



Member Spotlight: Joe Soss Builds Policy Relationships Using His Book

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For political scientist [Joe Soss](#), public engagement starts long before a scholar shares a research finding. It begins with building relationships.

Soss, the Cowles Chair for the Study of Public Service at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, recently spoke about his approach in a Scholar Strategy Network virtual event, "Using Your Book as a Platform for Public Engagement." His new book, [Legal Plunder: The Predatory Dimensions of Criminal Justice](#), co-authored with [Joshua Page](#), examines how fines, fees, forfeitures, and related practices can funnel money out of low-income communities by turning parts of the criminal legal system into a source of revenue for law enforcement, local governments, and corporations. As part of a book promotion tour, Soss used the travel he was already booking to try to build relationships that could help communities use his findings and expertise in their efforts for change.

Because many criminal legal policies are made locally, policy engagement on these issues often means meeting people working in their own communities on reforms. Soss said that when this involves short local visits, it's important to be mindful of the skepticism that outside experts can face when they "parachute in," as well as the limitations and risks inherent in this approach.

"People come in, they've got their solutions, they stir things up, and then they leave and everybody else is left to deal with the fallout," Soss said.

For him, the question is how to join that work in a helpful way without creating new problems for people who actually live in these communities. To do so, Soss said he keeps four things in mind:

First, requests to meet are not to promote a book but a chance to "participate in a political and policy process that's already in motion." Second, he goes in assuming people on the ground understand their community better than he ever could. Third, he treats any "educating" as a two-way exchange, where he learns as much as—if not more—from local leaders as he shares with them. And fourth, he considers the history of earlier fights and reforms, which often explains whether an idea can land within a particular local context.

Those principles lead to three core commitments—be useful, do no harm, and listen.

He pointed to a November 2025 trip to Boston as an example. His schedule included meetings with a state senator, the mayor's policy director, staff from the Joint Committee on the Judiciary, researchers at the Boston Federal Reserve, leaders at the state attorney general's office, and a reporter with *The Boston Globe*.

Access, he emphasized, came from other people's trust. Maxcy Grasso, Senior Policy Associate at Scholar Strategy Network; and a friend, Professor [Erin O'Brien](#) at the University of Massachusetts Boston, helped arrange the meetings.

"The meetings I had that week happened because people who had local knowledge and relationships made it happen," he said.

In many meetings, Soss said, officials wanted him to start by explaining his research. He learned to keep the book description to "under 2 minutes" and then shift quickly to asking questions about the local landscape—inviting others to explain what is happening, what has been tried, and what might be feasible.

His book "was a conversation starter," he said. "The people I met with were far more interested in talking to me as a general expert on the issues than about any specific finding or argument from our book."

To sustain relationships after the meetings, Soss said he tries to offer forms of practical, ready-to-use support that might be quickly accepted at busy offices where personnel are stretched thin. These can include a short memo about what other states have done or confidential comments on draft bill language. In his experience, those offers can "establish a basis for continuing to talk after I flew home."

Follow-through, he added, is where many engagements fail. He tries to leave with "a specific person and a specific email and a phone number," then follows up proactively—sometimes prompting the response: "Oh, right, I totally forgot about you. I'd love to chat more."

Those initial conversations can lead to ongoing work. Soss pointed to one Boston connection that turned into several Zoom calls, requests for input on active projects, and interest in having him return to testify at hearings.

For scholars looking to adopt this approach, he suggests looking for existing networks and policy conversations, rather than starting from scratch.

"Look for opportunities to enter into and be an active participant in the networks that are already going on around the issues that you're working on," he said.

Soss's examples show that engagement is not just message delivery. It is the slow work of building trust—doing your homework, relying on local relationships, listening for what matters to others, and following up with concrete help.

"Two ears, one mouth," he said. "Listening has to be treated as the first priority."

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Soss studies the interplay of politics, social inequalities, and public policy, with a particular focus on poverty governance, race and politics, welfare systems, and policing and punishment. Soss works with public agencies at the state and local levels as well as nonprofits, foundations, and advocacy and activist groups that work to combat social injustices and threats to democracy.