

Becoming a Field Catalyst

This piece was authored by Molly Watkins and draws on documentation provided by Student Experience Research Network (SERN), conversations with SERN staff and partners, and a third-party assessment of SERN's impact.

According to The Bridgespan Group's [research on field catalysts](#), "equitable systems change requires a diverse set of actors playing distinct and complementary roles across a field or ecosystem." Field catalysts like Student Experience Research Network "harmonize and drive that multifaceted work, serving as a kind of nerve center for the matrix of activity needed to transform our inequitably designed systems."¹ Unlike traditional direct service or advocacy organizations, field catalysts are not interested in scaling programs or organizations. Instead, they focus on large-scale impact by brokering relationships, coordinating learning and information-sharing, and facilitating shared strategies and goals across actors throughout the ecosystem.

The Bridgespan Group finds that "most field catalysts use adaptive strategies and often learn their way toward equitable systems change." To measure impact, these organizations rarely use traditional metrics, instead "[relying] on a varying set of indicators to gauge if the conditions holding inequities in place have shifted." These indicators can include "changes in policy and institutional practices, the strengthening of relationships and networks among stakeholders across the field, or the changing of narratives and shifting of mindsets."²

SERN was not founded as a field catalyst – the designation didn't exist then and the early focus of the organization was to facilitate large-scale interdisciplinary studies of mindset interventions. But SERN grew into the field catalyst role over time. Some of the reasons for this were circumstantial and some were intentional. But SERN's inclination toward listening to and engaging with its partners was present from the start. An example of this was when SERN convened its scholarly community for the first time. Some questions emerged during the convening from members who wanted to better understand what the network really was and who was driving the agenda. After that, the executive director held a series of conversations to get to know what would be of value to them.

What the executive director heard from the SERN membership mirrored conversations with others in practice, policy, and philanthropy during this period: The research SERN was founded on – about students' learning mindsets – sparked in them a drive to understand the role the learning environment played in shaping students' beliefs about their ability to learn, their sense of belonging, and the perceived relevance of their schoolwork. This series of conversations was the start of a practice that formed the basis of SERN's approach throughout its lifespan – one of consistent, systematic engagement with the field to both understand its needs and push it forward. In its first year, SERN was already starting to look like a field catalyst.

^{1,2} Farnham, L., Nothmann, E., Crouch, K., & Daniels, C. (2023). Equitable Systems Change: Funding Field Catalysts from Origins to Revolutionizing the World. The Bridgespan Group. <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/funding-field-catalysts>



SERN's Impact as a Field Catalyst

The pace of SERN's maturation into a field catalyst quickened as it realized that if it wanted the research it was stewarding to have an impact in the education field, it must systematically engage the broad range of actors within it – in SERN's case, that meant practice and policy organizations and education funders – in addition to researchers.

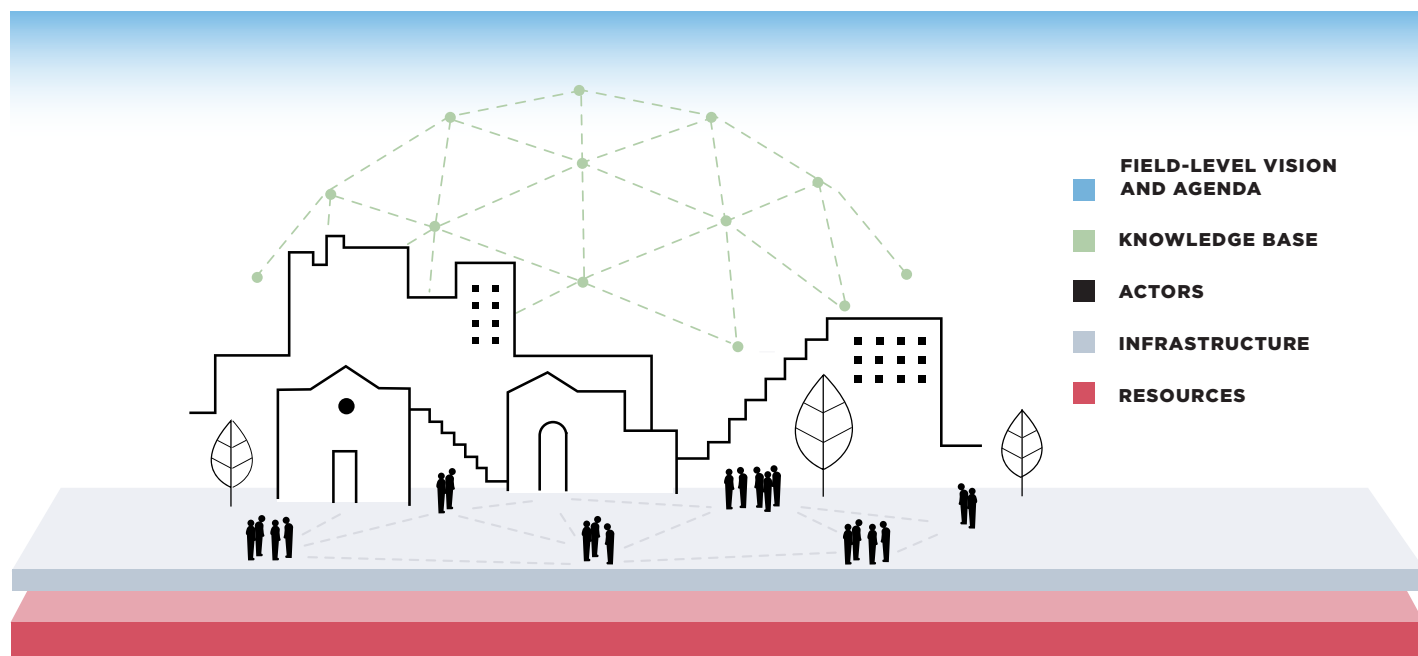
SERN's positioning at the intersection of research, practice, policy, and philanthropy meant that it could serve as a connector, sharing insights between sectors. Scholars who engaged with SERN valued opportunities to collaborate within the research community and for their research to have a greater social impact. Practice, policy, and philanthropic actors valued SERN's familiarity with a deep body of research knowledge and its synthesis and translation of that knowledge. Over the course of several years, what had started as a relatively small group of researchers studying mindset interventions became a “big tent” hub of relationship-building, knowledge generation, and research mobilization.

Ultimately, SERN engaged with a diverse group of hundreds of influential education actors across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy in

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service of producing and using research to help build learning environments where all students are respected as valued people and thinkers. Through this hub, SERN punched above its weight and by the time of its strategic sunset, it had contributed significantly to the student experience field across all five characteristics of field development that The Bridgespan Group cites in its research on field catalysts. (See the following page for an illustration of SERN's impact.)

CHARACTERISTICS OF FIELD DEVELOPMENT AND SERN'S IMPACT



DEFINITIONS³

FIELD-LEVEL VISION AND AGENDA

The combination of approaches field actors will pursue to address barriers and develop solutions to the field's focal problem or issue.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

The body of academic research and practical knowledge that helps actors better understand the issues at hand, and identifies and analyzes shared barriers.

ACTORS

The set of individuals and organizations that together help the field develop a sense of shared identity and common vision.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The "connective tissue" that enables greater innovation, collaboration, and improvement among a field's actors over time.

RESOURCES

Financial and non-financial capital that supports the field's actors and infrastructure.

SERN'S IMPACT

FIELD-LEVEL VISION AND AGENDA

The concept of student experience is "on the map" in that a wider set of influential education leaders, funders, and researchers now see student experience as connected to their work and feel responsible for stewarding it forward.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

A larger body of practically relevant, interdisciplinary research is contributing to our understanding of student experience, and key findings from this research have been identified, synthesized into a coherent body of insights, and made accessible to actors outside of academia.

ACTORS

A broader, more diverse group of scholars have gained recognition for their research and leadership in the student experience field.

INFRASTRUCTURE

There are stronger relationships and growing collaboration in the field, both among researchers and across sectors and silos (e.g., across research and practice), as well as increasing practical application of insights from student experience research.

RESOURCES

Funders are allocating more resources to projects that integrate student experience and related concepts, and SERN's re-granting directed more philanthropic funding to racially minoritized scholars and early career scholars in the field.

³ Farnham, L., Nothmann, E., Tamaki, Z., & Daniels, C. (2020). Field Building for Population-Level Change. The Bridgespan Group. <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/field-building-for-population-level-change>



Thanks to SERN and others, the concept of student experience is “on the map,” in that a wider set of influential education leaders, funders, and researchers now see student experience as connected to their work and feel responsible for stewarding its progress. More practically relevant, interdisciplinary research on student experience exists because of SERN and key student experience research findings have been identified and synthesized into a coherent body of insights and made accessible to actors outside academia who are using it to inform their work. And a broader, more diverse group of scholars have gained recognition for their research and field leadership. SERN also helped to create stronger relationships

and increase collaboration in the field, both among researchers and across other groups in education. Because SERN was regularly engaging with its partners in the field and in adjacent spaces, it was in a good position to broker relationships between people based on shared interests and increase the practical application of student experience research in education. Funders are allocating more resources to projects that integrate student experience and related concepts, and through its initiatives, SERN re-granted funds from education philanthropies to a more racially diverse group of scholars as well as to more early and midcareer scholars from a range of disciplines and institutions.

SERN's Approach to Field-Building

Field-building work requires specific skills, capacity, and ways of working that can drive outsized impact, but can be difficult competencies to build and maintain. [SERN's experience](#) provides insight into what it took to advance progress in the student experience field.

Field catalysts like SERN take on several activities in support of collective progress, including brokering and supporting relationships; enabling joint learning; helping the field develop a common strategy; garnering funding and re-granting to other organizations in the field; translating academic research and practical knowledge; and tracking collective progress toward shared goals.

SERN had underlying skills and assets that drove its success as a field catalyst (documented by a third-party impact assessment) including its depth and breadth of relevant knowledge, attention to ecosystems and power, a relationships-first approach, and a service and growth orientation. Importantly, the impact assessment revealed that it wasn't just *what* SERN did but *how* it did it that unlocked its impact in the field.

Depth and breadth of relevant knowledge. SERN had a deep knowledge of research and researchers in the field, as well as an ability to understand the contexts of multiple actors across education and communicate effectively with all of them. The importance SERN placed on precise and inclusive language and careful framing to build buy-in among and between its partners was essential to its success as a field catalyst. Researchers felt they could trust SERN to translate their work accurately and practice and policy audiences trusted SERN to be a credible representative and translator of the research. SERN's knowledge

management, translational syntheses, events, and advising expanded the scholars and scholarship that education actors were exposed to and democratized access to the latest research knowledge in the field.

SERN's careful focus on language was essential in the work of building, expanding, and promoting inclusion in a heterogenous tent. SERN was able to speak to different groups across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy in a way they would recognize and feel affinity with, which enhanced SERN's ability to broker relationships between people and organizations for future collaboration.

Attention to ecosystems and power. SERN's navigation of complex ecosystems and power dynamics was also essential in the work of breaking down silos between disciplines and sectors. SERN was capable of bringing together leaders from across the field who did not typically interact. SERN engaged in extensive preparation with participants before events to provide scaffolding to both sides of a conversation, based on participants' context and situational power, so that the work of bridging would be more fruitful. It worked to create spaces where people could have productive disagreement and feel safe to ask questions and share challenges. It also put careful thought into the voices it was centering when it convened its partners and consistently tried to represent and bring a wider range of voices, approaches, and perspectives to the table – from small, specialized interactions, to its larger funder briefings.

Through strategic re-granting and fellowships, SERN elevated the profiles of scholars from

minoritized groups and invested in early and midcareer scholars' leadership. These activities strengthened the field and distributed opportunities for funding, professional learning, and community-building more equitably.

Relationships-first approach. Relationships were essential to SERN's work, and it took a human-centered and strategic approach to building and sustaining them. It conducted organizational relationship reviews yearly and staff regularly talked about what they were hearing from their partners and how individuals and organizations were engaging in initiatives. SERN kept a calendar of communications with partners to ensure the team was tailoring requests based on a broader context, spreading requests among their community, and making sure they never piled too many on at once. And SERN consistently sought to learn from its partners and better understand their work and context.

SERN's events were continually referenced as important spaces for sharing ideas, building relationships, and increasing collaboration. It acted as a thought partner to organizations and individuals to help them unpack research insights and reconsider their work with this new lens and it supported the creation of new relationships across silos among field actors.

SERN prioritized trust in all of its external engagement, by being transparent, keeping confidences, and seeking and acting on input from partners.

Service and growth orientation. SERN was highly adaptive in responding to what the field needed. This required having systems in place that allowed it to do so. And it took time and some trial and error for SERN to develop the processes and skills that ultimately helped make it an effective field catalyst. As SERN's executive director Lisa Quay said, "It takes a fair amount of planning to be nimble."

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— LISA QUAY,
SERN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Strong project scoping and project management were essential on a small team taking on a large volume of consistently evolving work. SERN over-scoped some work in the beginning, learned from it, and got better over time. If a staff member announced they were leaving SERN, or new external factors arose, the team could review the detailed work plans to better make tradeoffs.

SERN had a strong feedback culture, both internally and externally. Team members gave and received feedback on all the work they did together. SERN also regularly sought feedback from external partners both formally and informally and made changes based on the feedback to continuously learn and grow. These changes, to internal processes or in work done with the wider field, were always communicated back to demonstrate how SERN was responding to feedback, which enhanced relational trust. SERN also demonstrated a willingness to give away its intellectual capital and credit, and this collaborative orientation bolstered the field's sense of trust in the organization as well.

Notably, data from the third-party impact assessment and SERN's own feedback data it gathered on all of its events and initiatives over the years illustrated that these skills and assets are observable and measurable, and also can be improved—and that they were meaningfully experienced by the people SERN engaged.

The Role of Philanthropy

Philanthropic support is essential to a field catalyst. No organization is ever going to turn a profit doing this kind of work. SERN's funders recognized this, and they invested in SERN performing this role, flexibly, for several years. This is a rarity in philanthropy.

Every funder interviewed for this piece said that SERN [engaged with them differently](#) than other grantees. Each felt brought along on a learning journey; their networks and knowledge expanded. Ninety-five percent of the 20 funder respondents to a survey about SERN's impact said they applied research takeaways to their work because of engaging with SERN. Further, more than half of funders surveyed said SERN changed how they funded. SERN connected funders to a diverse pool of researchers and strategically re-granted philanthropic funds based on its deep knowledge of scholars and scholarship. It deepened its funders' understanding of the role of field catalysts and the need for philanthropy to support them.

What will it take for more funders to understand this imperative and increase support for organizations like SERN in education and other fields? One way is thinking about measurement and impact differently.

SERN's four strategic priorities, and the leading indicators the organization developed to track progress on each of them, were not geared toward the traditional ways in which philanthropy measures impact, like number of students served. In its final three-year strategy adopted in 2020, SERN's priorities were:

1. **Synthesize, translate, and disseminate key research insights that can inform decision-making by education systems and institutions.**
2. **Serve as a trusted thought partner and provide advice to organizations that shape decision making by education systems and institutions.**
3. **Broker connections among research, practice, and policy that can build relevant knowledge and advance the application of research insights to inform institution and system-level decisions in education.**
4. **Enable practically relevant interdisciplinary research on student experience.**

SERN's strategy was designed to ensure that the small team deployed resources in ways that were valuable to the field, while remaining flexible so it could be responsive to the specific needs and opportunities that arose. SERN made significant progress on each of its priorities, in service of its ultimate goal of generating and mobilizing research knowledge to improve the decisions made by education system and institution leaders in order to create a system that respects every student as a valued person and thinker.

While many foundation staff recognize the need for this adaptive, field-level type of impact, a larger number of senior leaders, principals, and boards of foundations need to better understand and value the kind of service field catalysts provide and see it as essential to achieving systems-level change alongside – and as a necessary complement to – investments in the organizations and systems that conduct work on the ground. Often, field catalyst activities are overlooked when strategies are being set within foundations, leaving program officers with little leeway to include field catalysts in their portfolios.

If funders do support a field catalyst, it should be through general operating support without strings attached given the type of work field catalysts engage in. The funder will get more from the relationship if they are there to learn and provide feedback, rather than dictate the approach. While SERN was pleased to receive funding from MacKenzie Scott (who provides general operating support to grantees but does not engage further with the organizations she funds), it appreciated being in strategic conversation with its funders because that is in part how it operated as a field catalyst.

Funders, in turn, can benefit from partnerships with field catalysts by gaining perspective, connections, and lessons from the wider field that allow them to more effectively advance systems change. For example, because of the expansive conversations happening at the tables SERN set and how SERN staff engaged funders one-on-one and in small groups, funders were able to get a sense of where the field was moving to and what its needs were in a way that helped them in their broader work, outside of their relationship with SERN. As described below, SERN also enhanced the effectiveness of funders' other grantee partners.

Even the most flexible of funders have a strategy they are following so even though SERN's funders appreciated the role it was playing, for some funders, when their strategies began to move further downstream toward application of the ideas in the research or to respond to the increasing politicization of education, and away from investments in scholars and more traditional academic research, their funding of SERN decreased. And for some philanthropies that never funded SERN but benefited (both themselves and their grantees) from access to the research-based knowledge and relationships SERN provided them, they didn't have an allocation in their budget for this type of field-level service. The case for funding organizations like SERN remains, however, even if

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field catalysts nor academic research are a core feature of a particular funder's strategy, given that both have roles to play in enabling the systems change funders seek in education.

Additionally, what funders may not realize is the way in which field catalysts are in fact performing a function for other organizations that funders support and who may represent the "core" of the funder's strategy. As heard in interviews and surveys with its partners as part of its impact assessment, SERN allowed these organizations and individuals to focus on what they are uniquely positioned to do (e.g., do research, provide supports to districts, develop curriculum) but made these field actors smarter and better through the tailored capacity-building and connections it offered to knowledge and other actors in the field. What SERN provided to others led to new partnerships and projects, changes in programming and learning agendas, new funding, and shifts in strategies. The "value add" that SERN brought to the partners that were part of its orbit was the equivalent of having additional skilled staff positions, consultants, professional learning opportunities, and platforms for networking and amplification. That must be part of the consideration for funders when deciding to decrease or end support for a field catalyst or to not invest in them in the first place. Through its sunset, SERN is aiming to help seed this capacity in the field, but it most likely won't be fully replaced.



Lessons Learned

Doing field catalyst work well is hard. It requires an ability to bridge across silos and sectors, which SERN was able to do successfully by hiring for and developing the unique set of skills needed to do this highly relational and adaptive work. It also tended to work with consultants repeatedly once they had the depth of familiarity and capabilities that SERN needed. But if it wanted to grow (and had the funds to do so) and be sustainable in the long term it would have entailed finding and cultivating a larger pool of people with the right skillset to hire as staff and senior leadership.

[Recent research](#) on field catalysts confirms this is a common issue, pointing to an urgent need to identify and develop more professionals and leaders with the ability to span boundaries and serve fields in these ways. Fifty-seven percent of field catalysts surveyed across a diverse set of fields and geographies said internal staff capacity is a major challenge; funding and talent were by far the biggest challenges named by field catalyst leaders. Field catalyst work is different from other organizational models in that the team needs to

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think strategically at an ecosystem level and be able to quickly adapt and evolve in response to a changing environment. Difficulty in finding and keeping this capacity can weaken field catalysts and limit their impact.

In SERN's case, it increasingly invested over time in professional learning and organizational processes tailored to its work, as well as competitive compensation to recruit, develop, and retain staff. These investments yielded significant returns in terms of staff development and long-term retention, although the organization still grappled with ensuring sufficient team capacity and staff and leadership burnout given both the nature of field catalyst work and the larger societal context in recent years.

Doing field catalyst work well takes time and financial resources. The work SERN was doing to grow their coalition is time-intensive, personal, relational work. It requires resources that allow an organization to act in ways that are aligned with what the field needs. In SERN's case, it needed to raise pools of funds that it could distribute in re-granting to build relationships and community with a heterogeneous group of researchers with relevant knowledge. SERN also needed the ability to invest in knowledge-building and convening activities that were relevant across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy. In moments of urgency – such as responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice uprising in 2020 and the growing,

politicized attacks on public education and marginalized groups – both short-term and long-term approaches are necessary, but that often only becomes clear in retrospect.

Everyone has a role to play in supporting the work of field catalysts. Both funders and others who benefit from field catalysts can advocate for them, point out when and where they are needed in a field, and contribute things like time, relationships, and perspectives on the field and its needs to them. They can also report back to field catalysts how their work has impacted them, which will help field catalysts understand, improve, and tell the impact story of their work. SERN benefited tremendously from both funders and non-funders providing these vital non-financial resources. Organizations and individuals can also integrate lessons and functions from the work of field catalysts, including brokering relationships and setting them up for success; sharing information; staying apprised of trends, bright spots, and needs in the field; organizing and contributing to field-level convenings; and advocating for ideas in the field.

It's not easy to describe the work of field catalysts – their work often can't be distilled into a catchy tag line, simple impact metric, or elevator pitch. But if long-term, population-level systems change is what's needed, field catalysts are essential.

And they need consistent, long-term, unrestricted philanthropic funding and the support of the partners they help connect and marshal in the field to have the impact we all want to see.