators to be low-pressure and untethered from specific legislation, making everyone less defensive. For example, we had a criminal justice meeting with heads of the judiciary and corrections committees after major bills were decided, focusing on learning rather than lobbying. Scholars often have great ideas but need to understand the political process better, and legislators can learn from scholars' research. We're trying to establish a broader and richer network of connections between the university and the legislature.

## What is the structure of these forums?

First, we get the two relevant committee chairs to sign on, which makes it easier to get their colleagues to attend. We send a local student to the Capitol with printed invitations, which has been effective. We organize these forums at the Hawaii State Art Museum, which is right across the street from the Capitol, it's a seven-minute walk for legislators and their staff, and that's made a huge difference. We get twice the number of people attending with that proximity. The director of the art gallery is more than happy to play host. She might walk them through a new exhibition, so she gets to show off her museum. We get to show that two separate state agencies are playing nice with each other and using state resources cooperatively.



*Hawaii-SSN policy briefing on criminal justice and public safety*

At the forums, we gave everybody a card when they walked in. Everybody was supposed to answer three questions, like what's your big vision, what do you think is a big problem, and what's one low-hanging piece of fruit that could be implemented legislatively that would make a difference? We divided people into tables and had lawmakers and scholars discuss the questions. It worked pretty well; I think it got people talking.

## **You've tried various techniques for getting policymakers in the room. How did you build those relationships?**

Hawaii is a small state, so it's not that hard to form relationships. In yet another chapter in my restless life, I was in charge of Hawaii's bid for the Obama Presidential Library, head to head with Chicago. We were trying to persuade Obama and his people to build two at once, like locate his international and environmental programs here and social issues and democracy work in Chicago. In the process of running Hawaii's bid, I got to know the governor and a lot of legislators so that made it easier to pivot into this work.

Many scholars in our SSN chapter also have personal relationships with legislators. Over time, you get to know a lot of people, including former students who become legislators. I have a student who's running right now. A teacher I used to work with on high school curriculum is in the legislature now; she's the chair of higher ed. And there's a surfing buddy who became the head of public safety.

The new legislator reception came out of some frustration when politicians express support for a bill you're working on but then it dies mysteriously without comment. So the idea was to try to start building relationships with legislators when their experience in the legislature is still in formation. We convened an all-star team of university scholars who are most engaged already in the policy process. And then we invited all the new legislators to come to a dinner at the art museum with Argentine wine and Argentine empanadas. Almost all of them came. Everybody just chatted and said what they were hoping to accomplish. The scholars focused on what they hoped would come out of their research, and the legislators said what they would like to focus on in the coming session. And it was just to try to get people to know each other.



*UH-SSN reception for new legislators, February 20, 2024*

Now that the legislative session is over, the new legislators came back for a tour of the university. We took them to various places, including places they fund, such as a glass-blowing studio and a lab where they're building satellite parts.

**What are you looking at for the future?**

We're experimenting with different approaches to show academics that engagement is worth their time even though the tenure academic structure doesn't reward legislative engagement.

And the relationship with academics has to be valuable enough to the legislators that they want to attend. It's challenging but promising. The third part is we want to actually show results. It's an ongoing experiment, and we're trying a lot of things to make a difference.

A lot of these things we couldn't do without SSN. It was really cool to go to the [SSN national convening](#) and hear about other ideas and experiments people are trying. That gave me a lot of new ideas to think about.