Agenda-setting as a Field Catalyst: Listening to and Organizing the Field

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Agenda-setting is a core function of field catalysts that unlocks the potential of an ecosystem of field actors to accomplish significantly greater impact collectively than as individuals working in their own silos. But determining what the field is and what shared agenda is appropriate and feasible for the field is challenging and time intensive. It is also an ongoing process. It requires a field catalyst to be in dialogue with and continuously synthesizing and encouraging areas of alignment across a wide range of people working on a number of related (and adjacent) issues, pulling a variety of levers, and operating at multiple altitudes.

As defined in Bridgespan's 2020 report on [field building for population-level change](#):

The "agenda" collectively refers to the most critical approaches that field actors will pursue to address barriers and develop adaptive solutions. These approaches are varied yet complementary, and bound by an overarching strategy that the field's actors co-create to guide progress. For issue area-based fields, the field-level agenda is typically looser and focused on shared barriers. Regardless of the field's type, the field-level agenda should be adaptive and responsive to lessons learned over time and the dynamic conditions within and surrounding social change fields.

THREE LESSONS LEARNED

1. **A shared agenda can look different at different stages in a field's evolution–and depending on the type of field (e.g., issue based vs. problem based).**

2. **Field catalysts can benefit from using a holistic set of strategies for field-level agenda setting, adapting them over time as the field evolves and in response to specific challenges and opportunities.**

3. **Engaging diverse perspectives–and building trusting relationships with a heterogeneous group of actors in the field that can surface such perspectives–is essential to agenda setting.**

In SERN's case, the field-level agenda that we organized around evolved significantly over time as we got into greater dialogue with a wider range of researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders.

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

Student Experience Research Network (SERN; formerly Mindset Scholars Network) worked from 2015 to 2023 to cultivate understanding and awareness of how structures in education shape students' experience of respect as valued people and thinkers in school in ways that meaningfully impact their learning and well-being. In partnership with a community of 42 researcher members ("SERN scholars") and over 500 actors across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy, SERN bridged long-standing silos to build and mobilize practically relevant research knowledge.

SERN served as a field-building intermediary, performing a behind-the-scenes function essential to advancing systems change that has been conceptualized as a "field catalyst,"

although it also goes by other names. Such field-building efforts are often overlooked and under-resourced by funders because they do not fit the mental model of a typical nonprofit. This type of work brings with it a unique set of strategic and organizational needs. This piece is part of a series developed following SERN's strategic sunset in 2023 with the intention of documenting some of SERN's core strategic and organizational practices and lessons learned as a field catalyst. Our hope is that these pieces will contribute to the emergent knowledge base about field catalysts and be of value to others serving in field catalyst roles and those who partner with them.

EXAMPLES AND RESOURCES LINKED IN THIS BRIEF

- Field Building for Population-Level Change and Field Diagnostic Tool: Assessing a Field's Progression; a report and companion tool by The Bridgespan Group defining key terms about fields and field building and illustrating how fields tend to progress

- Launching a Field Catalyst: Creating Favorable Conditions for Field-Level Impact; a brief on SERN's lessons learned about launching a field catalyst

- Mobilizing Research for Structural Change in Education; a piece about how SERN supported the use of practically relevant research on student experience to contribute to structural change in education

- Empowering Practitioners, Policymakers, and Funders to Apply Insights from Research; a brief documenting SERN's lessons learned about bringing insights from research to bear within practice, policy, and funding organizations

- SERN's Data Archive for Interdisciplinary Research on Learning and SERN's Compendium of Studies that Measure Learning Mindsets; examples of infrastructure built by SERN that helped bring together field knowledge and identify gaps in the field

- SERN's Midcareer Fellows Program; example of one of SERN's fellowships that contributed to field leadership development

- SERN's first request for proposals; example of using regranting as part of building momentum on an emerging agenda

- Introducing Student Experience Research Network; a blog post explaining why SERN changed our name and how we defined our conceptual focus

- Priorities for the overall student experience field and priorities for student experience in postsecondary education; examples of how SERN synthesized field-level priorities based on input from a wide range of field actors

- Field Catalyst Staffing: Building and Sustaining a Team of Bridgers and Organizers; a brief on SERN's lessons learned about staffing a field catalyst organization

- SERN's Annual Funder Briefing: sample agendas, sessions, and links to a detailed resource suite on how SERN designed and planned these events

- Designing Inclusive Scholarly Events that Foster Relationships and Engagement Across Silos; a brief documenting SERN's lessons learned about how to design events that serve as inclusive learning spaces for cross-sector groups

THE INITIAL PURPOSE OF SERN

As described in the piece in this series about launching a field catalyst, SERN was founded in 2015 by psychologists who wanted to advance interdisciplinary research on how students' beliefs about learning and school (what we referred to as their "learning mindsets") shape their educational outcomes–and how those mindsets can be changed through brief psychological interventions. Early scholarship on these mindsets revealed that such interventions had a notable effect for people from minoritized and marginalized groups, for whom society had always questioned and undermined their ability and belonging in educational spaces.

The founding scholars established what was originally called the "Mindset Scholars Network" around two large-scale experimental studies of mindset interventions and convening a multidisciplinary group of researchers to collaborate on them. The initial goal was to understand for whom and under what conditions such interventions were effective.

LISTENING TO DIVERSE ACTORS INSPIRED A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT THE WORK–AND A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE FIELD-LEVEL BARRIERS TO CHANGE

When we began talking to more people–a wider group of researchers across multiple disciplines, educators, policymakers, and funders–it became clear that their priority was the school and classroom environment. They wanted to know: *How do we create learning environments that support students' sense of belonging, a culture of growth, and a sense that what they are being asked*

to do is meaningful and relevant? And how do we do this systematically for students for whom school was never designed to serve in this way?

There was some emerging evidence and relatively isolated examples of what this looked like in practice but this knowledge and activity was largely siloed. And in taking stock of what it would take to advance progress on these questions, some key barriers emerged:

Competing priorities. People in our community had varying ideas about how resources should be used and what should be prioritized; this was also true in the broader education field.

Unbridged silos. There were multiple bodies of relevant research and practical knowledge but those who produced them were not in dialogue due to long-standing structures that did not incentivize (and in some cases, discouraged) coherence, integration, and collaboration.

Centering dominant groups and approaches. As is often the case, systemic power imbalances and biases disproportionately weighted dominant groups' perspectives, priorities, and approaches.

Insufficient field capacity. The field had limited experience and infrastructure for sharing and building this type of cross-sector knowledge—and limited funding to build and sustain such capacity.

Thus, an expanded set of levers, activities, and people would be required to address the questions emerging from the field. SERN engaged in two broad phases of work aimed at progressively expanding the tent and building alignment around a shared agenda.

BUILDING ALIGNMENT AROUND A SHARED AGENDA

The first phase entailed articulating a new, shared vision for the network and building alignment around a broader set of research priorities among the participating scholars, while simultaneously learning from early adopters in education about what kind of research knowledge would be most helpful.

Activities during this phase included surfacing priority research areas through discussions at scholarly convenings we hosted and one-on-one conversations with participating scholars and other grantees of our funders who had signaled early interest in learning mindsets and represented a pool of early adopters working in education practice and policy. We also increasingly focused on synthesizing research knowledge in translational formats on topics we heard from these practice, policy, and funder audiences; this helped us build shared language and connect the dots between relevant research knowledge that was often siloed.

The outcome of this first phase was a larger, more diverse community of participating scholars and alignment around an expanded conceptual focus, which we articulated as "students experiencing respect as valued people and thinkers in school"—and progress against a shared knowledge building agenda focused on understanding how structures in education inequitably shape that experience of school.

Based on what we learned in this first phase and changes in the external societal context in the United States in 2020 (in particular, the COVID-19 pandemic and reckoning with systemic racism), we refined our strategy in the second phase and

increasingly focused on cultivating alignment among influential actors who shape decision-making by education system leaders. In light of an education system in crisis and the limited capacity of our small team, this was a strategic choice to prioritize working through relationships we had cultivated over the prior years (and those of our allies) to build and strengthen a coalition of leading funders and practice and policy intermediary organizations who had extensive reach in American education.

The second phase focused on cultivating a shared understanding and commitment among this targeted set of influential education leaders that the core structures in education are inextricably linked to student experience and that achieving educational equity requires system leaders and policymakers to make changes to these structures in ways that improve the experience of students from marginalized groups. Simultaneously, we focused on building cross-sector connective tissue and encouraging collaboration among these education leaders and scholars. Our goal in promoting such collaboration was to advance the field's understanding of what it looked like to change such structures in practice and policy—and the effect of such changes on valued outcomes.

During this second phase, we repeatedly engaged with a targeted set of influential education leaders with significant reach. We sought to understand their needs and connect them with synthesized, translated research knowledge and opportunities to unpack the implications of it for their work with schools and systems. This engagement happened in the context of individual meetings, SERN events, and hosted cohorts. We also supported relationship building and collaboration between researchers and

practitioners and policymakers through brokered introductions and funded opportunities that emphasized bridging between research, practice, and policy (e.g., our funded grant portfolios and fellowship cohorts). To learn more, check out this piece from our sunset on how SERN mobilized research to advance structural change in education and this lessons learned brief on how SERN empowered practitioners, policymakers, and funders to apply insights from research.

According to an independent impact assessment conducted as part of SERN's strategic sunset, the outcome of SERN's efforts included student experience getting "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. They understand its importance to student outcomes and educational equity. Rather than a focus on direct-to-student interventions designed to change students' beliefs, these actors see the importance of intervening at a systemic level to equitably change students' experience of school.

The impact assessment also found increased cross-sector and cross-disciplinary engagement within the field, greater application of the research, and an increased focus from funders on student experience.

Below are three lessons learned in the process of our efforts to align the field around a shared agenda.

Lesson 1

A shared agenda can look different at different stages in a field's evolution–and depending on the type of field (e.g., issue based vs. problem based).

When SERN began, there was no student experience field. Influential education decision-makers were focused primarily on other levers to advance educational equity and were dissatisfied with the results. The underlying body of evidence connected to student experience was siloed in different academic disciplines and subdisciplines. There was also a lack of a robust and ongoing dialogue between research and education practice and policy in this arena.

SERN's chief job from a field-building standpoint was to get student experience "on the map" with these decision-makers, as noted above, and spur valuable, cross-disciplinary and cross-sector knowledge building on practically relevant questions of broad interest–something that was not happening under business-as-usual structures and incentives.

SERN was organizing in an earlier stage, issue-based field. As such, this shared agenda is different from a field that is at a more advanced stage of development or [focused on advancing change on a specific problem](#) (e.g., reducing tobacco use among youth or ending malaria), where a shared agenda might entail a coordinated set of actions to achieve and protect specific policy and regulatory wins.[1] Check out this [Bridgespan field diagnostic tool](#) to learn more about how fields–and their characteristics (including the shared field-level agenda)–evolve over time.

Lesson 2

Field catalysts can benefit from using a holistic set of strategies for field-level agenda setting, adapting them over time as the field evolves and in response to specific challenges and opportunities.

We used several approaches simultaneously to expand and coalesce the field around a shared agenda; collectively, these approaches helped us

get traction on the above-mentioned barriers although we continued to grapple with them throughout our entire existence. We also evolved the strategies we used in response to changes in the field. The accompanying table lists these strategies.

STRATEGIES USED BY SERN TO EXPAND AND COALESCE THE FIELD AROUND A SHARED AGENDA

In the tables on the following pages, the strategies used by SERN are grouped into three general purposes. Each individual strategy (row) is mapped against the general barriers we faced to coalescing the field around a shared agenda (columns).

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[1] [In Bridgespan's 2020 report](#), they note that "fields fall into two categories: those that are focused on a specific problem (e.g., achieving universal access to high-quality pre-kindergarten) and those focused on broad issue areas (e.g., early childhood). Despite the clear differences between specific problems and broad issue areas, both are still considered fields. An important consideration is that problem-based fields often overlap with others that reside within the same issue area. For example, the field of bail reform overlaps with sentencing reform and police reform, all of which reside within the broader field of criminal justice reform." Bridgespan notes that "the work of field building requires advancing both types of fields," (issue-based and problem-based), and that without advancing broader issue fields, those working in related problem-based fields can face a steeper uphill battle and end up competing for scarce resources.

Build trusting relationships and understand the work of partners (and others) with an eye to expanding the tent and cultivating alignment

Strategies SERN used to advance field-level agenda setting	BARRIERS THAT THESE STRATEGIES HELPED ADDRESS:			
	Competing priorities	Unbridged silos	Centering of dominant groups and approaches	Field capacity, infrastructure, and funding
1. Gather input from diverse stakeholders on their priorities and **play back shared values and priorities** that reflect the collective	X		X	
2. Participate in field-level gatherings and knowledge sources that enable tracking of broader developments and new actors	X	X	X	
3. Build relationships with highly connected nodes in diverse subfields to expand reach and understanding of broader needs		X	X	
4. Host learning-oriented convenings that introduce participants to new perspectives and people; build shared understanding and language; strengthen existing relationships and seed new potential collaborations	X	X	X	
5. Seek and act on feedback and evolve work "in public" to model a learning orientation and continue to earn others' trust as a field steward and representative				X

Synthesize, elevate, and invest in ways that help field actors integrate and evolve a shared agenda

Strategies SERN used to advance field-level agenda setting	BARRIERS THAT THESE STRATEGIES HELPED ADDRESS:			
	Competing priorities	Unbridged silos	Centering of dominant groups and approaches	Field capacity, infrastructure, and funding
1. Synthesize existing knowledge for different audiences to help them take stock of current knowledge, surface new opportunities to act, and elevate marginalized knowledge and contributors		X	X	
2. Create safe opportunities for field actors to make meaning of what they are learning and implications for their work	X			
3. Elevate promising examples via storytelling and evidence	X	X	X	
4. Use grantmaking strategically to de-silo, seed and signal new directions, build field capacity and knowledge, and disrupt inequities	X	X	X	X

Cultivate field-level capacity, infrastructure, and funding to support long-term progress on the agenda

Strategies SERN used to advance field-level agenda setting	BARRIERS THAT THESE STRATEGIES HELPED ADDRESS:			
	Competing priorities	**Unbridged silos**	**Centering of dominant groups and approaches**	**Field capacity, infrastructure, and funding**
1. Build field-level tools that facilitate exchange and illustrate gaps in field knowledge and action (e.g., SERN's data archive and survey measure compendium)		X	X	X
2. Organize funders to support a shared vision and priority investments to advance the field (e.g., via SERN's funder briefings and recruiting co-funders for SERN-hosted requests for proposals)	X			X
3. Foster peer mentoring and regular dialogue among field leaders to build capacity, support retention, and improve coordination (e.g., via regular low-stakes meetings of field leaders); **invest in leadership pipelines and development opportunities** (e.g., via fellowships)			X	X

We used many of these strategies throughout our existence and they became core to who we were organizationally and how people saw us moving and operating in the field. From our learning-focused gatherings to our reputation for regularly soliciting input and feedback, to our roles brokering cross-sector relationships and synthesizing cross-disciplinary bodies of research on topics of interest to practice and policy actors, these were consistent ways of operating and functions that SERN became known for.

We deployed other strategies at key points and opportunistically. For example, our founding funder collaborated with us on SERN's initial request for proposals (RFP) in 2016 based on what we observed in SERN's first convening of its scholar membership, where several new participants were unclear why they had been asked to participate and were unsure whether they would have a voice in setting the new entity's agenda. We were also working to counter deeply entrenched norms in the academy whereby cross-discipline collaboration is, at best, not taught and at worst, discouraged. An RFP that funded research on topics surfaced by the entire community at that first convening and one that required cross-disciplinary teams served as an intervention on the field itself (both its focus and how it conducted its work) at a crucial moment. Our founding funder contributed additional dollars and helped us bring other funders to the table to co-fund the initiative; this became a model we used going forward.

Lesson 3

Engaging diverse perspectives–and building trusting relationships with a heterogeneous group of actors in the field that can surface such perspectives–is essential to agenda setting.

To understand what the emerging field was, where it was going, and where it needed pushing–and to help seed the kind of relationships and knowledge required to advance progress on systemic change in education–we had to engage a wide range of people and organizations. It was essential we were consistently in dialogue with diverse perspectives. This practice involved regularly showing up in places where people who may not see themselves as part of the "student experience field" met and shared knowledge. We attended broad conferences in education and research as well as convenings on more specific topics that were adjacent to our issue. These places allowed us to expand the edges of our knowledge and meet people who were also bridgers and might ultimately connect to our field (and vice versa).

It meant intentionally seeking perspectives and feedback from across a wide spectrum, including those with divergent views. We regularly sampled perspectives in our community and sought out targeted perspectives beyond it in making major programmatic and strategic decisions. We asked questions about what needs people saw, trends and directions in the field, and how SERN might help advance the field collectively.

Such efforts led us to evolve our conceptual focus (which resulted in a change in our organizational name) from "learning mindsets" to the more expansive and multidisciplinary "students' experience of respect as valued people and thinkers in school," which allowed more people to feel welcomed in and connected to the field. Another example of how we formally integrated diverse field perspectives is this memo that synthesized information 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–to articulate a series of forward-looking priorities for the overall student experience field as SERN sunset in 2023. While not everyone in our community agreed with each priority, most agreed with some and saw at least one about which they were personally committed. Other efforts were more targeted, such as this memo distilling priorities for student experience in postsecondary education

in the United States, which synthesized themes from interviews with 13 leaders, carefully selected as a group for their breadth of complementary experience and perspectives across research, policy, practice, and philanthropy.

It also required building authentic relationships with people who naturally tended to function as connectors to relevant people and knowledge. Importantly, SERN also functioned in this way, with our staff engaged in identifying and brokering connections between people within and beyond our field.

Intentionally engaging a diverse range of perspectives required specific skills and orientations on our staff and the consultants we engaged, as described in the piece in this series focused on field catalyst staffing. It also entailed us developing certain design strategies and toolkits for the events we hosted, such as our annual funder briefings and scholarly convenings, since all involved heterogeneous groups and boundary spanning. As part of our sunset, we publicly documented lessons learned about how we crafted these events to foster relationships and engagement across silos (see our funder briefing resource and scholarly events resource; both include takeaways, examples, and templates that are more broadly applicable beyond the target audience for these events).