# PRIORITIES FOR THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE FIELD: HIGHLIGHTS FOR POLICY ACTORS

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 policy actors.**

## 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 articulating policy priorities, advocating for policies, and demonstrating the impact of policies. Talk about student experience with others and share compelling new research, case studies, stories from students, and resources.

**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.** Policy actors have key roles to play in addressing areas raised by SERN's community:
- 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.

- Encouraging 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. 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.

**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 can help you map additional people with relevant expertise you do not yet know. Identify other field catalysts like SERN working on issues connected to student experience with whom you might share relevant policy expertise and connections, learn about field needs and trends, or surface new partners and allies.

**Facilitate knowledge sharing and relationship building between policy actors and researchers studying student experience, especially scholars from minoritized groups.** Participate in events and activities that aim to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration between research and policy actors; develop your own skills in bridging across such silos. Engage in initiatives and entities designed to support professional learning opportunities and relationship building between researchers and policy actors, especially those that are designed by and for scholars from minoritized groups. Leverage policies that shape research and institutions of higher education to encourage changes to the practices and norms of academia to better support (and stop disincentivizing and penalizing) these scholars' policy bridging.

**Expand and diversify the scholars and scholarship on student experience that you draw on and elevate in your work.** This requires both near- and longer-term efforts to change practices that shape which scholars remain in the field, limit our understanding of phenomena like student experience, and undermine innovation and impact.
- Cite and build relationships with scholars from minoritized groups and those from institutions beyond those that are the highest status, especially scholars who are proximate to and engaged in authentic relationships with marginalized students, families, and communities. Compensate them for their work.
- Direct both financial and non-financial resources (e.g., connections, platforms, amplification) to research and research mobilization activities led by scholars from these groups and to the innovative types of scholarship and research use they and their partners in education are initiating.

- [Rectify public grantmaking practices](#) that advantage white scholars and more established scholars and act to change patterns in the kinds of research and scholars that are elevated in public policy circles.
- Expand the types of evidence that you draw on and amplify, including rigorous qualitative, mixed methods, and descriptive scholarship in addition to commonly elevated quantitative approaches, recognizing that multiple methodological and theoretical perspectives are necessary to yield practically relevant insights on complex issues like how education systems can better support student experience.

*For more detail, read priorities [#4](#), [#5](#), [#8](#), [#9](#), [#12](#), [#13](#), and [#14](#).*

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

**Encourage more public dollars for 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.

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