

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

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 researchers.**

### 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 discussing issues and research in education. Talk about student experience with others and share compelling new research, case studies, stories from students, and resources.

### **Conduct research on how and why K-12 and postsecondary schools should attend to student experience.**

Study how institutions improve student experience equitably. Examine the impact of attending to student experience on important near- and long-term outcomes that matter to students, families, educators, system leaders, and policymakers.

### **Bring research to bear in service of facilitating K-12 and postsecondary educators' and system leaders' ability to improve student experience.**

Research can contribute to the following 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. In addition to harming students and educators and undermining public education as an institution, these politicized attacks also threaten institutions of higher education, as well as faculty and their scholarship.

**Study 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 K-12 schools.

*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 education systems, practice organizations, and other researchers on applied research, 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. Study how education actors effectively advance efforts to support student experience, including the enabling conditions and resources that support 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.
- Conduct academic scholarship that synthesizes key takeaways and gaps in research across disciplines, theories, and methods on topics that are relevant to practitioners and policymakers. Partner with practice and policy entities to conduct translational syntheses of research that can inform their work. Support opportunities for education actors to make meaning of insights from synthesized research to surface practical implications for changing practices, policies, and norms in the education system.
- Collaborate with practitioners and policymakers to 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.

- 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 who – directly or through their publicly available work – 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 research expertise and connections to other scholars, learn about field-level needs and trends, or surface potential cross-sector partners.

**Facilitate knowledge sharing and relationship building between practitioners, policy actors, funders, and researchers, especially scholars from minoritized groups.** Participate in events and activities that aim to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration across these sectors; develop your own skills and those of your students and colleagues in bridging across such silos. Support 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 and the roles you hold within academia to encourage [changes to the practices and norms of academia](#) 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 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.
- 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 partnerships.
- [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.*

- Use gatekeeping roles you hold (e.g., as reviewers, departmental and institutional leadership, advisors) to help 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. 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 institution 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.

*Cultivate and elevate a more diverse body of rigorous research evidence on student experience.*

- Expand the types of research evidence that you utilize and amplify, 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.
- Continue to engage in dialogue and collaboration across disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological silos to generate research knowledge that can address the nuances and complexities of education practice and policy. Host, amplify, and participate in cross-disciplinary spaces.

*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. Encourage federal funding bodies 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.

*For more detail, read priority [#11](#).*