

STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

April 2023

Student Experience Research Network (SERN) is grounded in an interdisciplinary understanding that in order to learn and thrive, students need to experience respect as valued people and thinkers – and that the practices, policies, and norms in education and society have inequitably shaped this experience depending on who students are, the opportunities they are afforded, and whether the education system was originally designed to serve or exclude students like them. Students’ experiences influence their outcomes, and importantly, postsecondary institutions can make changes to practices, policies, and norms in ways that improve students’ experiences and outcomes.¹

SERN interviewed 13 leaders across the sectors of research, policy, and philanthropy² in fall 2022 about field-building related to student experience in postsecondary education and how research can help advance structural change within institutions to better support student experience.³

These interviews took a high-level view meant to assess the needs of the field from multiple angles, including the knowledge base available to conceptualize and address challenges, field actors and their interactions with each other, the financial and non-financial resources that are present, and the priorities and combination of approaches field actors employ.

This memo presents themes that arose across multiple interviews. As SERN sunsets its operations, we offer these observations on the current state of the field and opportunities for future investments and undertakings related to student experience to inform the work of others.

HOW DO PEOPLE UNDERSTAND STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND WHERE DO THEY SEE IT COMING INTO PLAY IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION?

The term “student experience” evokes a number of associations for field experts. Interviewees prioritized the use of inclusive and actionable language over alignment around a shared definition.

When asked about student experience, interviewees referenced concepts including completion, equity, belonging, growth mindset, identity safety, student voice, equitable learning environments, and student success. This range of associations prompted questions about the importance of a universally accepted definition of student experience. In response to these questions, most interviewees prioritized action over language. As one policy interviewee noted, “I think whether it’s student success, well-being, experience – it’s all about how

¹ See, for example, [Expanding the completion conversation: Why student experience matters to college success and what institutions can do about it](#); [Elevating the objectives of higher education to effectively serve socioeconomically diverse students](#); and [Studying belonging in education: A conversation with Claude Steele, Mary Murphy, and Gregory Walton](#).

² A number of individuals who currently hold roles in policy and philanthropy have prior experience as practitioners in postsecondary institutions, which they drew on during our interviews. The researchers came from a variety of disciplines, including economics, education, psychology, and sociology.

³ Alongside these interviews, we also reviewed the work of dozens of policy, practice, and philanthropy organizations operating in the postsecondary sector to examine how their activities are taking up issues connected to student experience.

students are engaging with the environment. I don't think language matters as much in that regard." Interviewees also spoke to the importance of specificity, and using language and examples that describe what it means to focus on student experience in the core domains of institutions (e.g., financial aid, admissions, student support) to make the concept concrete and actionable.

Holistic approaches to student success—those that go beyond just academic support—have become increasingly important since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and have created new openings to adopt a student experience lens.

Experts voiced a shared sentiment that COVID-19 prompted new questions about students' access to basic needs like housing, food, healthcare, and access to the technology needed for distance learning. Disparities between students became more pronounced and interviewees perceived a growing awareness of the connection between academic outcomes and the material conditions of students' lives.

One intermediary leader who has also held faculty and trustee positions shared the following phrasing that she uses with institutional leaders, "You have to be learner-centered and look at the whole person because students are not just learning machines, they are people who come to you from a variety of backgrounds... But if you don't have an education system that accommodates that, it's all on the student to identify pathways of being successful."

Many institutional leaders are aware of the equity gaps that exist on their campuses and want to better serve students who are structurally marginalized. We heard that belonging and campus climate were two common areas of focus for creating more equitable student experiences, however interviewees also identified opportunities for deeper structural change in this area.

There was broad agreement across our conversations that the evidence base and energy around students' sense of belonging is strong. Still, some interviewees were concerned that belonging-focused efforts are oversimplified, when they do not involve fundamentally shifting structures to better support student experience and addressing the fact that postsecondary institutions were originally designed to include some groups of students and exclude others.

A researcher summarized this dynamic as she reflected on measures that could be used to assess student experience at the postsecondary level, "A big one [that research centers] have pushed is 'sense of belonging.' I struggle with that as liberatory, because it really comes from a place of, 'If students would just belong,' when we haven't adjusted the actual experience enough to want students to belong to it."

Initiatives that explore equity in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) departments have broad appeal and bipartisan support, offering opportunities for dialogue around student experience.

Initiatives that seek to create belonging-supportive cultures in STEM departments have an enduring popularity that indicates they will continue to occupy a large share of the discourse. The topic of STEM equity can serve to convene actors who may not normally interact with one another. One researcher explained the stability of STEM-related activity in the following manner, "STEM is consistently of interest across different political climates, seasons, and actors. STEM equity and opportunity can get people [to the table] with you. Other topics... feel more urgent than STEM because I'm confident STEM will continue to have that interest over time."

Interviewees identified topical areas such as academic advising and institutional communications as helpful entry points for institutions to adopt a focus on student experience. Other topics – such as admissions, affordability, and student pathways – were identified as top-of-mind among postsecondary actors but not yet consistently incorporating a student experience lens.

Multiple interviewees identified academic advising as a notable feature of initiatives that provide wraparound supports to students. One funder explained that academic advising can be an entry point for a broader focus on student experience. She described the use of “Trojan horses” that can show postsecondary actors the possibilities for attending to student experience in one area, which they can then apply in other areas. Another example she provided, which was echoed by two other interviewees, was audits of institutions’ websites and communications to review how students may experience reading or receiving those communications by asking, “What are the messages we’re sending students?”

Other topics that came up across interviews included race-conscious admissions, debt and affordability, and academic pathways for students in transition (e.g., transfer students) or on certain academic tracks. Some interviewees described opportunities for bringing a student experience lens to these issues, but they did not observe a broad or explicit focus on student experience yet in these areas.

Faculty practice and faculty hiring, with a focus on recruiting and retaining faculty from minoritized groups within academia, were viewed as essential, but underemphasized levers for addressing student experience.

Several interviewees pointed out the need to make progress in integrating a student experience lens into faculty practice, and pointed out challenges to doing so. “Until we address pedagogy and instruction,” one funder interviewee said, “we will never close equity gaps no matter how much institutional, structural work we do.”

This is a difficult issue to address – in practice and in terms of making the case for funding this work – because the typical incentive system in postsecondary education does not reward instructors for high-quality teaching or creating equitable learning environments. Similarly, the training that most postsecondary instructors receive focuses on preparing them to be researchers, rather than teachers. It also does not educate them on the science of learning and development. These issues can be magnified at four-year versus two-year institutions.

A number of interviewees pointed out the related issue of faculty diversity. “Faculty hiring needs to change in order to support students. It matters for students to see themselves, hands down,” a researcher said.

WHAT IS CHALLENGING, HELPFUL, AND NEEDED IN INSTITUTIONS’ AND SYSTEMS’ EFFORTS TO BETTER CENTER AND SUPPORT STUDENT EXPERIENCE?

NAVIGATING BELIEFS AND INCENTIVES

A long-standing narrative exists in postsecondary education that students are responsible for their own success, but research can help show that institutions shape students’ outcomes.

Several interviewees identified a pervasive narrative that “students are adults; it’s up to them” to complete college. They said that shifting this belief within institutions and systems is critical – whether through a focus on “student-centeredness,” “the whole student,” “ecological supports,” or any other approach that puts the onus of change on the institutional environment.

Two policy intermediary interviewees added that research can help to make the case for policy incentives for institutions around completion and post-college outcomes. “What’s important is the narrative arc of research that gets them to understand that student experience is not fundamentally an issue of the students,” one policy interviewee explained. “The idea that student experience is influenced by the institution, and it influences outcomes – that’s been eye-opening, particularly when you can put specific research points behind it.”

Faculty tenure and promotion structures incentivize research and publishing over teaching, and pre-faculty training does not focus on pedagogy or creating equitable learning environments.

As mentioned above, faculty practice was identified by interviewees as a critical priority for making progress related to student experience, but one that is not incentivized in the current system. “You have a value proposition in these departments focused on research, publishing papers, and getting grants, without the same kind of emphasis on teaching well, and teaching everyone well,” one policy intermediary interviewee summarized.

Multiple interviewees pointed out the need to shift the culture of postsecondary education along with the incentive structures. One funder interviewee said: “What does it mean to be a good faculty member? That definition needs to change and it needs to center students in a way that it has never done before.” Interviewees also identified a need for more research on how to train faculty and on curriculum and instruction at the postsecondary level more generally. One researcher shared: “The whole body of [research on] student learning from K-12 has not moved over to higher ed.” Finally, interviewees highlighted a need to design for the challenges of implementation in this area: “Not only are you [delivering professional learning] for all instructors, but you have to do it for each new generation because graduate programs aren’t structured that way.”

Institutional leadership can help or hinder efforts to center student experience, but they are often risk averse and focused on short-term rather than long-term change.

Interviewees discussed the importance of leadership in student experience-focused change efforts. One policy intermediary interviewee described her experience as a trustee reviewing and discussing data on students’ experience with institutional leadership. She acknowledged that data-driven action can come from the bottom up, but emphasized the importance of a commitment from leaders: “If you don’t put people and budget behind it, it’s unlikely to happen.”

Other interviewees named inspiring leaders at other institutions. But many perceived this type of attention to student experience as uncommon among institutional leaders, based on the incentive structures they are operating within. “Institutions are big bureaucracies,” another policy intermediary interviewee said. “They’re operating on how things have always been done, what’s most efficient.” A funder interviewee posited that because of turnover on institutional boards and leadership teams, the short term may outweigh the long term in their theories of change, which makes it difficult to pursue more complex and transformative initiatives.

The centrality of whiteness in conversations about student experience can also be a challenge to better supporting students from minoritized groups.

A few interviewees named challenges in having conversations about equity. One researcher described, “I get questions like, ‘if we focus on Hispanic students, what happens to white students?’ You wouldn’t ask that question if you were focused on equity... People are not ready to fully focus on the students that need it the most.” A policy intermediary interviewee similarly observed that it can be difficult for white people to understand what a lack of belonging on campus, for example, might feel like or how it might impact them, which can limit their willingness to take action on the issue. “Racism makes it really hard for people to challenge the narrative of individual responsibility in the context of students of color,” she added.

USING RESEARCH-BASED KNOWLEDGE

Research-based knowledge that (a) shows how changes in institutional and faculty behavior shape student experience and outcomes, and (b) takes into account what is needed for effective implementation can help empower leaders to make shifts in their work.

As mentioned above, research that demonstrates institutions’ role in shaping student experiences and outcomes can be a powerful tool. A number of scholars elevated the importance of research that illustrates not just key principles, but how they play out on the ground. One researcher highlighted the evaluation of the City University of New York (CUNY) ASAP program as having large effects that “you can’t ignore” and also demonstrating the types of shifts that are needed to achieve such results. “In general, marginal interventions have marginal effects,” she said. “Where we see large effects on things like completion are interventions [like CUNY ASAP] that take a different approach to building in structures and attending to the complexity of students’ lives.”

Another researcher described the importance of using an implementation science approach and being able to answer the question: “what are the conditions that need to be in place for these things to go well?” Knowing the answer to this question can help guide administrators who are seeking to implement an idea but are facing constraints in terms of capacity or logistics. (We discuss what is needed to conduct and enable this type of practically relevant research in more detail in the next section on field level needs.)

Synthesis and translation that make research on student experience more digestible can enhance the impact of the research.

Many interviewees cited the importance of translating research into concise, accessible formats that are realistic for practitioners and policymakers to take in given the limited time they have to engage with research. Given this context, it is important for translated materials to be catered to a specific audience and speak to that audience’s context. A couple of interviewees described visions for breaking down insights from research into more specific entry points, or into a set of priorities.

For example, a policy intermediary interviewee shared, “I could see a series of one- or two-pagers – what to do in admissions, financial aid, etc. [from the perspective of student experience]. Policy [actors] will rarely read more than a page, and maybe just the bullets.” Discussing communications with faculty and administrators, a funder interviewee wondered, “how might you assemble the components of student experience, and what the most significant student experiences are, and in particular, the most significant experiences for student groups

who have high equity gaps?” Across interviews, including many with researchers, there was recognition that this translational work did not necessarily need to be done by researchers, and requires a different set of skills than those that are often prioritized in academic settings.

Compelling, “sticky” storytelling and takeaways based on research can help institutional actors envision the change process.

Many interviewees reported the best results when postsecondary actors could see themselves in some way in the research being used. “When you show what an institution did to move the needle, that’s where there is excitement,” a policy intermediary interviewee explained. “At Florida State University, the previous provost led a data-driven change effort to close gaps. He did a lot of great storytelling... Both how he was using data from the actual students [at that campus], and how it made it so another school could pick it up.” Case studies can help make the research concrete and show other institutional actors what is possible.

SETTING UP SUPPORTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

Due to the bureaucratic nature of postsecondary institutions, change efforts must involve educating and engaging actors at all levels within the organization.

One policy intermediary interviewee described part of her work as getting “institutions to recognize the systemic nature of the change process... you’ve got to transform it for all the stakeholder groups and if you don’t, you’re just tinkering around the edges.” Another described how case-making and training for student experience work needs to happen throughout the institution, across roles and functions that may be siloed from each other.

One researcher also called for more knowledge-building around how practices and policies interact with each other within an institution: “We know some practices work... But it’s tough when they interact with department or university policies. For example, [policies related to] grading on a curve in STEM classes. That really limits faculty members’ course-specific practices on grading and ties their hands with some really inequitable practices.” This example illustrates the importance of coordination across and at all levels of the institution and taking the lens of student experience throughout.

Certain institutions, and people and spaces within institutions, may already be using a strong student experience lens, and their efforts can be supported and elevated.

Four interviewees named Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as leaders in attending to student experience; resources can be directed to these institutions to continue and expand their work. Two interviewees pointed out that student experience-focused change efforts are often led by faculty and staff from minoritized groups, e.g., staff and faculty of color, adjunct faculty members, and women. They called for changing university incentive structures to better support these groups and ensuring that the commitment to centering student experience is more evenly distributed, to avoid burnout. Additional researcher interviewees named other spaces that may be bright spots for centering student experience within institutions, including ethnic studies courses, cultural centers, or clubs and organizations that see high student engagement.

Professional learning communities can offer opportunities for skill-building, knowledge-sharing, and peer support that can assist efforts to better attend to student experience.

Interviewees, most commonly funder and policy intermediary interviewees, discussed professional learning communities as a valuable structure for helping institutional actors “make the leap” from understanding principles from research to applying research in practice. They offered examples of both intra- and cross-institution professional learning groups, which would create space for peer learning, vulnerability and practicing new skills, and having a community to be accountable to. Specific examples included: role-alike groups for deans of undergraduate studies or student affairs professionals across campuses, networks of faculty teaching common first-year courses at an institution, and low-stakes spaces to build racial literacy skills.

Disaggregated data can provide administrators and faculty with a fuller picture of their students and a more comprehensive understanding of their needs.

Interviewees described how, as a faculty member or administrator, having access to data about your students’ experiences can help to spur change. “You cannot fix what you cannot see,” one policy intermediary interviewee summarized. “And you cannot see unless you measure it.” Disaggregation of data is important. Another interviewee, who was formerly a faculty member, described: “There’s encouragement... to homogenize students and think of them as one thing... I never once was given an analysis of my equity gaps or given the data in a way that could turn on a light bulb for me and say, ‘I have to work on that.’”

Another policy intermediary interviewee shared an example that illustrates the potential for using data in a more proactive way, describing how an institution that knew a student was living independently or unhoused could reach out to offer housing assistance rather than putting the onus on the student to request services. Many interviewees also called for additional research on specific groups of students, like students who are multiply marginalized or students who have left postsecondary institutions without a degree or credential. Research like this can equip institutions with relevant knowledge that is specific to the population they are seeking to support.

WHAT IS CHALLENGING, HELPFUL, AND NEEDED AT THE FIELD LEVEL TO BUILD KNOWLEDGE, AWARENESS, CONNECTIVE TISSUE, AND WILL TO MAKE COLLECTIVE PROGRESS RELATED TO STUDENT EXPERIENCE?

BUILDING RESEARCH-BASED KNOWLEDGE

Interviewees identified a need for more support for practice-informed research – including time to build relationships between researchers and practitioners and training and capacity on both sides.

Many researcher interviewees described the challenges to conducting practice-informed research. Challenges arise as early as the conceptualization of a research project. One interviewee described: “What problems are researchers seeking to solve, what problem is the system seeking to solve, where is there overlap? [Figuring this out] is not trained, it’s disincentivized, and it takes a lot of resources.” For this researcher, starting up research-practice partnerships involves resource-intensive work including site visits, surveys, and focus groups to gather and synthesize data on a problem and make a plan for how to address it.

Another researcher summarized the challenges to carrying out practice-informed research given the constraints of academia. “Fellowships exist for dissertation and early career, but the systemic change stuff is difficult and when you have a grant on a specific topic, there’s so much management of it that it takes away from actually doing the work, especially for those of us not at a plush private institution... Getting seed money or release time is really difficult.”

Similar capacity issues are at play for practitioners involved in research. Another researcher observed from their experience in research-practice partnerships: “Institutions are not so happy to let people experiment because higher ed is underfunded in the first place, so we need financial resources for that too.” Researchers emphasized that practitioners must be supported not only for the implementation of a study, but also for the translation of that study into practically relevant insights.

Long-standing norms and professional incentives can lead to a fragmentation of the knowledge base across scholarly disciplines and methodologies, increasing the difficulty of gleaning a holistic and comprehensive set of practically relevant insights.

One funder interviewee shared an anecdote about seeking a landscape scan related to student experience that illustrated the difficulty of generating a “big picture” understanding of the research. “We were told it’s too big – scholars cover different pieces, someone covers the role of adjuncts, someone focuses on diversifying faculty and administrators, everybody has their own piece.” A researcher described how synthetic scholarship is more difficult to publish, because it requires more reviewers, and spoke to a lack of connections among scholars studying similar topical areas and across institutions, especially in research on higher education (as compared to other fields of research).

A lack of alignment in measurement across disciplines and developmental stages can also contribute to fragmentation in the research base. One researcher described: “Coming together around well-being, feeling valued, how do we measure those things? I don’t think there’s broad field understanding.” One researcher noted the need for measures specific to postsecondary contexts, saying that she often had to draw on measures developed for K-12 contexts. A researcher also highlighted differences in measurement across different levels of sophistication in terms of centering equity. She used the survey measure, “How color neutral are you?” as an example. “That’s not liberatory – that’s an individual measure of people’s perceptions of things like affirmative action vs. [a liberatory survey measure like] ‘I feel that I want to serve my community after having this experience.’”

Interviewees recommended documenting best practices for attending to student experience, for example from HBCUs, to build the field’s knowledge and capacity.

As mentioned above, case studies and concrete examples were cited as helpful for informing shifts in practices, policies, and norms to better support student experience, because they can make the case for these shifts at other institutions. This is especially true when research establishes a connection between the shifts and student outcomes. Four interviewees named HBCUs, in particular, as leaders in attending to student experience, and Tribal Colleges and Universities and other Minority Serving Institutions may also be a source of best practices in this area.

CONNECTING ACTORS IN THE POSTSECONDARY SECTOR

Better coordination across intermediary organizations and across research, practice, and policy can support coherent change strategies within institutions and the field.

Interviewees pointed out various needs for greater coordination. One observation across interviews was that intermediary organizations often focus their programming on a particular student demographic or aspect of education. This can complicate the process of coming together around shared priorities as a field, or even within an institution that is working with multiple intermediary partners.

Another need interviewees identified was capacity for research translation. Interviewees noted that researchers can connect with partners who can help translate and disseminate research insights. A number of interviewees pointed to existing bodies of research that they considered underutilized (e.g., research on faculty diversity). Additional bridging across sectors can help to not only translate new research, but lift up existing research and incorporate it into field conversations, for example when an aligned policy window arises.

Convening actors across institutions and sectors can support the field's ability to attend to student experience, but such efforts require careful attention to how people are brought together to yield productive, respectful engagement.

Multiple interviewees discussed spaces and mechanisms for convening. While acknowledging the value of spaces for knowledge-building and sharing, professional learning, and coordination and alignment, they also offered some cautions. We heard a need for carefully designing and scaffolding these types of engagements between actors who may not have shared language or prior experience working together. One policy intermediary interviewee specifically noted, “the reality is that we’re all competing for the same foundation dollars. You have to acknowledge that while seeking to build collaboration and it can’t be a free-for-all with intellectual property.”

PROVIDING RESOURCES

Constraints on what is “fundable” were identified as a barrier to resourcing field needs.

Interviewees discussed a number of examples related to funding constraints. One funder spoke to philanthropic boards’ desire for “transformational” impact, which he said could lead to frustration when not paired with a theory of change that accounts for how deeply embedded structures in postsecondary education are and how difficult they are to shift. This can reduce the funding appetite for initiatives that do not promise transformational results on relatively short timelines.

One policy intermediary named a reticence by foundations to pursue major policy campaigns that could change incentives for postsecondary institutions. Two researchers spoke to the mismatch between both public and private funders’ strategic priorities, language, and frameworks as compared to the priorities, language, and frameworks of researchers, particularly researchers conducting equity-centered scholarship. They felt that to secure funding they had to “make concessions” in terms of the theoretical approach or “package [a research project] the right way.” One funder also named the challenge of coordinating with other funders who use different language to refer to similar work.

Researchers who are not already connected to funder networks and know-how are disadvantaged in accessing resources.

Three researchers spoke to the difficulty of tapping into philanthropic networks. Opportunities for funding that are not advertised broadly or do not use more open structures and those that researchers are used to (e.g., RFPs) rely on informal networks to disseminate information and specialized know-how about fundraising and penetrating philanthropic funder networks.

“Funders go to the most senior scholars, most well-connected, etc.” one researcher described. “There’s no expectation from funders for senior scholars to collaborate across generation, institution, or race or gender... I don’t think funders are usually thinking about how to broaden who is supported.” Another researcher pointed out how this dynamic can block earlier career scholars from testing promising approaches for changing structures to support student experience outside their own context, if they don’t have access to the financial resources or visibility to connect with other institutional partners and run a larger study.

Funders’ processes and grant structures may need to shift to support research activities that can help advance the field of student experience.

Researcher interviewees described how philanthropic priorities can influence the types of scholarship that researchers take on, whether in certain topical areas or using certain methodologies. They also called for shifts in the design of funding structures that recognize the timelines, need for relationship-building and adaptability, and greater resource intensity of practically relevant, interdisciplinary research.

One researcher shared: “One challenge with funding is the timeframe. You apply and you hear back eight months later with a no and you have to restart. Can there be a more rapid turnaround? Or smaller development grants where maybe the idea is less well-developed but you want time to read about it, have a conversation, whatever it is. Smaller opportunities like that – idea genesis grants. Also just funding to begin relationships or fund activities that sustain relationships but don’t have deliverables. Can you go visit your research site to have a few days of meeting together?” These types of activities could require greater flexibility in grant funding, including prioritizing core support funds.

As mentioned above, needing time (e.g., in the form of course buyouts or fellowships) was echoed by other researchers. The need for relationship-building and coordination with practice partners also came up in multiple interviews, as did a need for funding that allowed for “intellectual curiosity” and experimentation not strictly tied to deliverables, which can lead to promising innovations.

Another researcher pointed out that when looking to intervene on structures within postsecondary institutions, the “financial resources to do a study that is well-powered enough are very expensive.” She shared the example of changing structures within a biology department, in which you would need to partner with many departments across institutions in order to deliver practically relevant insights about what works across contexts.

All of these examples point to a need for shifts in funding structures and processes to enable the kind of academic research and research-practice collaborations that can yield practically relevant insights and drive change in postsecondary institutions.