
Field Catalyst Communications: A Core Enabler of Field-Level Impact

Author: **Lisa Quay**

Date: **February 2025**

Field catalysts exist to build the capacity of fields in service of achieving systems change. Their primary [roles](#) include diagnosing and assessing the core problem and ecosystem of actors focused on it, connecting actors around a shared goal, shining a spotlight on the issue, and filling key gaps in the field.

In doing this field building work, field catalysts have to cultivate credibility and trusting relationships across sectors, foster dialogue and alignment between organizations and individuals operating at multiple altitudes, synthesize knowledge, articulate collective strategy, and recruit and influence resources to support the field. And they have to do all of this with little to no formal authority. Field catalysts also have to secure resources (including talent and funding) to support their own organizations—a challenging task when [many funders don't yet see or understand field catalysts](#) as a critical facilitator of systems change, when field catalysts' efforts are not the “typical” type of work highlighted in the social sector and their work is in a constant state of evolution, and when field catalysts are often intentionally operating from a behind-the-scenes position. All of this requires exceptional skill and intentionality in communications to be successful.

This piece highlights three lessons learned from SERN's communications work as a field catalyst.

THREE LESSONS LEARNED

- 1. Communications is vital to field building because it can support the development of shared language and vision and encourage a larger tent of people and organizations (including funders) to see themselves as part of the field.**
- 2. Responsive, transparent, carefully planned, and coherent communications—both within the communications function and across all external-facing teams—are important to field catalysts building and sustaining trust with field actors.**
- 3. Beyond their own communications, field catalysts have a unique skill set and opportunity to contribute to enhancing the field's communications capacity.**

The following background on SERN's audiences and the role communications played in our organization as well as how we staffed the function provides important context for these lessons learned:

Audiences. SERN focused on building practically relevant research knowledge and using it to (a) make the case for an emphasis on student experience in the American education system and (b) support influential education intermediaries and funders to apply insights from the research in their

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 Catalyst Origin Stories: Lessons for Systems-Change Leaders](#); a report featuring research by The Bridgespan Group on how field catalysts originate
- [Field Catalysts: The Versatile, Essential Tool Missing from Philanthropy's Systems Change Toolbox](#); a Center for Effective Philanthropy blog post summarizing insights for funders about how and why to support field catalysts
- [Mindsets and the Learning Environment Request for Proposals](#) released by SERN in 2017
- Sample SERN funder briefing [invitation](#) and [speaker preparation document](#); [overall approach to speaker preparation](#) as part of our [funder briefing resource suite](#)
- Communications collateral for SERN [scholar members](#) and [partners](#) explaining the evolution in our 2020 strategic plan
- Public messaging of SERN's new strategy and name: [blog post announcement](#) and [SERN overview document](#)
- [Letter](#) from SERN's executive director to the SERN community about the decision to pursue a strategic sunset; [public announcement](#)
- SERN's strategic sunset communications planning: [sunset email plan](#) and general external [communications and engagement calendar](#)
- [SERN competency map](#) for all role levels across the organization
- [Funding a Field Catalyst: Engaging Funders to Build Durable Buy-In](#); a brief on SERN's lessons learned about funding a field catalyst organization
- [Sharing Power in Philanthropic Relationships to Enhance Impact](#); a brief documenting SERN's lessons learned about engaging with our philanthropic partners and regrants funds
- [The Evolution and Impact of Student Experience Research Network](#); an article summarizing SERN's evolution and the results of an independent impact assessment
- [External-facing excerpt from SERN's style guide](#)
- Sample research synthesis: SERN's [Structures for Belonging research synthesis](#) and [key messages](#)
- Sample SERN [key messages on evidence and research use](#)
- [Priorities for the Student Experience Field](#); an example of how SERN synthesized field-level priorities based on input from a wide range of field actors

work with policymakers and system and institutional leaders to achieve equitable educational outcomes. Our primary audiences were thus academic researchers, senior leadership in practice and policy intermediaries, and program staff and directors in philanthropy.

Objectives. Our communications activities worked hand in hand with our programmatic efforts (e.g., convening, regranteeing, cohort building, knowledge and tool building) to:

- Expand the tent of people and organizations who saw themselves as part of the student experience field;
- Encourage research that was more practically relevant, interdisciplinary, equity-centered, and transparent;
- Make available synthesized, translated research knowledge that could inform decision-making in practice, policy, and philanthropy; and,
- Build buy-in and alignment among influential education intermediaries and funders that student experience mattered to equitable outcomes in education and that they were in the business of student experience—even if they did not see that as their primary focus.

To this end, communications was part of project scoping on our research and outreach teams in addition to the communications team having its own projects.

Activities. Our formal communications activities included regular messaging to our community of scholars and education partners; publication and

dissemination of written and video content; and maintenance of a website that served as a trusted clearinghouse for research-based information on student experience. Our chief dissemination channels were our website, social media (Twitter in particular), and our email newsletter, which reached a list of more than 4,500 people and had unusually high open and click-through rates. Our communications team also worked on the grant writing and reporting aspect of SERN's funder relations. Informally, we thought about communications and messaging in every aspect of our work across our entire organization: from how we framed event invitations and requests for proposals to how we sought input and feedback from participants and the field. We also thought about the communications capacity of the field itself as part of our work, too.

Staffing. Our communications function was staffed by myself as executive director (playing aspects of a director of communications role) together with half of a full-time staff person, who was split between our communications and outreach teams. We also sought targeted consultant support as needed on graphic design, videography, and communications content and editing. However, all SERN staff thought a great deal about communications and took this lens in their day-to-day work and programmatic design.

Communications performs an essential function for all organizations; the following lessons learned from SERN's experience highlight implications for field catalysts in particular given their unique functions and how they are situated.



Lesson 1

Communications is vital to field building because it can support the development of shared language and vision and encourage a larger tent of people and organizations (including funders) to see themselves as part of the field.

Two of SERN's key functions as a field catalyst were to shine a spotlight on the issue of student experience with actors who had long focused on other levers in education, and to connect a larger, more diverse group of actors across research, practice, and philanthropy to build and apply new knowledge about how structures in education shape students' experience of school. In both cases, it was imperative for SERN to create and socialize language and narratives that a wide range of actors could connect to and integrate as part of their work.

A couple of examples illustrate how we did this in our communications with field actors. First, the

shifts from studying interventions on students to understanding learning environments and then to changing structures in education more broadly. Second, a transition from our conceptual focus on "learning mindsets" to "student experience." In these cases, communications played a key role in making these shifts, both of which evolved the field's focus and connected a larger tent of people and organizations with relevant knowledge and activities to the field.

When SERN was launched in 2015 as "Mindset Scholars Network," our focus was on interventions delivered to students that sought to change their beliefs (or "learning mindsets") about learning and school. In our earliest communications, this was emphasized via translational summaries of the results of individual studies of mindset interventions and their effects on education outcomes. We also synthesized research (primarily from a single sub-discipline of social psychology) distilling what was known on individual mindset constructs: growth mindset, belonging, and purpose and relevance.

As we spoke to more practitioners and policymakers, it became clear that people wanted to know how institutions and classrooms shaped these beliefs. They wanted to know what they could do differently as people and organizations who shaped these educational contexts—and how they could remedy environments that for a long time had conveyed to many students that they did not belong, that they were not expected to excel, and that school was not relevant to them.

To encourage a shift in focus in the broader field, we not only issued requests for proposals to study the learning environment using cross-disciplinary perspectives but also began to shift our communications. We began talking about how the “learning environment” shaped students’ beliefs about learning and school in our convenings, presentations, and advising of funders and education intermediaries. We also began publishing translational syntheses of research that brought together knowledge from social psychology alongside bodies of research knowledge that had deep experience studying classroom and school environments.

Ultimately, we evolved this focus on the “learning environment” to a more encompassing emphasis on “structures,” which we explicitly defined as practices, policies, and norms in education. At the same time, we also intentionally shifted our conceptual focus (and our name) as an organization from “learning mindsets” to “students’ experience of respect as valued people and thinkers in school” (or “student experience” for short). This shift emerged from our growing realization that there were far more concepts and bodies of knowledge that were relevant to the central issue at hand than the three concepts around which we were founded—and that many scholars and organizations who were

Evolutions in our language and public messaging helped us encourage and reinforce important new directions in the field’s agenda and recruit essential new perspectives and knowledge to the community of people and organizations working in the field.

engaged in relevant work did not see themselves as focused on “mindsets” (and in some cases, had a negative reaction to this language because of its implications in dominant American culture). These evolutions in our messaging—aligned with shifts in our programming—changed who saw themselves as part of the field and our work at SERN.

As we made these pivots, we ensured this messaging was consistent across all our external-facing communications—whether in the context of program work (e.g., [requests for proposals](#), [invitations](#) to and [speaker preparation](#) for events) or on our website and social media. A SERN style guide supported such efforts. We also [explained to our constituents](#) *why* we were making the shifts so that they understood how they reflected evolving thinking and knowledge in the field.

In all these cases, our language evolved as we learned from the field and reflected on our work. Evolutions in our language and public messaging helped us encourage and reinforce important new directions in the field’s agenda and recruit essential new perspectives and knowledge to the community of people and organizations working in the field.



Lesson 2

Responsive, transparent, carefully planned, and coherent communications—both within the communications function and across all external-facing teams—are important to field catalysts building and sustaining trust with field actors.

As a field catalyst, our impact was predicated entirely on the trust and credibility we had with our field. Communications played a vital role in cultivating both—from the very beginning as we built our organization to the multiple pivots we made as we evolved to continue advancing the field.

Early on, it was essential that we build credibility with our scholar members and education actors. Many factors and experiences played into this but a key element was our communications. For example, in producing early translational syntheses of the state of research knowledge in the field for education audiences, it was imperative that both the scholars in our field and the target audiences saw them as accurate, relevant, and accessible. This was critical to building SERN’s early reputation for credible, practical work. In producing our first such synthesis, we established a SERN tradition of initiating publications on topics being demanded by our target audiences and seeking external peer review on drafts from a wide range of both scholars and members of our target audience. We took their collective feedback seriously and integrated it into the final versions.

As a field catalyst, our impact was predicated entirely on the trust and credibility we had with our field. Communications played a vital role in cultivating both.

It was also critical to trust-building that our communications signaled transparency and respect for members of the field. When we made strategic pivots, we explained in our communications how and why we had arrived at the decision, including how we had sought input from the field in making those decisions and the multitude of factors we were holding. This was also true for our internal communications. Examples of such communications include the “family and friends” messaging we shared with our [scholar members](#) and [partners](#) about our new strategy in summer 2020, our [public messaging](#) about that new strategy and our associated organizational rebrand, and the [decision to engage in a strategic sunset](#) in fall 2022.

We also conveyed respect to our community through the intentionality and thoughtfulness with how and when we communicated with them. By planning out our communications and engagement carefully (see this example of [coordinated email communications](#) and external [engagement calendar](#) from our strategic sunset) and cross-functionally—in dialogue with the full set of teams who engaged

various members of our community—we conveyed respect by making requests that people found personally relevant, minimizing time burdens, giving people a heads up on things that affected them, and distributing requests across our community.

Coherence and clarity in internal and external messaging also has heightened importance in sustaining trust given that field catalysts' work evolves dynamically in response to changing fields and lessons learned. At SERN, this entailed ensuring our language was consistent (e.g., via our style guide) as it evolved and that changes in our focus and strategy were reflected across partners' various touch points with us, whether that was a convening, a new publication, or participation in a grant portfolio or cohort program for scholars or education intermediaries. We also placed an emphasis on “showing” through our actions, not just telling; coherence between our words and actions was vital—as illustrated via the [public roll out of our new strategy](#), where we featured a [high-level overview](#) of our strategy alongside illustrative projects and publications that showed how we had been and were continuing to embody the new strategy's focus.

Coherence was important in internal communications, too, as staff had to absorb and lead through multiple pivots. This meant coherence across strategy documents alongside the design of and communications about core systems like project planning processes and talent development systems (e.g., our [competency map](#) and new performance review process that reflected the type of field catalyst work we evolved into).

In the specific case of funders, it was essential that we communicate with them regularly and bring them on a learning journey with us so that they understood why we were evolving our work and

Coherence and clarity in internal and external messaging also has heightened importance in sustaining trust given that field catalysts' work evolves dynamically in response to changing fields and lessons learned.

felt equipped to talk about the importance of our work as a field catalyst with people within their organizations who many not understand the need for such entities in the context of much broader strategies. For more on how we communicated with funders specifically, check out the piece in this series on [field catalyst funder relations](#) and also our lessons learned on [sharing power in philanthropic relationships](#) that we published in May 2023 as part of our sunset.

This close attention to communications required a communications focus by everyone at SERN—our staff and consultants, and everyone in all roles across all functions—not just our communications team. But there was a payoff to this organization-wide communications lens: it enabled us to make multiple important strategic pivots that positioned us to better serve the field and it also showed up in our ultimate [impact on the field](#).

This close attention to communications required a communications focus by everyone at SERN—our staff and consultants, and everyone in all roles across all functions—not just our communications team.

Lesson 3

Beyond their own communications, field catalysts have a unique skill set and opportunity to contribute to enhancing the field's communications capacity.

In addition to our own communications activities, SERN spent significant effort building the communications-related capacity of actors in our field. Through this work, we learned that field catalysts are poised to contribute to the field's overall communications capacity because of their specific skill set and positioning.

Because of their role, effective field catalysts become masters at translating and communicating between multiple, often siloed sectors within a field. They also accrue valuable information on needs, developments, and pain points across the field and are constantly learning from diverse perspectives. This unique skill set and perspective can aid other field actors seeking to bridge between sectors (e.g., researchers seeking to speak to policy, practice, or funder audiences). In SERN's case, we took a variety of steps to invest in the communications capacity of actors in our field. Below are some examples of strategies we used:

Feedback. Providing feedback on draft remarks and presentations to grantees and other speakers when presenting on their work with audiences from outside their domain at SERN-hosted events. Such feedback focused on building their understanding of these audiences and strengthening the clarity and effectiveness of their messaging. Examples of [how we prepared speakers](#) can be found in SERN's [funder briefing resource suite](#).

Resources. Sharing [excerpts from our internal style guide](#) with SERN participants and grantees for use when preparing public materials; this

Field catalysts are poised to contribute to the field's overall communications capacity because of their specific skill set and positioning.

resource included recommendations for scholars translating research insights for non-technical users and encouraged use of inclusive, equity-centered language.

Reducing information asymmetries. Providing background information to each party in connections we brokered (e.g., between a funder and a researcher) before introducing them to help reduce information asymmetries and scaffold more productive dialogue between them.

Training. Emphasizing communications capacity building as part of our programming. Examples include communications-focused training and feedback in our SERN Midcareer Fellows Program and the development of policy briefs and funder presentations by emerging scholars in our early career fellowships.

Messaging. Providing messaging that field partners and funders could adopt and adapt as part of their own efforts to advocate for a focus on student experience and invest in the field. Examples of this include the [translational syntheses](#) we published on priority topics in the field as well as [forward-looking field priorities](#) we synthesized from field input and released as part of our strategic sunset. We also shared talking points on topics about which we commonly received requests for information from partners fielding questions internally within their own organizations, such as our [talking points on evidence use](#) or this summary of [key messages about belonging](#).