KNOWLEDGE BASE

1. Expand applied research that enables structural change in education to support student experience

The people SERN engaged observed wider acceptance among education leaders that student experience matters, and signaled a **pressing need for applied research that can advance understanding of how practices, policies, and norms can better support student experience—and how such structures can be changed** within complex social systems and across diverse local contexts. This entails applied research on contextualized approaches that reshape the system itself. Centering students who are most marginalized in the current system in these redesign efforts stands to uplift experiences and outcomes for all students.

People named the following applied research activities that can enhance understanding and action related to real-world structural change:

Evaluate existing efforts to transform practices, policies, and norms to support student experience, including how transformation was implemented and its impact on meaningful near- and longer-term outcomes.

Study how education actors effectively advance efforts to support student experience, including the enabling conditions and resources that support structural change within systems and institutions.

Investigate variation in these approaches, including how they can be designed and adapted based on local context, and heterogeneity in the effects of structural change on student experience and outcomes. These types of studies that look across multiple contexts require significant resources. Researchers and practitioners, especially those who are less well networked and resourced, who have demonstrated promising approaches to structural change in one context may require support with connections and funding to adapt and assess approaches in additional contexts.

SERN's field engagement reinforced what others have observed about the need to change how priorities are set and who is engaged in producing applied research.

Involve both researchers and education actors – including students, families, community members, and educators closest to the issue – in identifying areas for new knowledge-building and funding priorities, to ensure that research meets their collective needs and increase the likelihood that research will be used. While this work is inherently complex, it is supported by previous efforts to develop frameworks (e.g., community-engaged research; participatory action research; research-practice partnerships) and document successes and challenges in research that includes actors outside of academia.

Engage in and incentivize partnerships between academic researchers and education actors, including students, families, community members, and educators. These partnerships should be grounded in principles of equitable collaboration and shared power. Such partnerships require additional time to establish trust, develop shared agreements, align on processes, and engage in training. These activities require additional financial resources and time since they involve multiple actors, are not aligned with typical incentive structures within academia, and counter dominant approaches to conducting research.

student experience
RESEARCH NETWORK

Several topics garnered particular interest for future applied research.

Applications from researchers and practice and policy organizations to SERN's final funding opportunity in 2023 as part of our sunset covered topics in both K-12 and postsecondary education, including:

- Civil rights protections
- Culturally responsive and sustaining approaches in the context of academic instruction, measurement, mental health and healing, and other supports for students
- Curriculum, instruction, and other supports that can enhance students' sense of belonging, including a focus on K-12 and postsecondary STEM contexts
- Developing new research-based, equity-centered narratives and messaging on student experience for system leaders and policymakers
- Educator beliefs and practice across both K-12 and postsecondary contexts, including supporting educators to change beliefs and practices, use data on student experience to inform improvement efforts, engage in stronger relationship-building with students, and receive feedback on their practice through student-reported and observational measures
- Family engagement
- How certain institutions might enhance students' experience of school and outcomes, including Historically Black

Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Minority Serving Institutions, as well as community schools in K-12
- Improving diversity, equity, and inclusion practices, tools, and leadership in education organizations
- Institution- and system-level policy and practice change in support of equitable student experiences in two- and four-year postsecondary institutions
- Measurement of student experience
- Mental health, healing, and wellness
- Preparing new K-12 educators to support student experience
- Recruiting, supporting, and retaining K-12 educators of color and Indigenous educators
- School discipline policies and practices in K-12 education
- Student voice in K-12 and postsecondary contexts
- Youth development and collaboration between schools and communities

Interviewees that SERN spoke to about student experience in postsecondary education named faculty practice and faculty hiring, with a focus on recruiting and retaining faculty from minoritized groups within academia, as essential but underemphasized levers for addressing student experience. They also recommended documenting best practices for attending to student experience, for example from Historically Black Colleges and Universities and specific spaces within institutions, to build the field's knowledge and capacity.