



Empowering Practitioners, Policymakers, and Funders to Apply Insights from Research

BY CHLOE STROMAN AND LISA QUAY

MARCH 2023

Student Experience Research Network (SERN; formerly Mindset Scholars Network) worked from 2015 to 2023 to cultivate and bring greater attention to research on how structures (i.e., practices, policies, and norms) shape students' experience of respect as valued people and thinkers in school. In partnership with a community of 42 researcher members ("SERN scholars") and over 500 actors across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy, SERN bridged long-standing silos to build and mobilize practically relevant research knowledge. This document was developed as part of SERN's strategic sunset in 2023 with the intention of sharing lessons from our work that we believe will be useful to others in the field.

One of SERN's core accomplishments was supporting education practice intermediaries (e.g., system-level providers, developers of education resources, teacher preparation organizations), policy intermediaries (e.g., networks and associations, think tanks, policy advocates), and philanthropic funders to unpack the implications of student experience research. We provided meaning-making opportunities that exposed people to insights from research and offered

EXAMPLES AND RESOURCES LINKED IN THIS BRIEF

- SERN's [key messages regarding evidence and research use](#) and a [William T. Grant Foundation article](#), which can support practitioners, policymakers, and funders in interpreting and using research
- [Structures for Belonging](#), a research synthesis accompanied by a [one-pager of key takeaways](#), which served as a grounding artifact for the Belonging Collective
- The [facilitation guide](#) for the Belonging Collective kickoff event, which informed the [final slate](#) of Belonging Collective projects, including a [strand of work](#) to develop professional learning materials
- The final [professional learning presentation](#) developed in the Belonging Collective
- [Videos and publications](#) from SERN's annual funder briefing
- A [slide deck on why student experience matters to college success](#), developed as part of SERN's briefing for congressional staff and policy intermediaries

We wish to acknowledge the [Student Experience Research Network team](#) and the scholars, practitioners, policymakers, students, and funders who engaged in these events and initiatives. We thank our reviewers Marc Chun, Adriana Galván, Marisa Goldstein, Dave Paunesku, Jamie Spears, and Carolyn Trager Kliman, whose feedback on earlier drafts greatly improved the depth and utility of this piece. The content remains the sole responsibility of the authors and Student Experience Research Network.

scaffolding for them to consider how they might approach their work differently based on that research.

SERN supported meaning-making through both informal engagement (e.g., one-off conversations) and more structured approaches (e.g., events and initiatives). Our structured meaning-making opportunities took various formats. First, we held an annual funder briefing for dozens of representatives from national philanthropies; [this resource outlines the design and execution of the funder briefing in detail](#). In addition, we held a briefing for congressional staff and policy intermediaries in Washington, D.C. about the ways in which student belonging matters for postsecondary success—and how institutions shape students’ belonging.

Finally, we convened practice intermediaries in hands-on meaning-making opportunities. We held a two-day event called Curriculum x Motivation in which leading curriculum developers learned about research on student engagement and workshopped implications for their products. We also facilitated a six-month engagement called the Belonging Collective, in which participants from nine national practice intermediaries compiled and developed resources they could use internally to make changes to their programming and messaging based on the research on belonging-supportive learning environments.

This brief is designed to support other organizations interested in bridging research, practice, policy, and philanthropy, as well as researchers who would like to grow their skills in this area and funders who would like to facilitate this type of collaborative work.

Across SERN’s events and initiatives focused on making meaning of research, we used the following guiding principles. Below, we share insights, strategies, and examples related to each principle.

- 1. Set the parameters of the meaning-making opportunity carefully to ensure that it is responsive to participants and that the programmatic design is connected to realistic objectives.**
- 2. Create a collaborative and learning-oriented atmosphere that builds from participants’ incoming expertise, in which participants can freely share challenges and ask questions.**
- 3. Start from a strong foundation of synthesized, translated, practically relevant research and set up relationships and follow-up actions that help participants sustain the work.**

1. What are the parameters of the meaning-making opportunity?

Develop objectives that are specific to your audience and use them to guide program design. Clarifying the objectives for a learning experience about research is an essential first step. For example, SERN held conversations with funders each year to surface and pressure test ideas for the funder

Annual funder briefing

Representatives from over 45 foundations and philanthropic intermediaries attended SERN’s funder briefing over the years, and both funders and speakers reported that the event was a unique and valuable learning experience. 90% of surveyed funders reported that their engagement with SERN led to increased application of insights from research on student experience in their work.

In order to extend the impact of the funder briefing, SERN developed a suite of resources that detail how we planned and executed the event.

The [SERN funder briefing resource suite](#) outlines our processes for theme and agenda development, speaker selection and preparation, attendee communications, and more, and offers curated examples and templates that we hope will build capacity for other events that enable dialogue and learning across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy.

briefing theme. Similarly, we interviewed Belonging Collective participants before the project started to learn which questions or problems they were seeking to address through the engagement.

The objectives for a learning experience will be most relevant if they are designed based on input from the target participants.

Additional factors to consider while drafting objectives include:

- **Time and capacity:** Set objectives that are realistic for the time and capacity available. One-off events are often better suited for landing a few key messages than they are for digging into the tactics of research application. For example, SERN’s congressional briefing sought to land the key points that (a) belonging shapes critical academic behaviors and outcomes in college, and belonging concerns are disproportionately experienced by members of [minoritized groups](#), and (b) postsecondary institutions can shift their practices, policies, and norms in ways that support students’ belonging and academic performance. (See the [slide deck from this meeting on why student experience matters to college success](#).)
- **Participants’ context:** SERN was careful to match our objectives for meaning-making opportunities with participants’ contexts. For example, our annual funder briefing began in 2016, and for its first few years, the event focused on building awareness of the research on student experience, which many funders had not yet been exposed to. Since many of the same people attended year over year, and as awareness of the research began to permeate the field, we eventually

shifted the discussion at the funder briefing more toward implementation, since attendees already had a foundational understanding of the research. For the congressional briefing, we framed the conversation around college completion, since we knew that was an outcome on which policymakers were increasingly focused.

Identify participants who are well-positioned to take up the work. Another key early step in designing an effective meaning-making opportunity is considering the set of people to invite to the table. When issuing invitations for the Belonging Collective, SERN sought out individuals who (a) had meaningful influence over the relevant work at their organizations, and (b) were enthusiastic about the value of research in informing their work. We hoped these individuals could become ambassadors within their organizations by sharing the implications of the research with their colleagues and drawing connections between the research and organizational priorities.

Consider the role researchers could play. SERN invited researchers to participate in meaning-making opportunities when, for example, they were presenting new findings or when we hoped to seed longer-term relationships between researchers and practice, policy, or funder attendees. It is helpful to ensure that invited researchers have prior experience working with a similar or related audience, can speak clearly and succinctly about research and provide concrete examples from practice, and are excited to collaborate with and learn from practice and policy audiences.

In other cases, it may not be necessary to invite researchers. In the Belonging Collective, participants were familiar with the body of research around belonging-supportive learning environments, and needed space to consider how they might redesign practice based on the research. In this case, SERN prioritized collaboration with other education intermediaries over direct connections with researchers.

People learn best when they feel connected to their co-learners and when they do not feel judged or threatened.

2. What might it look like to create a collaborative and learning-oriented atmosphere?

Invest in participants' psychological safety to enable collaboration and learning. People learn best when they feel connected to their co-learners and when they do not feel judged or threatened. SERN used the following strategies to create collaborative spaces in which learners could freely share challenges and ask questions:

- **Spend time on relationship-building.** Even when time is limited, prioritize introductions, icebreakers, and other opportunities for connecting socially—both generally and in ways related to the focus or theme of the event. Considering how people are assigned

to breakout groups and tables (i.e., to encourage connections that may not happen otherwise), carefully designing small-group activities (i.e., ensuring there are roles for different types of participants with different expertise), and intentional facilitation (i.e., disrupting typical power dynamics to promote equitable airtime) can also help build relationships, especially for participants who may be less comfortable engaging in larger groups or without structured opportunities.

- **Authentically convey a focus on inclusion and growth.** The [facilitator's guide](#) for our professional learning presentation on belonging-supportive learning environments recommends a warm up activity that supports participants in making a personal connection to the topic of belonging and asks the facilitator to share a story from their own experience, in order to help participants feel safer taking emotional risks themselves. Setting this type of tone for a meaning-making opportunity can help create a sense of community and orient participants toward learning and growing rather than performing or achieving in a space. Activities that hold participants accountable for reflecting on their own work, such as mailing a postcard to themselves with a written commitment, can also communicate an emphasis on growth.
- **Address power dynamics through messaging, programming, and facilitation.** It is essential to be mindful of power dynamics in all aspects of an event. For example, in a setting that brings together researchers and practitioners, messaging and programming can emphasize the expertise that practitioners bring and counter the misconception that empirically-generated knowledge is more valuable than knowledge gained from individuals' experiences; this approach helps convey that [multiple forms of knowledge are important to consider holistically](#). In a setting that brings together funders with other actors (e.g., researchers, practitioners), look for opportunities for funders to share back information, rather than simply receiving information, to create a mutual learning experience. Facilitation can also help to ensure that everyone's voices are heard.
- **Minimize psychological threats and competition.** SERN's more intensive meaning-making opportunities asked people to reflect on their own work, which requires vulnerability, so it can be helpful to scaffold this process. For example, at Curriculum x Motivation, participants used principles from research to identify potential issues with other curriculum samples before they turned the lens on their own curriculum. It can also be helpful to avoid having direct competitors in the same space, or to structure the programming to minimize competition. At the same event, participants worked within their organizational teams to assess areas for improvement in their own curriculum products, rather than providing feedback on each other's products.

Recognize and build from participants' incoming expertise to maximize engagement. The recommendations in the remainder of this section draw primarily from SERN's Belonging Collective, which was our most in-depth meaning-making engagement with practice intermediaries. We designed the project to learn from participants about how they could apply insights from SERN's [research synthesis](#) on belonging-supportive environments and to collaboratively develop related resources that could be used by others in the education sector.

The project used the following strategies to recognize and build from participants' incoming expertise. It is important to note that these strategies required more flexible timelines and more capacity than less collaborative projects, since we were planning for multiple potential scenarios and periodically revising elements of the project design in response to participant feedback.

- **Use principles of co-construction.** To design and adapt the Belonging Collective based on participants' input, it was necessary to begin the project with guardrails that denoted which parts of the programming could be shifted, which ways of working could be adapted, and which could not. This helped ensure that the project remained realistic and met its objectives. It was also important in terms of building and maintaining trust with participants, in that we only asked for input when we were able to act on it.

One example of co-construction within the Belonging Collective was our kickoff event, in which we refined a set of ideas for how the research on belonging-supportive environments could be better integrated in member organizations' work. SERN designed the kickoff event around four potential project ideas that we developed based on themes from our early discussions with the participants. During the kickoff, participants fleshed out the audiences, objectives, and major activities involved in each project. Our [kickoff facilitation guide](#) contains more information about the event. After the meeting, SERN determined a [final slate of three projects](#), solicited sign-ups for the different project teams, and held initial meetings with project teams to develop project plans (see, for example, the [plan for the professional learning materials project](#)).

- **Create meaningful but flexible roles through which participants can learn and share knowledge.** While participants often have limited capacity to devote to meaning-making work, it is beneficial to leverage their leadership and strengths to the extent possible. For example, one strand of work within the Belonging Collective was a professional learning community. We invited participants to present in and facilitate each meeting; however, there was no requirement that each organization present.

For the other strands of work in which we were developing resources, we designed multiple asynchronous avenues for participation, including

requests to crowdsource resources, complete desk research, or provide input on drafts. When possible, we matched these requests with individual participants' strengths and expertise. For example, we sought input on best practices for adult learning from participants who led trainings at their organizations.

3. How can the meaning-making opportunity account for the complexity of changing an organization's work based on research?

Initiate long-term relationships that can sustain the work in the future. Bridging research with education practice, policy, and philanthropy is largely relationship-based work. It can require time upfront to build mutual understanding and trust, as well as follow-up communication to learn about how insights from research are being applied, which new challenges, needs, and questions are arising, and to be able to continue connecting organizations with new people and resources over time. It is also important to share feedback with researchers, so that their future work can be informed by practice and policy perspectives and innovations.

Bridging research with education practice, policy, and philanthropy is largely relationship-based work that requires time upfront to build mutual understanding and trust, as well as follow-up communication to learn about how insights from research are being applied, and which new challenges, needs, and questions are arising.

To the extent possible, consider how a meaning-making opportunity can initiate long-term relationships (e.g., providing scheduled time and/or contact information for participants to connect about potential future projects; bringing the same group together again in the future).

Elevate translated research from a range of disciplines and methods to ensure that the knowledge base you are working from is relevant and useful for the audience. Individual studies, methods, and disciplines can offer only a partial picture of any complex social phenomenon, situation, experience, or context. This means it is necessary to learn from [relevant and rigorous](#) research spanning multiple methods and disciplines. Additionally, the way research is presented can shape the success of an engagement. SERN completed research synthesis and translation that was tailored to the interests and ways of communicating of the target audiences before our meaning-making opportunities, so that the content resonated with participants.

In the Belonging Collective, [Structures for Belonging](#)—which synthesizes scholarship across multiple disciplines on belonging-supportive learning environments—served as a grounding artifact that all organizations read in advance to

create a shared baseline for our work together. To develop such syntheses, SERN staff sought extensive external reviews of draft content from researchers across multiple disciplines and methodological backgrounds, as well as members of the target education audience to ensure both accuracy and relevance. We also packaged the content in multiple formats and lengths. For example, we published a standalone [executive summary](#) and a [one-pager of key takeaways](#) alongside *Structures for Belonging*.

As mentioned above, when inviting researchers into a meaning-making opportunity, it is important to select individuals who have experience translating their research for related audiences. For the funder briefing, SERN uses an in-depth [speaker identification](#) and [session design and speaker prep process](#) to ensure that researchers' presentations are responsive to the audience's needs.

Across all contexts, SERN used the following lenses when making decisions about which research and researchers to lift up:

- White researchers, men, and researchers who primarily use quantitative (including experimental and quasi-experimental) methods are cited more frequently and often perceived as conducting more rigorous work than researchers who are marginalized in academia and those who use more equity-centered approaches (e.g., liberatory or participatory, asset-based, anti-racist).¹ It is important to be aware of and counteract these inequities when elevating research and researchers, for example by inviting these scholars to present at or attend events where they can amplify their work; brokering connections with other practitioners, policymakers, and funders; and visibly citing their research in materials and conversations.
- Research can perpetuate deficit narratives by focusing on gaps (e.g., between white and racially minoritized students) or by focusing on "fixing" students rather than changing structures and systems.² Scholarship that reflects a stronger asset-based perspective can counter negative stereotypes, elevate humanizing approaches and those that address root causes, and highlight aspects of our current educational system that could be leveraged to create a more equitable one.

Equip participants to share insights from the engagement with others. Making research-based shifts, especially in large organizations, requires members of those organizations to build will and momentum internally, by demonstrating why the research matters for the organizational strategy and how it can help improve practice and outcomes. SERN often provided takeaway materials and documentation of our meaning-making events (see, for example, [videos and publications from each of our annual funder briefings](#)) to provide collateral for participants' efforts to build support for related work within their organizations.

The Belonging Collective was designed so that most organizations had multiple staff members from multiple teams participating, and the project generated ready-to-use materials, such as a [professional learning presentation](#). These design features aimed to enable participants to implement shifts at their home organizations. Still, some participants anticipated challenges in finding the capacity and the correct venue to share their learnings internally.

In similar future engagements, participants could benefit from dedicated time to develop an action plan with their teammates and receive peer feedback on the plan from other organizations. While it will look different for each engagement, keeping an eye toward the follow-up actions that participants may take can help extend impact.

¹See, for example, [Chakravarty et al, 2018](#); [Lerman et al, 2022](#); and [Pierce, 2013](#).

²See, for example, [Gutiérrez, 2008](#) and Patton Davis & Museus, "[Identifying and Disrupting Deficit Thinking](#)."