

## PRIORITIES FOR THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE FIELD: HIGHLIGHTS FOR FUNDERS

Leading up to and throughout SERN's strategic sunset, which concluded in May 2023, we had the opportunity to systematically gather input from our community about how to enable continued progress toward an education system that consistently and equitably supports [students' experience of respect as valued people and thinkers](#). We heard that our partners are eager to continue and expand work that SERN started, as well as pursue new directions for the field.

SERN surfaced a set of forward-looking priorities for the student experience field from nearly 90 conversations, more than 125 survey responses, and other insights from our projects – including a review of more than 50 proposals for funding under SERN's Sunset Grant Portfolio. This input came from a diverse group of researchers, practice and policy leaders, and funders. For each field-generated priority, we developed calls to action, which are designed to help our partners advance these priorities immediately and in the future.

We provide multiple, interconnected entry points for different individuals and organizations and acknowledge that not every call to action will feel relevant to every reader. The calls to action place an emphasis on research and research use given the nature of SERN's work. They take into consideration the [state of the field and the social, economic, and political context](#) faced by students and educators in the United States. We also recognize that many readers and their colleagues are already committed to acting on these priorities – and some are serving as leaders and models for the field. We are sharing the information we have gathered about energy and needs in the field not to minimize existing efforts, but to contribute to alignment and shared progress. **Read this [memo](#) for the complete set of priorities and calls to action. Below are highlights for funders.**

### Advance student experience-centered systems change in education

**Take a student experience lens to your work.** Center student experience – both insights from research and the lived experiences of students themselves – in your strategy and goals, project and grantee selection, communications, and measurement and evaluation. Talk about student experience with others and share compelling new research, case studies, stories from students, and resources.

**Align with other funders and field partners to advance agenda-setting and coordinated action on high-impact and high-leverage topics in education connected to student experience.** The following topics garnered particular interest among the people SERN engaged for continued agenda-setting and coordinated action in service of improving student experience. Many researchers and organizations have been making progress in these areas for a long time, and the field could benefit from continued investment and aligned activities.

*Make an affirmative, research-based case for why K-12 and postsecondary schools should attend to student experience. Demonstrate that institutions have the ability and responsibility to improve student experience equitably and that attending to student experience affects outcomes that matter to the people you engage.*

*Facilitate K-12 and postsecondary educators' and system leaders' ability to improve student experience by supporting shifts in their own practice and the structures that surround them. Areas raised by SERN's community included:*

- Providing supportive, lower-stakes professional learning opportunities for educators and system leaders to understand how they can improve student experience within their spheres.

- Including in assessment and accountability systems supportive conditions and outcomes valued by students, families, and communities, including those connected to student experience.
- Providing greater access to and more culturally relevant and sustaining support for mental health and well-being among both students and educators. Consider how broader structures in education can be changed to better support students' and educators' mental health.
- Advancing the development and use of data from measures that better capture the diverse and nuanced ways that students experience school and the factors that shape that experience to inform efforts to improve practice and policy.
- Contributing to organizing, messaging, and legal work that protects equity-centered policies and practices that can support student experience and the educators and administrators who are implementing them.

*Study, elevate, and encourage policies that support individuals, educational contexts, and institutions poised to have an outsized impact on student experience, especially for students, families, and communities that have been marginalized.* Examples raised by SERN's community included Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Minority Serving Institutions; educators of color and Indigenous educators in K-12 and postsecondary contexts; ethnic studies courses and departments in K-12 and postsecondary contexts; and collaboration between community-based youth development programs and schools. They also noted the need to address resource equity issues that have led to systemic underinvestment in these people and institutions.

**For more detail, read priorities [#6](#) and [#7](#).**

## Continue to build the student experience field

**Continue to identify and connect people and organizations with relevant interests and expertise to the field of student experience.** When convening tables, inviting experts, or exploring new partnerships, consider whom you might invite outside your existing relationships. 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.

**Use financial and non-financial resources to support relationship building in the student experience field, especially across research, practice, and policy silos.**

*Reconceptualize how the critical yet often invisible and under-resourced work of relationship building is supported in terms of time and money, and integrated as a key pathway to impact in your strategies.*

- Incorporate an explicit focus on relationship building into funding opportunities. This may include more flexible and smaller-scale funding for exploratory stage relationship building; support for deepening and extending existing partnerships; and funding or hosting field-level gatherings. Provide flexible funding that supports relationship building, understanding that the specific context for the relationship building will shape the type of resourcing and timelines required.
- Support entities and initiatives that create conditions for cross-sector relationship building. Provide resources that build field capacity for relationship and partnership building, especially across silos.
- Consider how to recognize and integrate relationships as vital pathways to impact in your strategies, investment portfolios, and measurement and evaluation approaches.

*Facilitate knowledge sharing and relationship building between practitioners, policy actors, funders, and researchers, especially scholars from minoritized groups.*

- Fund, and where invited and appropriate, participate in gatherings that bring together people across silos to extend the latest thinking and practice in the student experience field, across (and within) research, practice, and policy. Thought partnership and connections are also valuable.
- Fund initiatives and entities designed to support professional learning opportunities and relationship building between researchers and practice / policy actors, especially those that are designed by and for scholars from minoritized groups. Use your platform, influence, and funding that involves academic institutions to encourage [changes to their practices and norms](#) to better support (and stop disincentivizing and penalizing) these scholars' [bridging activities](#).

**Contribute to a diverse, multidisciplinary, and inclusive field of scholarship on student experience.** Funding inequities, as well as other structures and biases in academia, have [limited](#) our research-based understanding of human development and social phenomena, and many studies have shown the importance of diversity for generating solutions that are innovative and impactful. Research has also shown that while scholars from marginalized groups, including scholars of color and women, are more likely to innovate and conduct work that [spans important boundaries](#) and [conduct research with more diverse groups of participants](#), their novel scholarship is more likely to be “[devalued and discounted](#).” Understanding and addressing complex social issues like how structures shape student experience requires multiple disciplinary and methodological perspectives in addition to diversity in both participants and researchers. Changing these patterns requires both near- and longer-term efforts to challenge pervasive beliefs, behaviors, and practices among funders and in academia.

*Elevate scholars of color and early career scholars and their research on student experience.*

- Visibly cite the research of scholars of color and early career scholars.
- Encourage gatekeepers in academia – including scholars and higher education leaders that you partner with, fund, consult with, and advise – to make changes to their practices and norms that shape who is funded, published, cited, hired, awarded tenure, and promoted, as well as those that contribute to [the various forms of exclusion](#) faced by scholars of color in academia.

*Fund scholars of color and early career scholars and compensate them for their work, and design opportunities that are responsive to the needs and interests of these scholars.*

- Fund scholars of color and early career scholars and [rectify public and private grantmaking practices](#) that advantage white scholars and more established scholars and [disadvantage scholars of color](#) and earlier career scholars, which [negatively affect](#) retention and the research that is produced.
- Share information on speaker and advisory fees so that people can be paid equitably.
- Seek and act on information from scholars of color and early career scholars to understand how to better support and partner with them, recognizing that these groups are not monoliths.
- Support opportunities that explicitly [call for meaningful involvement of early career scholars, are responsive to the interests of the scholars you wish to support](#), and align with the academic context.
- Engage in more inclusive practices for developing priorities for funding research and designing calls for proposals / applications, cultivating diverse applicant pools, and evaluating applications (e.g., see *Lessons from SERN's funded portfolios* in this [brief](#); [Stevens et al. 2020](#)).

*Invest in the development and leadership of scholars of color and early career scholars studying student experience who want to [bridge between research and education practice and policy](#).*

- Advocate for and fund new opportunities to recognize early career scholars and scholars of color for their work bridging research with practice and policy.
- Support relationship building between early career scholars and scholars of color and practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ways that extend their networks, exposure, and use of their research.

- Advocate for and fund steady, year-over-year investments that support scholars of color and early career scholars committed to conducting practically relevant research and mobilizing research with education practice and policy groups. This type of sustained, targeted funding is essential to building and elevating a [diverse group of researchers](#) who are creating practically relevant scholarship and who are well-networked to education decision-makers. One-off and occasional investments will not be sufficient to counter long-standing patterns of investing in and privileging the expertise of white researchers, researchers who are men, and researchers from the highest status institutions. Research is relevant across a field's lifecycle, from case-making through implementation, which means that investments in research activities are relevant across multiple funding strategies.

*Cultivate and elevate a more diverse body of rigorous research evidence that can support systems change.*

- Expand the types of research evidence that you learn from, invest in, and amplify, including rigorous qualitative, mixed methods, and descriptive scholarship in addition to commonly elevated quantitative approaches, recognizing that individual studies, methods, and disciplines can only offer a partial picture. Multiple methodological and theoretical perspectives are necessary to generate practically relevant insights on complex issues like how education systems can transform to better support student experience. Funders play an important role both through their direct resourcing of scholarship and also via their indirect role as influencers.
- Invest in and use research that seeks to understand and address root causes and issues of implementation and change management within dynamic, historical, and political human systems like education; authentically involves people closest to the problem across the research lifecycle; and engages in research and translation that draws on the full research toolkit to address complex social issues and is therefore interdisciplinary, multi-method, and synthetic.

**Participate in and increase the impact of field catalyst activities in the student experience field.** [Field catalysts](#) help cultivate field-level learning, focus attention on key issues, broker new relationships across silos, develop shared strategies and agendas, and bring new resources to a field.

- With other field actors, engage in a [systems-level analysis](#) of the root causes and pathways to your desired impact and assess where field catalyst functions are needed to enable and accelerate connections and progress among a broader ecosystem of individuals and organizations, and determine which entities currently are performing or could perform some of these functions.
- Fund and elevate specific entities that are effectively performing field catalyst functions on issues related to student experience; make their often-invisible work visible and better resourced. Amplify and fund the work of entities performing field catalyst functions led by people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ leaders, and those with deep relationships in under-resourced geographies and communities.
- Identify where existing field catalysts might benefit from your engagement and support (e.g., brokered introductions, sharing expertise) to expand their reach and impact. Help field catalysts enhance their impact by sharing with them how they have affected your work and what needs you see in the field.
- Increase awareness among your peers, principals, and boards for the importance of funding field catalysts alongside complementary investments in other ecosystem actors to achieve large-scale change.

**For more detail, read priorities [#4](#), [#5](#), [#8](#), [#9](#), [#12](#), [#13](#), [#14](#), and these briefs on [Sharing Power in Philanthropic Relationships to Enhance Impact](#), [Mobilizing Research for Structural Change in Education](#), and [Becoming a Field Catalyst](#).**

## Contribute to ongoing transformation in education research and the mobilization of research that will benefit the student experience field and others in education

**Drive more public dollars to research on student experience and the mobilization of these research insights in education.** Research funding affects [which scholars remain in the field and what knowledge we have to draw on](#) to inform changes to education practice and policy. Most funding for education research comes from public sources, including the federal government; however, federal funding for education research has had a relatively narrow focus that inhibits research on student experience. Federal funding bodies need to take up recommendations like those issued by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine committee tasked with producing [guidance to the Institute of Education Sciences](#) on the future of education research to enable greater research on student experience and the use of such research in practice and policy.

### **Enable more effective and inclusive federal investments in education research and research use.**

- *Create a balanced federal investment in both basic and applied research*, including enhancing support for research that engages students, families, communities, and practitioners as partners; research involving a range of methodologies, timelines, and topical areas (including research on implementation and research use); and research focused on a wider range of approaches and relevant outcomes.
- *Strengthen education actors' ability to use research* by investing in [knowledge brokers](#) who can help bridge across sectors; using evidence on how [practitioners](#) and [policymakers](#) access and use research to inform future funding priorities for research and efforts to promote greater research use; establishing training and systems that allow researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to engage with each other more productively; ensuring that findings are presented in usable formats; and building capacity for education actors at all levels to [make meaning of research insights](#) that are relevant in their contexts.
- *Create a more equitable and inclusive ecosystem for research and research use* by investing in racially minoritized and early career scholars, as well as traditionally underinvested institutions, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Minority Serving Institutions; using more transparent and engaging mechanisms to gather input from researchers, community members, and practitioners to identify new research topics for federal funding; authentically engaging students, families, communities, and education actors across the research lifecycle; and ensuring diversity in participants and disaggregated data.

### **Pursue high-leverage philanthropic investments in education research that complement public funding.**

- Leverage philanthropy's ability to invest on faster cycles and with greater flexibility in the use of dollars to promote more responsive work by researchers and cross-sector partnerships involving research.
- Target funding toward researchers from historically underfunded groups and institutions. Consider funding re-granting by entities with deep relationships, knowledge of, and credibility with such groups.
- Invest in earlier stage ideas and earlier career scholars. Such investments can help build out their ideas and experience in ways that can make them more competitive for future public funding.
- Expand investments to include a broader range of methodologies and promising research bridging work.
- Consider how philanthropic funders might engage with public funders to advance shared understanding and public-private partnerships that facilitate research knowledge-building and use.

*For more detail, read priorities [#11](#), [#13](#), and this brief on [Mobilizing Research for Structural Change in Education](#).*