



Chapter Spotlight: Oklahoma SSN Brings Public Scholarship to Local Politics

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[Andrea Benjamin](#) (University of Oklahoma) and [Emily Stacey](#) (Rose State College) have long been deeply engaged in local politics, whether by serving on community boards or bringing policymakers into their classrooms. Now, as chapter leaders of [Oklahoma SSN](#), they are channeling that experience into building a network that helps scholars actively inform local political conversations. Through events like Advocacy Day and mayoral debates, they are creating spaces where research and civic engagement intersect—both on and off campus—empowering their communities to navigate political processes and push for meaningful change. With another [mayoral debate](#) scheduled for the end of March, Andrea and Emily spoke with SSN about their work organizing these events and the lessons they've learned along the way. The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Q&A

What has been your personal journey towards public scholarship?

Emily: I was a capitol reporter for about six years while I completed my masters and got into my PhD program. I made a lot of my connections then, to the state capitol and specifically to the Oklahoma Press Corps, that have certainly served me well through my career, helping me to develop my civic engagement and advocacy goals, and now also the work that we're now doing with Scholars Strategy Network.

I also host and coordinate all of our programs in relation to political science at my school and one of the things that I'm most proud of is the creation of Advocacy Day. In partnership with our Office of Student Engagement, we pull together a variety of stakeholders: legislators, the press, nonprofits, and advocacy groups. We make sure that it's bipartisan and we bring in folks to come talk to our students about how they can best advocate for themselves and use their voices.

Arturo Sandoval, one of our Gen Z state representatives, he was elected when he was 23 and he just turned 25, is usually a mainstay. He finished his engineering degree at Oklahoma University just this past year. So while he's been an active legislator, he's also been an active college student and he plays such an aspirational

role for my students in terms of what's possible.

Brining civic engagement to the students is really important and that bleeds into what we're trying to do at SSN. We want to make sure it's not just students and campus communities but the wider community. We want to engage them and want to make sure that they understand that they have resources, that they have a voice and, in a democracy, that they're the foundation.



Professor Andrea Benjamin, University of Oklahoma

Andrea: For me, within the first year after I moved to Oklahoma, I started to work with a coalition of community stakeholders to bring back the Human Rights Commission in Oklahoma City. We spent 25 months working on that. I learned more than I ever want to know about actual politics, and in many ways I feel like I'm still recovering from it. It was probably one of the hardest things I've ever done and participated in just because there was a lot of pushback against it. But I was thankful that there were so many community members that wanted to go on the journey with us and that we stuck it out, so I'm proud of that.

And I would say it definitely is related to my research in the sense of what do local politics look like? How do we engage with them? And so, even as I helped back a board, I also reviewed a book that will be forthcoming about how boards are not that great and that they don't do anything.

Aside from that, very similar to Dr. Stacey, the other piece I really try to engage in is bringing what I can to the students. I also have contacted Representative Arturo for different things. I taught a class and was like, "Hey, do you want to get some good policy memos from my kids? You can come talk to them and decide on the topic together." I believe his were about education, and I also worked with Senator Young to do some policy memos about the minimum wage. Whenever possible, I try to have outside speakers to give my students this real world experience where they can know that they do have a voice and that people are willing to listen to them.

I've also been serving on various boards, serving on Sally's List for five years, serving on the board of Northeast Oklahoma City Renaissance for almost five years. My term with ACLU is up this year. So really just trying to think about the ways that we as experts can plug into the community.

Building on your own experiences and connections, you've hosted a number of events through Oklahoma SSN over the past year to engage in local politics. What are some of the highlights from these events?

Andrea: Our original conception was to try to just get at what goes on in local politics. We know people don't participate at the same level, and yet we know how important it is. Having attended these events, it's very clear that people actually don't know what city council members or county commissioners do. You could tell by the types of questions that either the actual event organizers asked or just audience members, and it was very disheartening and frustrating at a certain point.

So we also had an event where people could come and say: This is what my job actually is, this is what I actually do day to day. We had a city council member talk about what it means to run for the city council. We had a school board member talk about being on the school board. We generally explained how a county commission works because there weren't any commissioners that could come. Multiple people from Sally's List talked, and we had a Sally's List board member who also works at ACLU give a legislative preview because the legislature was going start in the next week or two, just to give a sense of what bills people should be paying attention to.

And then there was just a general encouragement that while national and state politics might not be everything that you want it to be, that there are places, particularly in the local sector, where you still have control and agency to engage.



Emily: We have also partnered with NonDoc, one of our independent media outlets here in the state of Oklahoma. We hosted a series of three mayoral debates in our two larger metro areas, Edmond and Norman.

Professor Emily Stacey, Rose State College

The Edmond area just lost its local media, the Edmond Sun, and NonDoc has really filled that void in providing them with city council information, things that are going on right in their neighborhood. And although Norman has a lot more money and still has a local publication, it did fill a void there too because the Norman Transcript really didn't want to get involved in a pretty contentious mayoral race.

I was at the Norman debate and it was incredibly well attended. I think it really made a big difference honestly in the turnout for the election. A lot of us expected for there to be a runoff and instead the more progressive candidate beat the incumbent handily. I can't help but think that because there was more information readily available and people were able to engage with the candidates directly, there was real political change and people paid attention and turned out the vote.

We may find some opportunities to do more of those debates in the future. Oklahoma has an obscene amount of elections so there's opportunity. Getting folks engaged on things that are often overlooked, like their very local municipal elections, is a big part of where Andrea and I would like to see our participation in SSN go.

What are the lessons you've learned in the process of organizing these events?

Andrea: We've seen chapters do a lot at the state level, with their state legislatures. I think that there are more opportunities to work at the local level, with an amenable city council, or on bipartisan or at least nonpartisan basis. There are a lot of groups that are doing local work and they need our expertise and maybe they don't even know that we exist. A lot of scholars do research on local issues, so we're trying to draw those connections.

And obviously a lot of this happens because of relationships. Some of my personal relationships, like my former city council member who's now a state senator. When there have been things that she needed, I would volunteer because I know how to do that or I can get that information to her, no problem. Being responsive, also with local organizations who sometimes need someone to just come talk on a panel about things, provides a real opportunity to build a relationship.

There are a lot of these policies where we talk about them as national things, like immigration policy, but when they're implemented or enforced, it is at the local level. So building those relationships and thinking about if there are some municipalities, counties, or local entities that could use our expertise, that is something that SSN chapters can do.

Emily: Andrea is incredibly right and I think that a lot of people are finding hope at the local level. That's really the important thing. Even at the state level where we have connections, it's hard to feel like we can affect that

change all the time. So at the local level, it provides that hope that I think is missing from wider politics right now. And we just need to continue to plug away and identify the organizations that already exist and are doing the work where we can fit in effectively to make change where we can. Besides that, a lot of what Andrea and I both are doing is bringing this into the classroom every day with our students.