

INTRODUCTION TO THE FUNDER BRIEFING RESOURCE SUITE

As the Student Experience Research Network (SERN) prepares to sunset our organizational operations, we take pride in the connections we brokered and the learning experiences we facilitated. Our signature annual events, the scholarly convening and the funder briefing, forged new pathways for a more interdependent ecosystem within our field. They kindled cross-sector dialogue and collaboration, and the funder briefing created new avenues for research- and practice-informed philanthropy. However, the infrastructure that produced our events has largely remained behind the curtain. Executing such large-scale events with a lean, geographically dispersed team necessitated an event planning process that was strategically sound and relationally-centered. As a result, we developed a cache of tools, templates, and techniques that allowed us to magnify our impact.

This resource suite presents a synthesis of those materials. The items contained in the suite were developed for our funder briefing, an annual event that brings the philanthropic community together with researchers, practitioners, and policy actors who are engaging with core ideas related to how structures shape student experiences' experience of feeling respected as valued people and thinkers. The briefing showcases the latest research, implementation, and results of initiatives in K-12 and postsecondary contexts. Yet, our goal for this resource suite is not replication; we do not aim to precipitate a new wave of funder briefings. Rather, we hope it will support capacity-building efforts across an array of different contexts that help create the conditions in which every student can learn and thrive.

THEMATIC TAKEAWAYS

To that end, we have identified three thematic threads that may provide an entry point into these resources.

Events can function as mechanisms for field-building and movement seeding. Events have provided important touchstones across our organizational journey. From its inception, SERN was designed to be a field-catalyst—to both be responsive in meeting the current needs of the field and to help push it forward. Our events have functioned as launchpads for new relationships and helped us find “fellow travelers” in our quest to create an education system where every student experiences respect as a valued person and thinker. The process of hosting these events provided opportunities to engage a broader tent of stakeholders and increase coherence and knowledge exchange in the field across silos. The intention with which we approached speaker prep for the briefing amplified our credibility and increased funders’ confidence in our introductions and referrals. In essence, the funder briefing helped SERN develop the connective tissue necessary for supporting collaborations and coalitions across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy. Additional reflections and tools for leveraging events as part of a broader outreach strategy can be found in the Theme and Agenda, Event Program and Webpage, Session Design and Speaker Prep, and Pre-/Post-Event Communications sections of the resource suite.

Trust is imperative to the success of cross-sector initiatives and experiences. Funder briefings drew an eclectic mix of stakeholders: funders, leaders from policy and practice, and researchers do not often convene for an intimate event like the briefing. SERN funder briefings were also notable for the ways the program design and event norms aimed to disrupt traditional power dynamics. Speakers and funders came together for an educational, growth-focused conversation in which we situated everyone as bringing valued expertise and also as learners. Accordingly, we placed an emphasis on positioning speakers to be successful in this somewhat unusual setting. We approached the briefing as an act of co-construction between speakers, funders, and the SERN team. Likewise, we recognized that co-construction itself is an exercise in trust and vulnerability. As the materials in the Theme and Agenda and Session Design and Speaker Prep resource sections demonstrate, we engendered trust by developing an expertise in funder audiences and a fluency in field awareness and by shaping the overall theme with funders and the individual sessions with speakers. Doing so allowed us to curate learning environments that participants reported felt authentic, safe, motivating, and generative.

Events transmit organizational culture and shape staff engagement. Our organizational identity is predicated on our team's commitment to collective learning. In this way, the funder briefings were just as important for our internal operations as they were for our external outreach. Each phase of the planning offered a new chance to challenge our preconceptions and increase our effectiveness. With this in mind, we built multiple touchpoints into the work plan that gave the project team space to debrief major processes and iterate on key deliverables. Likewise, we scheduled times for the project team to share insights and questions with staff members who were less involved in the project. All SERN staff members were given opportunities to provide targeted feedback on different aspects of the event planning. Moreover, project leads posted weekly updates on the project status and plans for external engagement that were distributed to the full staff—a norm that fostered transparency and inclusion across the team. Following the event, we held debrief meetings with all staff members and consultants. There, we codified lessons learned, celebrated the sessions and processes that ran effectively, and cataloged areas for improvement and innovation. The polyphonic nature of these debriefs enriched our organizational learning as well as our interpersonal collaboration. More insights on designing touchpoints and conducting debrief sessions can be found in the Project Scoping and Data and Analysis sections of this resource.

CONCLUSION

This resource suite covers the most important processes and materials across the scoping, design, planning, and execution of the project, but it should be noted that these phases worked in concert with SERN's larger relational paradigm. The viability of the funder briefings depended, in large part, on the daily activities that characterized our work: close engagement and a learning orientation toward the research, practice, policy, and funder stakeholder groups we serve; cultivating an awareness of field-level interests and wonderings; adding our voices to the growing chorus of stakeholders attending to how structures shape student experience; and, advancing the collective mandate for learning environments that support students' experience of respect as valued people and thinkers in school. Though the funder briefing itself was a single-day event, the planning process was a year-round endeavor. Likewise, although SERN's time as a field catalyst has drawn to a close, the movement promises much more to come and we hope this resource collection will be of use to the field in pursuing that work.

Click [here](#) to open the resource suite.