

## PRIORITIES FOR THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE FIELD: HIGHLIGHTS FOR PRACTICE LEADERS

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 practice leaders.**

### 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 developing priorities and programming, advocating for changes in education, and demonstrating the impact of changes to practice. 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.** Practice organizations 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.

- 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. 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](#).*

## Collaborate on applied research and research use that will enable structural change in education to support student experience

**Partner with researchers, education systems, and other practice organizations on applied research, translational syntheses of research and meaning making activities, and the development of research-based resources that can advance structural change in education to support student experience.**

- Collaborate on evaluations of existing efforts to transform practices, policies, and norms to support student experience, including how transformation was implemented and its impact on near- and longer-term outcomes. Contribute to applied research on how education actors effectively advance efforts to support student experience, including the enabling conditions and resources that support change within systems and institutions, and how approaches need to be designed and adapted based on local context.
- Partner with researchers to conduct translational syntheses of research that cut across disciplines, theories, and methods to address pressing questions for your organization and others. Engage with other people and organizations in making meaning of insights from these syntheses to surface practical implications for changing practices, policies, and norms in education from multiple perspectives and lenses in the system.
- Produce examples, messaging, and practical resources that illustrate real-world implications of research on student experience and inspire people at all levels in the education system to drive structural change. This includes compelling case studies and examples; research-based frameworks, briefs, messaging, and media projects; and research-based, user-friendly tools that support education actors at all levels in the system to make changes to their own practice and advance broader structural change.

**Engage students, families, communities, and educators in generating and using applied research knowledge.**

- Engage those closest to the issue, including students, families, communities, and educators, in identifying topics for, and conducting new applied research. Engage in partnerships that are grounded in principles of equitable collaboration and shared power; learn from existing models and examples.

- Elevate and partner with researchers, especially scholars from minoritized groups, who have demonstrated commitment and skill in equitable relationship building with students, families, communities, and educators.
- Share examples of authentic partnerships among students, families, communities, educators, and researchers to build greater understanding of these types of partnerships.
- Partner with student, family, and community organizations in agenda-setting and decision-making related to student experience.

*For more detail, read priorities [#1](#), [#2](#), [#3](#), and [#5](#).*

## 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 whose work can help you map additional people with relevant expertise you do not yet know.

**Facilitate knowledge sharing and relationship building between practice leaders 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 practice actors; develop your team’s skills in bridging across such silos. Engage in initiatives and entities designed to support professional learning opportunities and relationship building between researchers and practice actors, especially those that are designed by and for scholars from minoritized groups. Use your platform and partnerships with institutions of higher education to encourage [changes to the practices and norms of academia](#) to better support (and stop disincentivizing and penalizing) these scholars’ bridging activities.

**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 challenge pervasive beliefs, behaviors, and practices that shape which scholars remain in the field, limit our understanding of social 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.
- Expand the types of research evidence that you draw on 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.

**Participate in, amplify, 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. These essential field-level entities

facilitate collective action and enhance the impact of other ecosystem actors. They need leaders like you both as collaborators and also to help build understanding of the importance of field catalysts to accelerating your work.

- 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.
- Advocate for and elevate specific entities who are effectively performing field catalyst functions on issues related to student experience; make their often-invisible work visible. Amplify and participate in 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.
- Explain to other leaders and funders the role that field catalysts play in enhancing and accelerating your work, and the need for field catalysts as part of a broader ecosystem of organizations and institutions to achieve large-scale systems change in education.

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