

# PRIORITIES FOR THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE FIELD

May 2023

Since 2015, Student Experience Research Network (SERN) has had the privilege of engaging with more than 500 researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders who share a commitment to building a just and equitable education system. A core part of SERN's work has always been to listen to our partners, share what we are learning, and work together to identify opportunities to advance understanding and action related to [how practices, policies, and norms shape students' experience of respect as valued people and thinkers in school](#).

Leading up to and throughout SERN's [strategic sunset](#), we had the opportunity to systematically gather input from our colleagues in the student experience field. This input revealed shifts in needs and resources in the field that in part [shaped SERN's decision to conclude its operations](#) and in doing so, help seed research-focused capacity to continue progress toward an education system that consistently and equitably centers student experience. Our input gathering also revealed forward-looking directions for the field, which we believe are important to share with our partners, to help continue to advance the work we led together.

**This document captures a set of forward-looking priorities that were surfaced from nearly 90 conversations, more than 125 survey responses, and other insights from SERN's projects – including a review of more than 50 proposals in response to SERN's latest funding opportunity as part of our sunset. This input came from a diverse group of researchers, practice and policy leaders, and funders. In this memo, along with these field-generated priorities, we share calls to action developed by SERN, which are designed to help advance these priorities immediately and in the future.**

The document begins with a brief reflection on the state of the student experience field to frame the priorities and calls to action that follow.

## Progress to Date in the Student Experience Field

[Research](#) by The Bridgespan Group has identified five observable characteristics of a field that can be used to understand its state of development and capacity to advance systems-level change. These characteristics include the knowledge base available to conceptualize and address challenges; the actors that contribute to a field's shared identity and work; the field-level vision and agenda, defined as the combination of approaches that actors employ related to the field's focal issue; the infrastructure that enables connection and collaboration among actors; and the financial and non-financial resources supporting the field's actors and infrastructure.

**In 2023, SERN partnered with an outside consultant to conduct an impact assessment, which revealed the following shifts in the student experience field since SERN's founding in 2015:**

**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 field leadership.**

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**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.

**Infrastructure:** There are stronger relationships and growing collaboration in the field, both among researchers and across sectors (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. SERN’s re-granting directed more funding to racially minoritized scholars and early career scholars in the field.

These findings are a testament to the incredible work by actors throughout the field who advanced research on student experience and its use in decision-making in education.

## Forward-Looking Considerations

We heard that our partners are eager to maintain and build momentum behind work that supports student experience. In some cases, they expressed a desire to continue or expand work led by SERN, which now must be taken up by others. In other cases, they prioritized new directions for the field. **We offer the priorities and calls to actions in this memo in order to inform and inspire collective action toward these ends in the months and years ahead.**

In some places, we offer information about SERN’s experience and impact, in the hope that it can provide warrant and encouragement for future work. While SERN did work toward many of the priorities in this document, our experience illustrates that no one entity or individual can bear sole responsibility for them. Rather, everyone has

important and necessary roles to play in field-building, and this work must be explicitly and sufficiently resourced long-term to achieve systems change at a large scale.

In sharing this document, we acknowledge a broader context in the United States in which education is highly politicized, and many of the approaches that we know from research are beneficial for students are under attack. We face an urgent need to attend to students’ mental health and well-being and combat the oppressive systems and policies currently harming students who are marginalized along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Individuals, communities, and institutions are grappling with the effects of gun violence, the COVID-19 pandemic, an uncertain economy, and threats to democracy.

We considered which actions felt most relevant and necessary in this context. **We strived to identify not only long-term, resource-intensive visions, but also near-term, lower-lift steps toward those visions. 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.**

Recognizing that individuals hold roles in multiple sectors, and that the distinctions between sectors can be blurry, we designed the calls to action to be inclusive of research, practice, policy, and funding entities. They place an emphasis on research and research use given the nature of SERN’s work.

**Importantly, we 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 toward an education system in which every student’s experience of school sets them up to learn and thrive. In many cases, the impact that the SERN community has already achieved shows that enacting these priorities is possible.

## Priorities and Calls to Action

The field-generated priorities that follow are organized according to the five observable characteristics of a field identified in [research](#) by The Bridgespan Group. These characteristics can be used to understand a field's state of development and capacity to advance systems-level change. The subsequent sections include calls to action underneath each priority.

### Knowledge Base

1. Expand applied research that enables structural change in education to support student experience
2. Continue to support education actors' access to and meaning-making of research on student experience
3. Create and elevate resources that illustrate real-world implications of research on student experience for advancing structural change in education

### Actors

4. Elevate research on student experience by scholars of color and early career scholars and invest in their development and leadership within academia and education
5. Engage more students, families, communities, and policy actors in the field of student experience

### Field-level Vision and Agenda

6. Continue elevating student experience to expand the group of influential education leaders, funders, and researchers who see student experience as connected to their work and feel responsible for stewarding it forward
7. Advance agenda-setting and coordinated action on high-impact and high-leverage topics in education connected to student experience

### Infrastructure

8. Sustain, deepen, and build new relationships within the student experience field, particularly across silos
9. Continue to create convening spaces that bring actors in the student experience field together across silos to build connections, share and apply knowledge, and develop shared agendas

### Resources

10. Change practices that shape how financial resources are distributed, used, and reported on in service of a well-networked, learning-oriented, and diverse student experience field
11. Encourage more public dollars for research on student experience and the mobilization of these research insights in education; rely on philanthropy for a targeted, complementary role

### Cross-cutting

12. Advance structural change in academia to support practically relevant, interdisciplinary, equity-centered research and greater bridging between scholars and education actors
13. Expand the types of research evidence used to inform practice and policy in education
14. Enhance the resourcing and impact of field catalysts in order to advance equitable systems change within education

SERN also developed a [memo on student experience in postsecondary education](#) based on interviews with 13 leaders across research, policy, and philanthropy about field-building related to student experience in postsecondary education and how research can help advance structural change within postsecondary institutions to better support student experience. Insights from this work are reflected in the priorities and calls to action in this document, however the postsecondary-focused memo contains additional detail and can serve as a standalone resource for postsecondary education audiences.

## 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](#).

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.

## KNOWLEDGE BASE

### 2. Continue to support education actors' access to and meaning-making of research on student experience

Studies of research use show that [syntheses of research](#) are particularly influential for education leaders. Syntheses can also help reveal where new research-based knowledge is needed. Funders, practitioners, and policymakers highly valued the research syntheses conducted and elevated by SERN; these syntheses were important knowledge-building tools in the field, and SERN paired them with opportunities for convening and dialogue in which people could unpack the implications of the research for their work. SERN's community also valued the [online knowledge hub](#) that our website offered for such trusted translational content.

#### Create both scholarly and translational syntheses of research on practically relevant topics.

**Conduct academic scholarship that synthesizes key takeaways and gaps in research across disciplines, theories, and methods.** This synthetic work should be guided by input from practitioners and policymakers about which questions and topics they consider high-priority. It can range from writing academic manuscripts to participating in multidisciplinary synthetic activities (e.g., national committees). Early career scholars who are close to the latest literature are well poised to conduct such work and can develop valuable cross-disciplinary experience in the process.

**Create translational syntheses of research that are designed for education audiences and mindful of how the target audience(s) access information and use research-based insights in their work.** This translation can take multiple forms, including written, oral, visual, and multimedia, and can be led by a variety of actors—including collaborations across research, practice, and/or policy.

**Cite and share high-quality scholarly and translational syntheses** on practically relevant topics in student experience within both academia and education circles to increase awareness of and demand for such work.

#### Where possible, create online repositories for translational syntheses that are easily accessible and relevant to education

**audiences;** when such actors are aware of the resource and trust the source's credibility and translational skill, these online resources can become vital hubs of knowledge access and dissemination.

**It is important to pair syntheses of research with opportunities for education actors to unpack (or "make meaning" of) the findings and consider them with respect to their needs, challenges, and contexts.**

**Provide structured (e.g., events, initiatives) and informal (e.g., one-on-one discussions) opportunities where practitioners, policymakers, and funders can engage individually and collectively with translational synthetic content,** articulate how it might apply to their context, and surface new questions that arise based on the research. This meaning-making can inform both their own work and the next phase of research on the topic.

**Document insights from these meaning-making opportunities** in order to share them back with attendees, and others when applicable (e.g., SERN shared [insights from our funder briefings](#) publicly).



Leverage existing structures and resources in academia to enhance researchers' capacity to engage in synthesis and meaning-making work with education actors.

**Encourage academic venues to support investments in and training for researchers to conduct scholarly (especially cross-disciplinary) and translational synthesis and to engage with practice and policy audiences in making meaning of research insights.** Such venues include academic journals, research societies and professional associations, as well as

undergraduate and graduate training programs. Encourage dialogue among research, practice, and policy actors that can surface new practically relevant knowledge-building needs.

**As discussed in the cross-cutting priorities section in this memo, revise structures in academia to incentivize these activities and ensure they are sustainable for researchers.** This includes tenure and promotion policies, discipline-specific norms within academia, publishing practices, and funding structures.

## KNOWLEDGE BASE

### 3. Create and elevate resources that illustrate real-world implications of research on student experience for advancing structural change in education

Across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy, we heard a **need for examples and practical resources that help education actors see what a focus on student experience looks like in their realm and how it can be achieved**, in a way that is both inspiring and actionable. This is particularly true in the current context in which people at all levels of the education sector are experiencing burnout and navigating competing demands, as well as challenging political climates in some contexts.

Produce examples, messaging, and practical resources that illustrate and inspire people at all levels in the education system to make changes to their own practice and contribute to broader structural change.

**Document and share compelling [case studies and examples](#) in which practitioners and policymakers approach their work differently based on insights from research** on student experience to demonstrate what is possible and how such change might come about across diverse contexts. Illustrate how these changes connect back to education actors' values and priorities.

**Engage in and incentivize collaborative activities to develop and share research-based frameworks, briefs, messaging, and media projects that outline how practices, policies, and norms shape student experience.** Illustrate how the lens of student experience can be taken across all functions, departments, and levels within K-12 and postsecondary institutions and systems to help everyone within these systems understand the role they can play and the levers at their disposal to support student experience.

**Develop research-based, user-friendly tools and other resources** that support education actors at all levels in the system to make changes to their own practice and advance broader structural change.



## ACTORS

### 4. Elevate research on student experience by scholars of color and early career scholars and invest in their development and leadership within academia and education

The people we engaged in the past several months appreciated SERN's **elevation of scholars of color and early career scholars** in multiple aspects of our work. (See this [list of participants](#) in our initiatives, as well as relevant points in this [article](#) on SERN's efforts to mobilize research for structural change in education.) They expressed strong demand for such efforts to continue and be expanded in the field of student experience going forward.

#### 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 in materials and conversations, both in academia and in education circles.** When producing scholarly or translational materials, check to ensure that relevant research by scholars of color and early career scholars is included.

**Advocate for academic journals to diversify their editorial boards, the scholars they publish, and the participants and approaches in their published research.** These decisions have far-reaching consequences for [the completeness of the field's knowledge base](#) and which research knowledge [shapes practice and policy and is seen as legitimate](#).

**Recommend scholars of color and early career scholars for funding, awards, and partnership opportunities.**

**[Address the various forms of exclusion](#) faced by scholars of color in academia**, which create a harmful professional culture and compromise and marginalize their research.

#### Fund scholars of color and early career scholars and compensate them for their work.

**Fund scholars of color and early career scholars and [rectify public and philanthropic grantmaking practices](#)** that advantage white

scholars and more established scholars and [disadvantage scholars of color](#) and earlier career scholars. These disparities have [deleterious effects](#) on retention and promotion and the research that is produced.

**Transparently share information on speaker and advisory fees** (those that your organization pays and those that you receive) so that people can be paid appropriately and equitably.

**Consider how mentorship and professional service burdens are carried disproportionately by scholars of color** and [how to change practices and policies](#) in ways that recognize, compensate, and share this responsibility.

#### Design opportunities that are responsive to the needs and interests of scholars of color and early career scholars.

**Seek and act on information from scholars of color and early career scholars to understand how to better support and partner with them.** They are not monolithic groups and time and care should be taken to understand the complexity of individuals' identities, needs, and aspirations.

**Create, contribute to, and fund opportunities that explicitly [call for meaningful involvement and development of early career scholars](#), [are responsive to the expressed interests of the scholars you wish to support and elevate](#), and [align with the academic context](#) (e.g., align**

with the timing of the academic schedule, buy out scholars' time, equip scholars with the types of experiences and deliverables that are recognized by academia in hiring and promotion).

**Engage in more inclusive practices for developing priorities for funding research and designing calls for proposals / applications, cultivating a diverse pool of potential applicants, and evaluating applications** with reviewers and holistic methods that value the relevant expertise, approaches, and strengths brought by diverse teams (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**, which is currently undervalued and disincentivized in academia. These opportunities could include endowed positions, professional awards, and university initiatives. Nominate scholars from these groups who study student experience for such opportunities and integrate these efforts with [broader shifts in academia to recognize, incentivize, and support bridging work](#).

**Support relationship-building between early career scholars and scholars of color and practitioners, policymakers, funders, and other researchers** in ways that extend their networks, exposure, and the use and amplification of their research.

**Contribute to initiatives and organizations designed to support professional learning**

**opportunities and relationship-building between researchers and education actors**, especially those that are designed by and for scholars of color and early career scholars.

**Consider how you can advocate for, contribute to, 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 might look like a dedicated funding stream that makes targeted grants each year or repeated annual funding for fellowship programs. It may also entail investments in entities that know research and researchers well and are poised to effectively recruit and support a diverse pool of early career scholars and scholars of color via re-granting. These investments should consider access beyond the highest status and best resourced higher education institutions, as well as a targeted focus on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Minority Serving Institutions. Given many foundations' and other education actors' strategic focus on supporting the success of students from minoritized 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.

**Advocate for structural changes in academia and funding structures to better support scholars of color and early career scholars (see cross-cutting priorities [#12](#) and [#13](#)).**

## ACTORS

### 5. Engage more students, families, communities, and policy actors in the field of student experience

The people SERN gathered input from observed the need to increase engagement of two key groups in the field of student experience in particular: **students, families, and communities**, as well as **policy actors**.

**Students, families, and communities need to be authentically involved in both scholarship and decision-making in education related to student experience.**

**Elevate and resource researchers, especially scholars from minoritized groups, who have demonstrated commitment and skill in equitable relationship-building with students, families, and communities.** Such work takes deep investments of time and expertise and can lengthen times to publication. This should be considered when academic gatekeepers and funders evaluate the proposals and CVs of researchers for funding opportunities, awards, and tenure and promotion.

**Document and share [case studies and examples of authentic partnerships](#)** among students, families, and communities, and researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Use these examples to build understanding of these types of partnerships, including how trust, respect, and shared power are essential to their success.

**Invest in training and ongoing professional learning focused on how to involve students, families, and communities in ways that are engaging and share power** across multiple aspects of your work and across the lifecycle of projects and initiatives (i.e., from conceptualization to implementation, and through analysis and measurement of impact).

**Partner with student, family, and community organizations in agenda-setting and decision-making related to student experience** across the domains of research, practice, policy, and funding, and at local, regional, state, and national levels.

**We also heard a need to expand the engagement of policy actors in the field of student experience.**

**Connect student experience to the outcomes policy actors care about and the problems they are seeking to solve.**

**Partner with and fund policy actors to support them in gaining exposure to, making sense of, and applying the research on student experience** that is relevant to their topical priorities and the constituencies they serve. This will involve both relationship-building and investments in translational materials that meet the needs of policy actors.

**Support policy actors to engage with the research themselves as part of efforts they are leading** (e.g., policy proposals, coalition-building). Offer connections to researchers who can provide guidance, feedback, and learn about policy actors' needs and processes.

**Funders inform the work of policy actors in various ways. Funders – and those who are connected to them – can use these routes to elevate student experience with policy actors.**

## FIELD-LEVEL VISION AND AGENDA

### 6. Continue elevating student experience to expand the group of influential education leaders, funders, and researchers who see student experience as connected to their work and feel responsible for stewarding it forward

Keeping student experience “on the map” among influential education leaders, funders, and researchers requires many individuals and organizations **contributing to a chorus that reinforces the importance of student experience in conversations about education**, and **conducting and leveraging research** that shows that student experience matters and that it can be improved by the actions of people in the education system.

#### **Continue to build the chorus around [student experience](#).**

**Talk about student experience with colleagues, partners, and the audiences with whom you engage**, and how the practices, policies, and norms in education and society have inequitably shaped this experience of school depending on who students are and the opportunities they are afforded.

**Share compelling new research, case studies, stories from students, and resources** with others to keep student experience front-of-mind and relevant.

**Model how you and/or your organization apply the [lens of student experience](#)**—attending to how practices, policies, and norms shape student experience—when designing research agendas and questions, communications, strategic priorities, and programming.

#### **Increase the visibility and centrality of student experience in field-level agendas, frameworks, and coalitions to inform collective action and alignment.**

**Infuse education practice and policy frameworks and advocacy agendas with an explicit focus on student experience**, integrating insights from research and the experiences of students, families, communities, and educators.

## FIELD-LEVEL VISION AND AGENDA

### 7. 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 important progress in these areas for a long time, and the field could benefit from continued investment and aligned activities across research, practice, policy, and funding.

**Make an affirmative, research-based case for why K-12 and postsecondary schools should attend to student experience.** Research may not convince those who are staunchly opposed, but it has a role in informing and equipping families, educators, and leaders who are open to discourse and seeking what is best for students.

**Demonstrate that institutions have the ability and responsibility to improve student experience equitably** (see this [example](#) for policymakers that leverages research on postsecondary institutions).

**Illustrate the impact of attending to student experience on outcomes that matter to students, families, practitioners, and policymakers.** Avoid perpetuating “either/or” thinking related to student experience and academic outcomes, by emphasizing that students’ experiences should be inherently valued in their own right, *and* they are important predictors of the outcomes that practitioners and policymakers are held accountable for in the current system.

**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.**

Examples raised in SERN’s input gathering included:

**Provide supportive, lower-stakes professional learning opportunities for educators and system leaders** to understand how they can

improve student experience within their spheres of influence. Specific topics named by field actors included: instructional practice, course design, educators’ beliefs and expectations, as well as transitioning from punitive to restorative discipline approaches.

**Include in assessment and accountability systems supportive conditions and outcomes valued by students, families, and communities,** including those connected to student experience.

**Provide 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.

**Advance measurement and data use on student experience** (e.g., co-create new measures with students, families, communities, and educators; [reimagine how data are used and the systems around them](#)) to attend to the diverse and nuanced ways that students experience school and to inform efforts to improve practices and policies.

**Contribute 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.**

Consider how to act as part of a broader coalition and how to leverage research in making the case for attending to student experience and defending against politicized attacks on educational equity.

Field actors also noted that a cross-cutting, root cause connected to progress on all these priorities is a focus on resource equity in education.

**Study, elevate, and encourage policies that support individuals, educational spaces, and institutions poised to have an outsized impact on student experience, especially for students, families, and communities that have been marginalized.** Examples raised in SERN's input gathering 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
- Collaboration between community-based youth development programs and K-12 schools

## 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.



## INFRASTRUCTURE

### 9. Continue to create convening spaces that bring actors in the student experience field together across silos to build connections, share and apply knowledge, and develop shared agendas

In the input we gathered, people highlighted the value of SERN **convening actors across silos** to achieve meaningful [advancements in research](#), coordinated action, and the [application of research-based knowledge](#) going forward. They emphasized the ongoing need for similarly generative and learning-oriented convening spaces, as well as new opportunities for **dedicated professional learning communities** in practice and research.

#### Engage in and support inclusive convenings of people and organizations across silos.

**Host, contribute to, and participate in gatherings that bring together people across silos to extend the latest thinking and practice in the field of student experience, across (and within) research, practice, policy, and funding.**

Such spaces require the ability to cultivate relational trust that can encourage generative dialogue and constructive disagreement. It can be helpful for funders to play a behind-the-scenes role or solely a financial support role, providing funding to cover organizing costs and following up with the host(s) afterward to learn about takeaways. Funding can also help participants explore potential partnerships and projects after convenings. Non-financial resources that field actors can share and solicit include thought partnership and recommendations and connections to speakers, facilitators, and venues.

**When convening across silos, consider important factors related to inclusion and power, relationship-building, translation, and scaffolding all participants to be successful in that space.** This includes being respectful of participants' time (and what can feel truly optional versus implicitly mandated) and being mindful of contributions and intellectual property, where relevant. Convenings should be hosted in response to genuine demand and

needs from the field and designed with participant input.

**Develop your own skills and invest in those of your colleagues (e.g., staff, students) and organization at bridging across silos,** including as a [facilitator](#) and participant. Fund and engage in professional learning in these areas.

[Looking forward, individuals who shared insights with SERN saw a need for dedicated communities in both practice and research focused on ongoing learning in low-stakes contexts.](#)

**Invest in existing or new professional learning communities that help education actors “make the leap” from understanding principles from research on student experience to making changes in their work** in response to the research, by providing low-stakes spaces to practice new skills, share knowledge, and provide mutual support.

**Invest in similar professional learning communities for researchers studying student experience to develop identities as scholar “bridgers” and practice engaging with practice and policy audiences in a supportive context.** Such communities are particularly important given that bridging work is [disincentivized by academia and presents unique challenges and costs for scholars of color](#), especially those engaging publicly on racialized topics.

## RESOURCES

### 10. Change practices that shape how financial resources are distributed, used, and reported on in service of a well-networked, learning-oriented, and diverse student experience field

How funds are allocated and how they can be used shapes the composition, trajectory, and impact of a field. Based on SERN's lessons learned with re-granting and what we heard from field actors about future priorities, [changes are needed to funding practices in the field of student experience](#) aimed at cultivating a well-networked, learning-oriented, and diverse field.

#### **Invest in relationships and relationship-building activities as essential field-level levers for impact.**

##### **Increase support for relationship-building and convening, especially among traditionally siloed actors working on student experience.**

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. Funders can include an explicit focus on relationship-building in strategies, funding opportunities, and metrics to enable this vital and resource-intensive work.

#### **Structure financial support in ways that encourage individual and collective learning.** This may include:

**Enhanced flexibility in use of funds (e.g., core support funds) and timelines** to enable adaptation in response to lessons learned;

**More support for planning and partnership exploration, especially across silos**, that recognizes and provides the time and funding necessary for this work (e.g., in the form of course buyouts for scholars and staff positions and consultants at practice and policy entities);

**Streamlined reporting requirements** (e.g., accepting reports in multiple formats; encouraging grantees to use the same report for multiple funders) to enable deeper focus on programming, reflection, and learning; and,

#### **Metrics and deliverables focused on learning outcomes that are useful to both grantees and others in the field.**

**Ensure that the next phase of field growth in student experience expands and diversifies who is funded.** This entails changes to how potential recipients of funding are identified, recruited, and selected (see this [brief](#) for relevant detail and examples from SERN). Doing so has implications for both funders and gatekeepers who influence how resources are distributed within the field (e.g., senior scholars, non-profit leaders). Many practices can contribute to these desired outcomes, such as:

##### **The use of inclusively developed RFPs;**

**Strategic outreach to potential applicants** for both open and closed funding calls;

**Engagement that sets up applicants to have the potential to be successful regardless of prior experience with proposal writing;**

**Review processes that involve thoughtful matching between external reviewers and proposals**, in addition to internal reviews;

**Feedback processes** that support all applicants to develop their skills and ideas; and,

**Longer-term relationship-building and engagement with people in the field to cultivate trust and expand and diversify the pool** of potential applicants over time.

## RESOURCES

### 11. Encourage more public dollars for research on student experience and the mobilization of these research insights in education; rely on philanthropy for a targeted, complementary role

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. For example, the [National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine \(NASEM\) committee](#) tasked with producing recommendations to the federal [Institute of Education Sciences \(IES\)](#) on the future of education research noted that past education research funding from IES has favored randomized controlled trials, and largely supported [interventions focused on students](#) and measurement of student-level characteristics, particularly standardized achievement test scores and grades, which provide an incomplete picture of students' experience in school and the contextual factors that shape it.

**Public funding for education research and for the mobilization of research insights in education must place a greater emphasis on how practices, policies, and norms shape student experience** to advance the field's research knowledge base. The impact of such investments on the field will rely on **public funding bodies like IES taking up guidance offered in the NASEM report**. These recommendations include expanding the range of student outcome measures that are used, measuring "structural and contextual factors that shape student outcomes," and examining educator practice, the role of school leaders, and how "the instructional environment and interactions... shape students' learning and experience." Recommendations in this report also have implications for other federal funding sources for research on education.

Philanthropy has greater flexibility but spends far less on research than the federal government. Even when philanthropy goes through periods of more limited funding for research, which may currently be the case, **philanthropic funders have an essential role to play by investing in research and research mobilization in high-leverage ways and diversifying the scholars and scholarship funded in the field** as a whole.

**Encourage federal funding bodies to focus on student experience and adopt recommendations from the NASEM report.**

**Encourage federal funding bodies that support education research to place a greater emphasis on student experience in future funding calls** (e.g., make the case for a focus on student experience with key decision-makers, increase exposure to research on student experience).

**Encourage the Institute of Education Sciences and other federal funders of education research (e.g., National Science Foundation) to**

**adopt recommendations in the NASEM report that would aid the generation and use of practically relevant, interdisciplinary, and equity-centered research on student experience.** Education philanthropy and other education actors can support and augment the efforts led by individual scholars and professional societies focused on education research to encourage the uptake of the recommendations.

**Philanthropic investments for research and research mobilization should be strategically targeted and complementary to public funding.**

**Leverage philanthropic funders' ability to invest on [faster cycles and with more potential for flexibility](#) in the use of dollars to promote more responsive and creative work by researchers and cross-sector partnerships involving research.**

**Target funding toward researchers from historically underfunded groups**, especially scholars from racially minoritized groups, and scholars from institutions beyond those that are the highest status and best resourced. Consider investing in entities that have deep relationships, knowledge of, and credibility with such scholars and institutions and might act as potential sub-grantors.

**Invest in earlier stage ideas and [earlier career scholars](#) focused on student experience.** Scholars in the SERN community have noted that these investments can build out their ideas and experience in ways that can make them more competitive for future public funding. In doing so, take steps to identify and counter practices that privilege certain types of scholarship and scholars (e.g., see priority [#4](#) on elevating research on student experience by scholars of color and early career scholars).

**Expand investments to include a broader range of research methodologies**, recognizing that multiple methodological approaches and designs are necessary to generate practically relevant insights on complex issues like how education systems can transform to better support student experience.

**Invest in promising approaches to research bridging work that can serve as examples and models across a diverse range of contexts**, especially those that engage in equitable collaborations that share power and incorporate co-construction methods.

**Consider how philanthropic funders might engage with public funders to advance shared understanding and public-private partnerships** that facilitate research knowledge-building and use in the student experience field.

## CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITIES

We have identified **three additional priorities that cut across the five domains above**. There are many actors outside of the student experience field contributing to progress in these areas. These cross-cutting priorities come from input from the field and our own experience over the past eight years, as well as implications of the third-party assessment of SERN's field-level impact. We name them as important contributors and enablers to the priorities articulated for the student experience field.

### 12. Advance structural change in academia to support practically relevant, interdisciplinary, equity-centered research and greater bridging between scholars and education actors

Structures in academia disincentivize practically relevant education research that is interdisciplinary and equity-centered – including liberatory or participatory, asset-based, and anti-racist research – and bridging between scholars and practice and policy. These structures include **tenure and promotion policies, discipline-specific norms within academia, publishing practices, and funding structures, among others**. Those scholars who are most marginalized within academia are [particularly disadvantaged by this system](#); while many do so regardless, they are less supported and pay a higher cost to engage in this type of work (see also [Lewis 2021](#) and [Settles et al. 2021](#)).

**Contribute to changes in practices, policies, and norms of academia, which are necessary to see practically relevant, interdisciplinary, equity-centered scholarship and research bridging at scale in education.**

**Elevate and cite examples of this type of [scholarship](#) and research [bridging](#) work**, including with peers and those in leadership roles to build greater awareness and understanding of what it takes.

**Listen to and support (with both financial and non-financial resources) the leadership and organizing of scholars from marginalized groups within academia who are engaged in this type of scholarship and bridging work** to understand and support the changes they seek to structures in academia.

**Encourage change within academia from the roles you hold inside and/or outside of academia.** Utilize gatekeeping roles within academia (e.g., leadership positions within departments and professional societies, editor roles for journals, tenure and promotion committees, boards and advisory committees) and those interfacing with academia (e.g., funders, certain education organizations) to advocate for and initiate [changes to practices, policies, and norms to better support this type of research and bridging between scholars and education actors](#) (see this [article](#), as well). This can entail both financial resources and non-financial resources (e.g., voice, convening, organizing) and contributing to the work of people and entities who have been pushing for such change.

## CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITIES

### 13. Expand the types of research evidence used to inform practice and policy in education

Influential actors in education, across the realms of research, practice, policy, and funding, reinforce a [deeply held set of beliefs about evidence](#) that contribute to limiting the types of research knowledge that are funded, elevated, and used. These include limited definitions and misunderstandings about what constitutes [rigor](#), [relevance](#) and [legitimacy](#) in scholarship; problematic [assumptions](#) of researcher and methodological neutrality and [bias](#); the marginalization of certain scholars and scholarship in [publishing](#) and [other processes in academia](#); and misconceptions about the existence of a [single “correct” result](#) in research studies (see also [Silberzahn et al. 2018](#) and [Botvinik-Nezer et al. 2020](#)).

**Understanding and addressing complex social issues like how structures shape student experience requires multiple disciplinary and methodological perspectives and diversity in both [participants](#) and [researchers](#).**

National scientific bodies, including the recent National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [report](#) to the federal Institute of Education Sciences, have echoed long-standing calls by researchers for such work. Actors in the student experience field across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy are well poised to lead for this type of change.

#### **Cultivate and cite a more diverse body of rigorous research evidence.**

**Learn and educate others about the value of different disciplinary and methodological perspectives to understand complex social phenomena.** Seek out and cite rigorous research from multiple disciplines and methodologies in seeking to study, understand, and communicate about issues in education.

**Shift individual and organizational messaging about what constitutes rigor and relevance in scholarship.** Avoid signaling that research is “neutral” or “objective.” Acknowledge the limitations and biases in research while also emphasizing what research can contribute to our understanding, alongside the lived experience and expertise of students, families,

communities, educators, and other sources of important information.

**Conduct, fund, cite, and advocate for rigorous studies that involve diverse disciplinary perspectives and methodologies, within both scholarly and education circles.** This includes rigorous qualitative, mixed methods, and descriptive scholarship in addition to quantitative studies and experimental and quasi-experimental studies in particular.

**Encourage federal funding for a more diverse body of evidence in education.** Use financial and non-financial resources (e.g., voice, convening, organizing) to encourage federal funding of research that invests in bringing multiple methodological, theoretical, and disciplinary perspectives to bear in studying important topics in education.



## CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITIES

### 14. Enhance the resourcing and impact of field catalysts in order to advance equitable systems change within education

**“[Field catalysts](#)” like SERN play a valuable role in advancing equitable systems change and enhancing the impact of other actors in a field to achieve large-scale social change; however, they are not yet widely understood as an essential ecosystem actor.** They rely on philanthropic funding and are [often under-resourced](#). This [article](#) shares reflections on SERN’s experiences and assets as a field catalyst as it evolved into this role.

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. They also enable others in the field to focus on what they do best (e.g., research, providing technical assistance, delivering programming), while simultaneously advancing those actors’ work on the field’s focal issue beyond what they could have done alone. However, it can be challenging to build understanding of the vital and unique role field catalysts play given traditional impact metrics and conceptualizations of how large-scale change happens. Everyone has a role to play in building support for and enhancing the impact of these essential field-building entities.<sup>1</sup> **The student experience field needs entities that perform field catalyst functions, as does the field of education broadly.**

#### Enhance the profile and impact of field catalysts.

**Consider how field catalysts fit into your theory of how impact will happen and where field catalyst functions are needed to enable that vision.** 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.

**Identify where existing field catalysts might benefit from your engagement and support to expand their reach and impact.** Field catalysts can benefit from both financial and non-financial (e.g., brokered introductions, sharing expertise) [resources](#).

**Help entities serving in field catalyst roles better understand and enhance their impact** by sharing back with them how they have affected your work, as well as what needs you see in the field looking forward.

#### Advocate for greater financial resources for field catalysts in education.

**Educate others about the role and impact of field catalysts, and what capabilities are important to look for and support in field catalysts.** Consider how long-standing mental models and frameworks for understanding impact and how change happens in fields might need to shift to accommodate field catalysts.

**Advocate for funding for these types of field catalyst functions and entities,** including helping funders understand how these entities improve your work and contribute to advancing collective impact in the field at scale.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that entities that have primarily engaged in other types of activities can evolve to take on field catalyst functions and that multiple field catalysts can exist and play complementary roles within a field.



## CLOSING AND RESOURCES

Making progress as a field depends upon countless relationships, decisions, and actions – large and small. SERN is deeply grateful to everyone who has advanced the student experience field to where it is today. We know that this next phase of work is urgently needed and that there is a strong foundation from which to build.

We encourage you to commit to a next step based on what you read above. To offer a final call to action, you may decide to use this document itself as a resource. Sharing and discussing it with someone else provides an opportunity to align on what feels most important and relevant, make connections, and spur future work in service of an education system in which every student’s experience of school sets them up to learn and thrive.

### SERN Resources

- [Accelerating the Leadership and Growth of Early Career Scholars](#)
- [Authentically Engaging Students, Families, Communities, and Diverse Institutional Members in Changemaking](#)
- [Becoming a Field Catalyst](#)
- [Designing Inclusive Scholarly Events that Foster Relationships and Engagement Across Silos](#)
- [Discussion with Student Leaders: Is My Voice Heard? Does My Voice Matter?](#)
- [Empowering Practitioners, Policymakers, and Funders to Apply Insights from Research](#)
- [Facilitating Continuous Improvement in Classrooms and Institutions](#)
- [Field-Level Enabling Conditions for Transformation](#)
- [Key Messages About Evidence and Research Use](#)
- [Mobilizing Research for Structural Change in Education](#)
- [Reflections from a Strategic Sunset](#)
- [Resources for Bridging Research with Education Practice and Policy](#)
- [Shaping Policy on Student Experience: Elevating the Leadership of Scholars from Minoritized Groups and Advancing Application of Equity-Centered Scholarship](#)
- [Sharing Power in Philanthropic Relationships to Enhance Impact](#)
- [Spotlight Series: Using Research to Promote Equity and Inclusion](#)
- [The Role of Belonging in Postsecondary Completion](#)
- [Visions for Practice-Responsive Research: A Conversation with Mesmin Destin, Simone Ispa-Landa, and Amy Pratt](#)
- [Why Student Experience?](#)

### External Resources

- [Actionable Evidence Framework](#) | Project Evident
- [Bringing Rigor to Relevant Questions](#) | William T. Grant Foundation
- [Designing and Facilitating Meetings for Equity](#) | National Equity Project
- [Engaging Policymakers: A New Era of Research and Theory that Builds on the Basics](#) | William T. Grant Foundation
- [Equitable Evaluation Framework](#) | Equitable Evaluation Initiative
- [Equitable Systems Change: Funding Field Catalysts from Origins to Revolutionizing the World](#) | The Bridgespan Group
- [Field Building for Population-Level Change: How Funders and Practitioners Can Increase the Odds of Success](#) | The Bridgespan Group

- [Field Catalyst Origin Stories: Lessons for Systems-Change Leaders](#) | The Bridgespan Group
- [How Universities Can Support Faculty of Color to Engage with Policymakers and Practitioners](#) | William T. Grant Foundation
- [Improving Evidence and Relevance at the Same Time](#) | *Items: Insights from the Social Sciences*
- [Power Moves](#) | National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy
- [Promoting Research that is Both Rigorous and Relevant](#) | William T. Grant Foundation
- [The Challenge: Homelessness is a Problem that's More Costly to Ignore than to Solve](#) | Community Solutions
- [Toward a Trust-Based Framework for Learning and Evaluation](#) | The Center for Effective Philanthropy
- [Why Am I Always Being Researched?](#) | Chicago Beyond

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