



Chapter Spotlight: Elizabeth Aranda on Leading Florida SSN and Supporting Immigration Scholars

MAY 13, 2025

Wendy Chow

Over the past few years, the [Florida SSN chapter](#) has become a vital hub for scholars navigating a challenging political climate—especially when it comes to immigration policy and attacks on higher education and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Under the leadership of [Elizabeth Aranda](#) and [Heide Castañeda](#) (both with the University of South Florida), the chapter has created spaces for researchers to connect, share strategies, and support one another in public engagement. In this Q&A, Aranda reflects on how the chapter has responded to recent legislative threats, supported scholars' professional growth, and deepened its impact through collaboration—both within Florida and across the country. The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Q&A with Elizabeth Aranda

What first drew you to study immigration and migrant well-being?

When I was a senior in college, California passed Proposition 187, which would have taken away all public benefits—including schooling—from undocumented immigrants and their children. I couldn't understand how people could support something like that. Around the same time, I was applying to graduate programs, and that's when I decided I wanted to research this topic. I started by studying Puerto Ricans because I'm Puerto Rican and wanted to understand that migration experience. But my research has always run parallel to the experiences of people without citizenship and the challenges they face in maintaining their well-being.

How did that lead to you becoming a chapter leader at SSN?

It's all connected to my concern about the cruelty I see in immigration policies. When Trump was first elected, I wanted my work to have more public impact. I was researching DACA recipients at the time and already knew Heide Castañeda, who's now co-leader with me. She had joined the Scholar Strategy Network and encouraged me to get involved. That's when I wrote my first policy brief, and within a year or two, I became a co-leader with Heide.

You and [Elizabeth Vaquera](#) co-founded the [Im/migrant Well-being Scholar Collaborative](#). What were you hoping to build?

We both saw a lot of valuable research showing how policy shapes immigrant experiences—sometimes supporting integration and well-being, other times excluding immigrants and causing real harm. But that research often wasn't reaching policymakers. We felt there was a gap between scholars and decision-makers. Inspired by SSN's model, we wanted to create a space specifically for immigration scholars to help translate their work for policymakers and build those connections.

We reached out to scholars across disciplines, separate from SSN, hoping to find people who wanted to do public-facing work but didn't know how. SSN gave me the tools to make that kind of translation possible, and we wanted to offer the same support to others.

How has your connection with SSN supported the work of the collaborative?

Last year, we partnered with SSN to offer trainings for members and prospective members. We held five sessions, and about 140 people attended. The trainings covered how to write policy briefs, work with media, and engage with nonprofits and advocacy spaces. We're doing parallel work to SSN—building our own relationships with lawmakers and helping our members get their research in front of those policymakers. Having Elizabeth Vaquera based in D.C. has helped us form connections with congressional offices and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. When a member has a relevant policy brief, we circulate it to the right offices and help facilitate meetings.

We also held a virtual event called [At the Border and Beyond Briefing](#). We had nonprofits in attendance, along with some legislative aides from Congressional offices. A member of Congress actually introduced the briefing, which was great. We had strong turnout—over a 100 people tuned in. We also provided materials to support the briefing, like a media toolkit and one-pagers that summarized the key points and policy implications of the papers we presented. We highlighted findings from three papers. But we continue to talk about: how do we measure the actual effect this work is having? Given the current political environment, unfortunately I don't think we're going to see many immediate or concrete outcomes.



One panel at the February conference included (from left) Jane Lilly Lopez, Tamara Luque Black, Andrea Gómez-Cervantes, Lisa Martinez, and Elizabeth Aranda.

In February, the collaborative and Florida SSN co-hosted a conference in St. Petersburg. What were the goals of that gathering?

The conference was really a space to bring together scholars from across the country who are doing cutting-edge research on how immigration policies and practices are affecting immigrant well-being. The goals were really multifaceted.

One key goal was to share that research with the local community—especially people working in nonprofit organizations and service agencies—so they could better understand the research behind the issues they're seeing in their day-to-day work with clients. So part of it was about bringing that knowledge to the Tampa Bay community. Our audience included service providers, students, and faculty, but I'd say it was primarily service providers.

Another goal centered on the second day of the conference, which wasn't public-facing. It was a training specifically for the scholars who had presented papers—16 papers in total. About 20 authors and co-authors participated. The idea was to provide them with a starting point for doing more publicly engaged work and engaging with policymakers. We had sessions on things like how to create a one-pager, so that by the time they left, they had tools they could use moving forward. And if they wanted to continue that work, they could partner with us and receive additional support.



Panelists Maria Barbero, Stephanie Potochnick, Camille Collins Lovell, and Elizabeth Vaquera listen to speaker Frania Mendoza Lua.

A third goal was to help scholars not just engage publicly but also meet the professional milestones of academia. A lot of early-career researchers put off public-facing work because they need to get a job, earn tenure, or get promoted. So we wanted to offer a way for them to do both. In both years we've held this conference, we've been able to publish selected papers in peer-reviewed journals. That way, it's not just another conference presentation or training—it's also a potential for publication. Right now, we're editing a special issue that will come out of this conference.

And one thing we've noticed is that when we put out the call for papers, we receive a lot of submissions from early-career scholars and people from underrepresented groups—often from the very communities they're researching. That wasn't something we planned for initially, but it's become a powerful part of what the conference offers: not just a platform for public engagement, but also a support system for moving through the academic pipeline.

What kind of feedback did you get from the conference?

The feedback we've received has been really positive. One of the main themes that came through was that the conference came at just the right time for many of the participants. A lot of them shared that they'd been feeling a bit aimless—not quite sure where to focus their energy or how to move forward with their research given the political climate. The conference helped give them direction.

It also provided an opportunity to connect with other like-minded scholars doing similar work, which seemed to be really energizing. There was this sense of mutual encouragement—of people feeling reconnected to their purpose through the support of others in the room. And I think the group really did network and build those connections. Even though it's just two days, when you spend that kind of focused time together, it can lead to lasting professional relationships. That's something we consistently heard in the feedback—how valuable those connections were.

What's next for the Im/migrant Well-Being Scholar Collaborative and for Florida SSN?

For the collaborative, I think we're in a period of regrouping—trying to figure out how we can make a difference over the next four years. We may be at a bit of a pivot point, so this summer will be important for helping us define our goals.

For Florida SSN, we've already been dealing with the kinds of anti-DEI legislation and policies that the rest of the country is just now starting to face. This has been going on here for two or three years. One thing we've done each fall is host an event to update members on what's happening with legislation in Florida and what's being done to push back. We've had participants from the ACLU, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, unions, and legal counsel. These conversations help our members understand the landscape and figure out how to respond.

It's important to recognize that things aren't getting better—they're getting worse. So we want to keep offering a space where Florida members can process what they're experiencing. For example, we're looking for guidance on how we can support international students who are part of our membership.

A lot of us are feeling disoriented by everything that's happened since January, and the ongoing wave of harmful legislation at the state level. The state is now asking for information about our publications and grant records—it feels like an intimidation tactic. So one of our main goals is to make sure people don't feel isolated. We want to create a space where scholars can connect and feel less alone. That's a role I really hope Florida SSN continues to play.