

INFRASTRUCTURE

8. Sustain, deepen, and build new relationships within the student experience field, particularly across silos

The people SERN gathered input from noted that part of SERN's legacy is a greater number of relationships within the field, especially across traditional silos (e.g., across disciplines in research; across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy). They called for the **nurturing of emergent cross-silo relationships as well as the formation of new relationships**. As SERN sunsets, there is an opportunity for others to establish the types of infrastructure SERN provided for [research](#) and [education](#) actors to engage in relationship-building activities.

Engage in and encourage relationship-building and collaboration in your areas of work.

Invest time and financial resources to deepen emerging partnerships between researchers and practice and policy actors.

Partner with and fund [entities](#) that build the capacity of [researchers to develop ongoing relationships with policy actors](#), in line with [evidence](#) on research use in policymaking.

Continue to reach out to individuals you have met who care about student experience, both within your silo (e.g., your own sub-field in education, your own academic discipline) and especially across silos (e.g., another sub-field of education, another discipline, a different sector – such as research or practice).

Consider how you can share lessons, thought partner, elevate each other's work, and, in some cases, pursue formal partnerships.

SERN's work and the input we gathered highlighted the need to reconceptualize how relationship-building is resourced in terms of time and money. Relationship-building is critical yet often invisible and under-resourced work.

Incorporate an explicit focus on relationship-building into funding [opportunities](#) and proposals. Consider how the context in which relationship-building is happening may inform the type and level of resourcing required (e.g.,

consider what behind-the-scenes work will need to happen to bridge across silos and which incentives for collaboration will be needed, as well as the local and historical context in which the relationship-building is taking place).

Solicit and provide resources that build capacity for relationship and partnership building.

Consider how to recognize relationships as vital pathways to impact in measurement and evaluation strategies, including normalizing (and not penalizing) that not every relationship or partnership will work out as intended.

Continue to identify and connect people and organizations with relevant interests and expertise to the student experience field.

When convening tables, inviting experts (e.g., as speakers, reviewers, advisors), or exploring new partnerships, consider whom you might invite outside of your existing relationships.

Not all of these “first dates” will lead to long-term partnerships, but they are necessary to expand the web of relationships and knowledge exchange within the field over time.

Identify people who are “nodes” in topics you wish to learn more about and who – directly or through their publicly available work – can help you map additional people with relevant expertise you do not yet know.