Shaping Policy on Student Experience: Elevating the Leadership of Scholars from Minoritized Groups and Advancing Application of Equity-Centered Scholarship

Overview and takeaways from the SERN Midcareer Fellows Program

student experience
RESEARCH NETWORK

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Brief overview of the SERN Midcareer Fellows Program (MFP)

*Based on research, learnings from conversations with leaders in the field of education, and benchmarking, Student Experience Research Network (SERN) worked with partners to design the SERN Midcareer Fellows Program (MFP). The fellowship supported a **community of 15 fellows** to collectively **bridge research on the structures (i.e., practices, policies, and norms) that shape students' experience** of feeling respected as valued people and thinkers in school with current state and federal policy topics. It was designed for midcareer faculty who identify as a member of one or more minoritized groups in the academy and who conduct equity-centered (e.g., liberatory, participatory-action, asset-based, anti-racist) empirical research on student experience.*

For a list of fellows, advisors, and leadership, see the SERN MFP webpage. The fellowship was funded through grants from the Bezos Family Foundation and Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

The MFP addressed barriers that prevent minoritized scholars from influencing policy and promoted the use of equity-centered research on student experience in federal and state policy

We conceptualized the MFP to **elevate the leadership of scholars from minoritized groups and advance the use of equity-centered research on student experience in state and federal policy.**

- **Scholars can influence what happens in education practice and policy in important ways** (e.g., Yanovitzky & Weber, 2020; Tseng, 2012).

  - **For example, academic scholarship has informed myriad changes in education, often through the brokering of policy intermediaries,** from local decision-making about curricula and instruction, to the design of federal legislation and regulation, to shaping how funding is spent on education programs and policies at the local, state, and federal levels;

  - **Scholars have also held positions of power and influence as experts consulted by practice, policy, and legal bodies**, ranging from the local level to the U.S. Congress, Supreme Court, and federal agencies, to positions that shape resource allocation (e.g., in policymaking positions in government, in public and private funding bodies).

- However, **there are many barriers that can prevent scholars – and scholars from minoritized groups in particular – from engaging in the policy arena** (e.g., Guillaume & Apodaca, 2020; Colby & Fowler, 2020; Kelly & McCann, 2014) despite a desire to inform policy decisions in education and despite the relevance of their expertise to active policy topics, including:

  - **A mismatch between the skills and knowledge base prioritized in the academy** compared to what is needed to influence policy, such as communicating about research in ways that are actionable and accessible to nonacademic audiences

  - **A lack of familiarity with the policymaking process and limited connections to policy audiences**

  - **Limited time and capacity to engage in translational and/or policy-facing work** given the number of demands on scholars' time

  - **Lacking a network of senior faculty** who can offer pathways for social impact in the education sector

  - **Having few connections to funders** who can provide resources and access that support research-policy bridging

  - **Being at risk of personal or professional harm** for engaging publicly on racialized topics in policy

  - **Negative career impacts due to COVID,** such as disruptions to funding or research projects

  - The pervasive norm for scholars to delay focus on policy until tenured; despite **the midcareer stage being overlooked for professional development opportunities and scholars with minoritized identities being disproportionately denied tenure**.

- The MFP addressed these barriers by: **supporting midcareer scholars from minoritized groups to bridge equity-centered research on student experience** with state and federal policy, **encouraging policy intermediaries to draw on a more diverse body of research evidence** on structures in education that shape student experience, **catalyzing shifts in the academy** that would better support minoritized scholars to bridge research with policy, and **promoting the advancement of minoritized scholars into academic leadership roles** that can help to plant seeds for structural shifts in the academy.

The initial design of the MFP was driven by SERN's learnings about the current state of research-policy bridging; through co-constructive processes, the design was refined with fellows' input and feedback

- **Partners:** Given what we learned about the need for scholars to build knowledge about the policymaking process, cultivate relationships with policy intermediaries, and practice making research actionable and accessible to policy audiences, **we knew we would need to engage external partners with deep expertise in this area to complement our expertise and augment our capacity**. We partnered with Scholars Strategy Network (SSN) to inform the fellowship curriculum, deliver trainings, and provide feedback on deliverables. We partnered with Education First over the course of the fellowship to support equity- and human-centered design as well as event facilitation in service of building community and creating a supportive experience for fellows.

- **Programming and design:** With our partners, SERN initially developed an arc of learning designed to build fellows' knowledge base about equity-centered research-policy bridging, deepen their networks with policy intermediaries and other relevant actors, and develop deliverables to advance their leadership with policy intermediaries (translational deliverables) and in the academy (scholarly deliverables). **To refine this arc of learning, we engaged in human-centered, co-constructive processes, seeking input from fellows at many points throughout the fellowship**. Fellows identified the following as their top developmental priorities as scholars seeking to bridge research and policy:

  - **Deepening their familiarity with the education policy landscape**, including intermediaries of interest, the ecosystem of key players, and priority questions that research could help address

  - **Honing their expertise speaking about bodies of research** with policy audiences to inform how these audiences conceptualize issues and choices, or introduce new issues or possibilities

  - **Learning from others who have relevant experience** bridging research and policy in education

  - **Practicing strategies for cultivating relationships with policy actors** and gaining familiarity with their context in order to be able to effectively engage them

  The final MFP design (i.e., fellowship objectives, deliverables, and programming) was refined to incorporate fellows' input and reflect their top priorities.

The four MFP objectives reflected fellows' input about what they needed to successfully bridge state and federal policy with equity-centered scholarship on student experience

1

Plant seeds for longer-term relationships with state/federal policy intermediaries that:

1. **Demarginalize equity-centered scholarship**

2. Support **policy intermediaries to begin to draw on diverse evidence** about structures that shape student experience
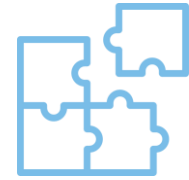
2

Foster professional skills and relationships with the fellowship community to make progress on fellows' visions for influencing education policy

3

Support the development of materials that speak to policy intermediaries, bridge state/federal policy with equity-centered research, and can be used during and after the fellowship

4

Support the development of tools and strategies needed to translate research to policy audiences at the state/federal level during and after the fellowship

MFP deliverables were designed with input from fellows and enabled fellows to practice skills and develop materials that have long-term utility for advancing fellows' research-policy bridging and leadership in the academy

- **Policy network map:** Each fellow identified their vision for policy change and developed a policy map that identified key partners focused on relevant topics. Fellows' visions for policy change included defending anti-racist policies and practices from anti-Critical Race Theory challenges; diversifying the educator workforce; enhancing data systems; investing in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education; and supporting educators' racial literacy development.

- **Policy brief:** Fellows then developed two-page policy briefs aligned to their vision for policy change that were designed to bridge equity-centered research and policy in accessible and actionable ways.

- **Outreach to policy audiences:** Throughout spring/summer 2022, fellows reached out to a diverse group of policy intermediaries to share their policy briefs and establish and/or strengthen relationships. SSN led trainings focused on outreach and fellows had scaffolded opportunities to hone their skills and receive feedback from SSN on what makes for an effective outreach to policy audiences. While some fellows were interested in opportunities to shape policy publicly, others preferred to work behind the scenes, such as through consulting or privately sharing learnings. Targets of fellows' outreach included:

    - **Policy intermediaries**, including American Council on Education, Arizona State Board of Charter Schools, BEST NC, Education Trust, Education Trust - West, Institute for Higher Education, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, the Learning Policy Institute, the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity, New America, Project Restore, and Stand for Children - Oregon.

    - **Policymakers**, including staff at the Georgia state legislature, New York Board of Regents, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and a congressional delegation from the districts surrounding the University of California, Davis.

    - **Journalists**, including staff at *The Conversation* and *The Hechinger Report.*

- **Scholarly deliverable 'building blocks' and longer-term goals:** Fellows identified a long-term goal or product designed to speak to scholarly audiences about the value of bridging equity-centered research with policy, support fellows' professional goals, and ultimately have the potential to contribute to structural shifts in the academy that enable more bridging between equity-centered scholarship and policy. They also identified a shorter-term 'building block' that would contribute to this longer-term goal or product.

    - Examples of building blocks included letters of intent, proposals for conferences and manuscripts, network maps, drafts of book chapters and manuscripts, and research on potential funding opportunities that focused on research-policy bridging.

    - Examples of longer-term goals included research partnerships, projects, and centers; special issues; conferences; and data collection efforts—all of which focused on research-policy bridging.

MFP programming was designed with input from fellows and supported fellows to increase their knowledge about the policy arena, build relationships with policy intermediaries, and develop high-utility deliverables

Programming was designed with input from partners and fellows and featured:

- **A focus on unpacking the policymaking process and exposing scholars to the different approaches policy intermediaries leverage in their work**: It was **important to demystify research-policy bridging.** It can be intimidating for scholars to engage in the policy space because it is seen as a 'black box' and works on different timelines and with different skillsets than those prioritized in academic settings. Fear and uncertainty can be a barrier to engagement, especially in the current political environment. In addition to supporting different roles scholars can play at various times as research-policy bridgers (including more public-facing and more behind the scenes opportunities), we also found it was important to explore how engaging in this work cultivated fellows' identities as research-policy bridgers.

- **Scaffolded opportunities to connect with policy intermediaries:** Formal structures in the fellowship supported and scaffolded fellows to connect with policy. Fellows received formal training and feedback from SSN about how to craft an effective outreach email to a policy intermediary and had structured opportunities to practice their policy pitches and receive feedback from policy intermediaries and communications experts. **SERN, Education First, and SSN created entry points for fellows regardless of their prior experience with policy intermediaries and supported a productive outreach process.**

  - Following fellows' outreach to policy intermediaries, at least 93% of fellows received a response and at least 73% scheduled a subsequent meeting. While some of the fellows had previous interactions with their target policy intermediaries, other fellows were engaging with these groups for the first time. **This response rate speaks to the importance of fellows' work refining their policy maps, pitches, and policy intermediary targets**. In one example, a fellow received a response from an intermediary that the window to connect about a specific policy had passed but they would be interested in future opportunities to connect. **Establishing new connections may not bear immediate results but can plant the seeds for future engagement when the right policy window emerges.**

- **Support for developing high-utility deliverables within a collective context:** Fellowship **deliverables needed to have utility for fellows, be appropriately scaffolded to reflect fellows' diverse incoming experiences, advance fellows' goals and the fellowship's objectives, and be a value add for potential end users like policy intermediaries and scholarly audiences engaged in research-policy bridging.** Creating opportunities to build trust and learn from and with the fellowship community was an important enabling condition for developing all deliverables, even those that were not produced collaboratively. For instance, fellows worked alongside one another in a work session and provided feedback to one another. For the scholarly deliverable, which many opted to produce in partnership with other fellows, community-building was critical for identifying potential collaborators.

See Appendix for a full description of MFP programming and activities.

While the longer-run outcomes of the fellowship will continue to unfold for many years, there are early indicators of the fellowship's impact on fellows, research-policy bridging, and norms in the academy

Priority outcomes	Selected early indicators of longer-term outcomes
• Priority outcome #1: Fellows have a **group of thought partners, potential collaborators, and close colleagues** whom they continue to draw on and work with throughout their careers, and who provide spaces of validation, amplification, and mutual support when other spaces in the academy do not yet recognize and support this work bridging research and policy in service of equity and justice.	• **Sixty percent of fellows chose to develop their scholarly deliverable collaboratively.** **For example,** Chezare Warren, Conra Gist, Tehia Starker Glass, and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz **submitted an AERA 2023 symposium proposal** to discuss how the fellowship helped them to develop skills to engage with policy intermediaries about preservice teacher education. Fellowship advisor Na'ilah Nasir is the discussant and fellowship director Shanette Porter is the session chair. • **Rebecca Covarrubias, Xiaoxia Newton, and Tehia Starker Glass published an article** "'You can be creative once you are tenured': Counterstories of academic writing from mid-career women faculty of color" in a special issue **edited by Conra Gist**. • **One fellow was promoted to full professor and hosted a session** to share his experiences and help strategize with other fellows interested in going up for full professor.
• Priority outcome #2: Fellows have **relationships with people at policy intermediaries** who seek out their expertise, advice, and partnership.	• **One hundred percent of fellows completed outreach to a policy intermediary** focused on sharing digestible, research-based insights; **93% of fellows received a reply in response to their policy intermediary outreach; 73% of fellows have held a meeting with a policy intermediary.** • Several fellows held meetings with or otherwise connected with a variety of audiences following their initial outreach. For example, **one fellow was invited to deliver a workshop, one fellow met with the congressional delegation representing their institution, and one fellow met with a state education leader about ways to incorporate research on student experience into the state's educator policies.**

While the longer-run outcomes of the fellowship will continue to unfold for many years, there are early indicators of the fellowship's impact on fellows, policy-research bridging, and norms in the academy

Priority outcomes	Selected early indicators of longer-term outcomes

• Priority outcome #3: Fellows have **tools they need to continue to build and deepen relationships and influence in policy**, including: a well-developed sense of the policy landscape and opportunities connected to their areas of interest and expertise; clarity on the role(s) they want to play in that policy landscape and strategies for how to engage in those roles; and skills they need to translate research and discuss its implications effectively with policy audiences.	• **Each fellow researched the major players in their policy area of interest, created a policy network map, and developed relevant skills,** such as crafting emails and pitching ideas to policy audiences.
	
	• **Fellows connected with senior scholars** and learned more about the different kinds of bridging roles available to them.
	
	• **Fellows shared many reflections about shifts in their identity and confidence as policy-research bridgers**, including:
	  • *"There are so many different ways to engage with policy - as we learned in one of our first sessions. This made me feel more confident that I could do this work in ways that resonate with me,"* and
	  • *"[There are] multiple ways and strategies of doing policy relevant work that are most in tune with our personal preferences. I feel more validated and confident in my choices now and can be intentional moving forward."*

• Priority outcome #4: Fellows have **outputs and relationships from this fellowship that position them to have an impact** and accomplish aspirations that are meaningful to them in the academy and policy.	• **Each fellow completed** a policy brief and outreach to at least one policy intermediary, as well as **a 'building block' as part of their scholarly deliverable that will help them to achieve their longer-term vision for bridging research and policy from within the academy.**
	
	• Xiaoxia Newton published her policy brief as an op-ed in *The Hechinger Report.*
	
	• **Fellows worked on active legal, policy, and academic issues during the fellowship that will continue to have impacts in the coming years**.
	  • Uma Jayakumar submitted an amicus brief to the Supreme Court in the case of *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina.*
	  • Lara Perez-Felkner made progress on her book (contract under review), *Latinx Students in Engineering: An Intentional Focus on a Growing Population*.
	
	• **One fellow accepted a new faculty position** at an R1 institution.

See Appendix for early indicators of additional target outcomes.

Reflection questions for policy and funder audiences

Policy Intermediaries:

- **How can policy intermediaries learn more about the timeline and process to develop and translate equity-centered research as well as the challenges facing scholars from minoritized groups who wish to engage with policy** in order to facilitate relationships (and collaborations) with these scholars? Consider starting with these resources: PowerPoint, Article 1, Article 2

- Because policy windows are emergent and policy timelines can move quickly or unpredictably, policy intermediaries need to have established, authentic relationships with scholars that can be mutually drawn upon as opportunities to influence policy arise. **What are immediate steps policy intermediaries can take to broaden and deepen their network of scholars from minoritized groups and researchers with equity-centered perspectives?** Consider attending events at policy centers on university campuses or otherwise engaging with university centers. Organizations like SSN and other research bridging entities may be useful resources for expanding policy intermediaries' networks. Policy intermediary organizations should make explicit their commitment to applying equity-centered scholarship and amplifying minoritized voices.

- **In the longer-term, what structures would need to shift in the policy context (including at policy intermediary organizations)** in order to facilitate relationship-building between policy intermediaries and scholars from minoritized groups? What funding and resources would support these efforts?

Funders:

- **What formal and informal structures are available to funders to support relationship-building between policy audiences and scholars from minoritized groups?** Here's a starter list to build on: inviting scholars from minoritized groups to participate in upcoming RFPs, hosting convenings or tables that amplify scholars from minoritized groups (including at academic conferences), brokering connections between scholars from minoritized groups and policy grantees, and visibly citing research from scholars from minoritized groups in policy-facing materials and conversations.

- **How can research-policy bridging funding opportunities better support scholars from minoritized groups?** Consider explicitly including a diversity statement, engaging scholars from minoritized groups in the process of developing the content and messaging, aligning with the academic schedule, making provisions for scholars and policy audiences to collaborate productively, and including significant resources that enable scholars from minoritized groups (including early career scholars) to engage deeply in translational work.

- **In the longer term, how can funders contribute to shifting the practices, policies, and norms of the academy in service of increasing the application of equity-centered research in policy and supporting scholars from minoritized groups to bridge research with policy?** Could funding mechanisms be used to create new opportunities (e.g., endowed positions, professional awards, university initiatives) for minoritized scholars to be recognized for social impact? Could funding mechanisms be used for training programs to support scholars from minoritized groups who wish to develop expertise in research-policy bridging?
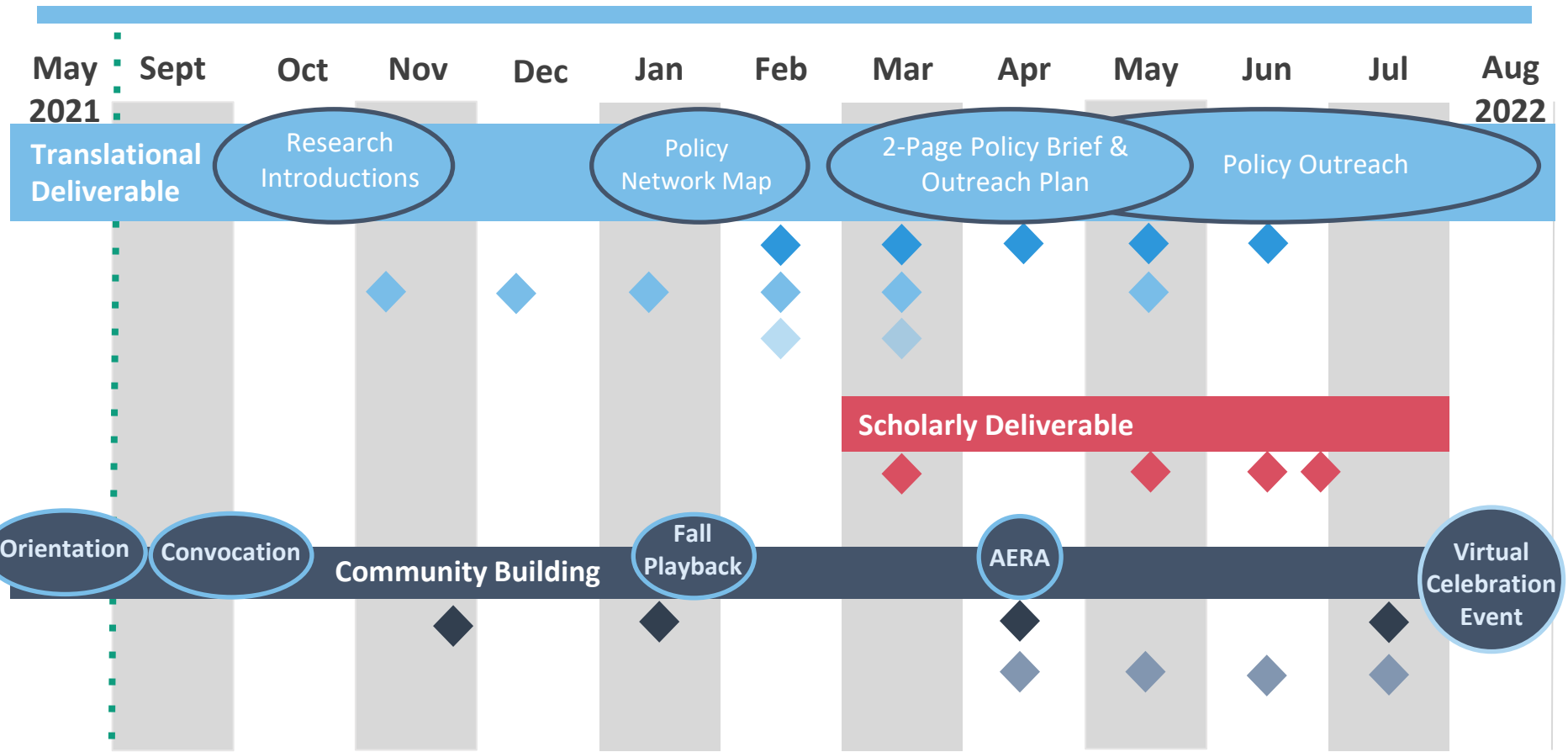
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Appendix A: Full list of MFP events, activities, trainings, and resources to scaffold learning and community-building

- **Scholars Strategy Network (SSN) trainings:** Trainings tied to the development of fellows' policy network maps, two-page policy briefs, and intermediary outreach.
- **Convocation:** Opening event that underscored key themes of the fellowship, including the power of collectives, the role of research in shaping policy, and opportunities to build relationships with policy intermediaries.
- **Colloquium I**, *Communicating with Audiences in the Education Policy Ecosystem Colloquium:* Event focused on building knowledge about and communicating with policy intermediaries, as well as providing fellows with an opportunity to practice communicating their vision for policy change and to receive feedback from national experts.
- **Colloquium II**, *Bridging Critical Research with Policy*: Event focused on the opportunities and challenges associated with advancing research-policy bridging in the academy and exploring opportunities to shift structures to support this work in the long run. Fellows also received feedback on their scholarly deliverables.
- **Colloquium III,** *Policy-focused Leadership in the Academy*: Event focused on the various roles that academics can take on as research-policy bridgers; fellows and speakers surfaced challenges and opportunities related to shifting the existing norms in the academy.
- **Research introductions:** Fellows introduced each other to their research interests and policy goals.
- **Fall playback**: A map of themes and areas of interest/overlap from the research introductions.
- **Shared resource library**: Fellows and the leadership team co-constructed a resource library for links, books, and articles.
- **Communications:** In service of co-construction, SERN leveraged a variety of formal (e.g., surveys, exit tickets, and planned interviews) and ad hoc (e.g., informal conversations with the fellowship director) structures to establish feedback loops with fellows.
- **SERN policy memo**: SERN staff developed and shared a memo of current policy windows that aligned with fellows' interests.
- **Affinity groups:** Sessions for fellows with similar policy interests to connect, coordinate, and strategize.
- **Office hours:** Time hosted by SERN, Education First, and SSN for fellows to receive targeted feedback and support.
- **Scholarly live feedback and peer working session:** Facilitated space for fellows to receive feedback on their scholarly deliverable.
- **Share and Solve:** Lightly-facilitated event for fellows to problem-solve outreach questions.
- **April 2022 AERA dinner:** In-person opportunity for fellows who attended the April 2022 AERA conference to connect.
- **Working cafes:** Fellow-suggested, optional time blocks for fellows to co-work.
- **Happy hours:** Opportunities for fellows to connect in an informal setting.
- **Celebration**: Final fellowship event that centered joy, community, and gratitude.

All activities were virtual unless otherwise noted. For certain events, fellows were organized into groupings according to policy interests, which were called home teams.

Appendix B: Arc of MFP programming supported community-building, deliverable development, and opportunities to engage with policy audiences

May 2021 | **Sept** | **Oct** | **Nov** | **Dec** | **Jan** | **Feb** | **Mar** | **Apr** | **May** | **Jun** | **Jul** | **Aug 2022**

Translational Deliverable

Research Introductions

Policy Network Map

2-Page Policy Brief & Outreach Plan

Policy Outreach

Scholarly Deliverable

Orientation

Convocation

Community Building

Fall Playback

AERA

Virtual Celebration Event

Translational Deliverables
SSN Office Hours
Supporting Events
Peer Feedback

Scholarly Deliverable
Supporting Events

Community Building
Happy Hours
Affinity Meetings

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Appendix C: Early indicators of MFP's impact on additional longer-term target outcomes related to fellows, research-policy bridging, and norms in the academy

Additional target outcomes	Selected early indicators of longer-term outcomes
• Additional target outcome #5: **Fellows use their roles as gatekeepers in the academy** to support the bridging of equity-centered scholarship with policy in the long run.	• As a result of a small group discussion between fellows and a SERN MFP advisor, SERN organized a session with SERN Executive Director Lisa Quay and PERTS' Director of Operations Laura Cossey to **shed light on working with a fiscal sponsor; the session provided opportunities for fellows to explore how this structure can be leveraged to help achieve their goals of bridging equity-centered scholarship with policy**. • Four fellows (three of whom are working together) have **plans to create university-based centers** where they can continue to build on the work they started during the fellowship. • Some fellows shared an interest **in advancing into leadership roles in the academy**, including an endowed chair, a provost, and a president.
• Additional target outcome #6: To amplify impact, **advisors, funders, and partners of the fellowship apply lessons from the fellowship** in ways that change how they approach their work as gatekeepers and influencers in the academy, policy, and philanthropy.	• **The fellowship director, with SERN and SSN staff, drafted a manuscript for academic audiences that shares takeaways from the fellowship and recommendations for shifts in the academy** to support scholars from minoritized groups who wish to bridge research with policy. • **Lara Perez-Felkner was invited to join SSN as a member.** • By request, **SERN recommended fellows as speakers for an SSN talk on postsecondary education.** • **Education First and SERN staff embarked on a documentation process to capture lessons learned**, including cataloging and processing the rich data sources generated through the fellowship (e.g., survey results, notes from 1:1 conversations, and reflections from project pull ups) and conducting interviews with fellowship staff to further document our learnings.