Field Catalysts and Field Funding: A Politically Sensitive and Essential Function

Author: **Lisa Quay**
Date: **February 2025**

Achieving durable population-level change takes significant resources–both in the form of people's time and often, funding. In addition to the funding that enables the activities of a diverse ecosystem of actors working to address root causes using different levers and at various altitudes, systems change requires investing in the capacity and infrastructure connecting those actors such that their collective impact exceeds the sum of their individual parts.

In their role as entities that amplify and harmonize the efforts of ecosystems of actors to achieve systems change, field catalysts' efforts advance key observable characteristics of fields. The financial and non-financial capital (e.g., connections to other funders) that support the field's actors and infrastructure are one of these characteristics.

In our experience at SERN and our observations of other field catalysts, understanding and influencing funding flows–the amount and type of funding as well as what and who are funded–is a core function of this type of field-building intermediary. Such a function can be both politically and practically challenging, requiring field catalysts to build specific skill sets and trust within the field. However, it is necessary to advance the efforts and impact of the ecosystem of field actors as a whole. And importantly, it benefits both funders and other actors in the field (see table on page 3).

THREE LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Field catalysts' ability to understand and inform how funding flows into the field is critical to the field's overall health and development; a field catalyst's strategy and leadership should thus maintain a sharp focus on field-level financial resources.**

2. **A field catalyst's decision to regrant can be fraught and politically challenging but it can also be a high-leverage means of advancing the field.**

3. **Monitoring funding-related information and outcomes for both the field catalyst organization and the overall field can be an important component of a field catalyst's measurement, learning, and evaluation efforts.**

Understanding and influencing funding flows–the amount and type of funding as well as what and who are funded–is a core function of this type of field-building intermediary.

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; a report by The Bridgespan Group defining key terms about fields and field building and illustrating how fields tend to progress

- An Inside Look at the Partnership Between Funders and Field Catalysts; an article illustrating how field catalysts and funders can partner to effectively advance systems change

- SERN's Annual Funder Briefing: sample agendas, sessions, and links to a detailed resource suite on how SERN designed and planned these events; information on how we developed event themes and agendas, and selected speakers and moderators from the field

- Sharing Power in Philanthropic Relationships to Enhance Impact; a brief documenting SERN's lessons learned about engaging with our philanthropic partners and regranting funds

- Shaping Policy on Student Experience: Elevating the Leadership of Scholars from Minoritized Groups and Advancing Application of Equity-Centered Scholarship; an overview and takeaways from the SERN Midcareer Fellows Program

- The Evolution and Impact of Student Experience Research Network; an article summarizing SERN's evolution and the results of an independent impact assessment

- A list of internal resources shared as part of SERN's strategic sunset, which links all of the requests for proposals and applications issued by SERN, including the RFP we released as part of our strategic sunset and the SERN Midcareer Fellows Program RFA

Benefits of field catalysts understanding and influencing funding flows in fields

BENEFITS TO FUNDERS* Field catalysts can...	BENEFITS TO OTHER FIELD ACTORS Field catalysts can...
Support funders to become savvier, more equitable investors and better partners to grantees in the field	Recruit a larger pool of financial resources to the field aligned with a holistic perspective on the field's needs, with the potential to significantly accelerate the field's progress (*this is also a benefit to funders since individual funders' resources are insufficient to solve major social and environmental problems*)
Facilitate funders' exposure to a larger and more diverse range of actors doing relevant work, supporting more productive engagement and connections between funders and those actors	Share insights and trends on the overall funding climate for the field that can inform field actors' planning and fundraising–both individually and collectively
Use their relationships in the field to assess systemic barriers and identify needed investments and new opportunities that would advance the overall field	Support general capacity building for productive funder engagement given field catalysts' unique understanding of and potential proximity to funders
If the field catalyst is engaged in regranting: Model practices that funders can adopt to recruit a more diverse pool of grantees and more effectively support collective learning and impact	Provide a trusted, credible channel through which field actors can share information about the field's needs and opportunities with funders
	Gain access to brokered introductions to funders where there are aligned interests

Drawn from this underlined article on how funders and field catalysts can partner to unlock population-level impact.

This work is vital to the effective, equitable resourcing of fields and ensuring a connected, diverse ecosystem of actors–key ingredients to advancing equitable systems change. Such efforts are needed because funders' exposure to fields is constrained by how they are situated, their networks are limited, and their perspectives on field needs and strategy often lack the expertise of those working actively within the field. Field catalysts provide an efficient, high-leverage source of such information and relationships. Moreover, exposure to and experience with funders is not equitably distributed among field actors–especially those most proximate to the problem–and many funders want to be more effective, equitable investors and better partners to their grantees.

HOW FIELD CATALYSTS CAN INFLUENCE FUNDING FLOWS

Given their unique positioning in the field, there are multiple ways field catalysts can influence funding flows. Below are ways SERN did so in the student experience field:

Deepened and accelerated funders' learning about the field and increased engagement between funders and a larger and more diverse range of field actors. We accomplished this through our annual funder briefings that featured field leaders, participation in funder-hosted gatherings, and individual engagement with funders (e.g., answering ad hoc questions, sharing resources, briefing their colleagues, connecting individual field leaders and funders). These efforts helped funders see the importance of student experience to outcomes they cared about, understand how their work and that of their grantees shaped student experience, and expand their awareness of relevant actors in the ecosystem–some of whom they ended up funding directly. On the flip side,

many field leaders with less incoming access to funders built relationships with funders and were able to shape how funders understood the field and the nature of the problem and potential solutions.

Whether in the context of events or individual funder engagement, we spent significant time and care in identifying and preparing field actors to engage with funders and vice versa. For example, our funder briefing resource suite shares information on how we carefully developed these events' agendas and identified speakers and moderators to feature. When responding to funder questions about the field, we were also intentional in who we recommended to funders–whether in sharing field actors' published work and resources and/or making a direct introduction to the funder. We took care to ensure we were highlighting actors who were engaged in relevant, high quality work but may not receive as much attention or were not as well networked to funders for structural reasons, and to avoid overburdening certain field actors.

Provided funders with onramps to support the field. Our annual funder briefings helped a larger pool of funders understand that, regardless of what topic they worked on in education, they and their grantees were in the business of student experience. We saw funders who participated in our funder briefings go on to fund work and partnerships that had a core focus on student experience.

We offered specific vehicles for funders to "try out" making investments in the field through co-funded requests for proposals that SERN ran via our regranting efforts.

We used individual advising (e.g., via our regular check-ins with SERN's funders and ad hoc meetings with other funders who reached out to

us with questions about the field) to help funders see specific needs and gaps in the field and made them aware of new funding opportunities that could benefit from their investment, enabling them to make direct investments themselves.

Directed funding to the field through our own regranting efforts. SERN issued requests for proposals (RFPs) to encourage knowledge building that was disincentivized or understudied under the business-as-usual circumstances in the field. We also issued requests for applications (RFAs) to funded fellowships that we hosted to invest in targeted capacity building among field actors as well as the leadership of scholars from minoritized groups in bridging research and policy. These RFPs and RFAs were typically co-funded with contributions by multiple funders.

Modeled and documented more inclusive funding practices. SERN brought our funders on a learning journey with us as we implemented our grantmaking portfolios and fellowships, sharing what worked and didn't and modeling practices that created more inclusive and learning-oriented experiences for participants. As part of our sunset, we released documentation of lessons learned for funders from our grantmaking practices and our SERN Midcareer Fellows Program.

SERN'S IMPACT ON OUTCOMES RELATED TO FIELD FUNDING FLOWS

The third-party assessment of SERN's impact on the field showed that our efforts contributed to multiple important outcomes related to funding:

Improved research-based knowledge use by funders. 95% of the 20 funder survey respondents in the impact assessment observed some or significant improvements in applying research takeaways to their work as a result of engaging with SERN. This was also a common theme in the interviews conducted with funders.

Increased funding to the field. 55% of these funder survey respondents observed at least some increase in their funding for efforts focused on student experience as a result of their engagement with SERN.[1]

Aided funders' efforts to invest more effectively in the field and support a more diverse group of grantees. The qualitative data gathered in the impact assessment showed that foundations valued SERN's ability to bring information that "made our strategies smarter," identify and elevate people beyond the "big names," and provide leverage to fund more scholars of color and early career scholars because, as one funder interviewee noted, "it is usually the old white men at elite universities that get our funding."

Disrupted traditional funding patterns that concentrated funding among traditionally privileged groups and institutions. SERN's regranting efforts shifted the funding status quo for knowledge building in the student experience field. For example, in a sample of more than 100 SERN participants, Black and Latino recipients made up almost 40% of the sample but received only 10% of philanthropic funding between 2014 and 2023. In contrast, they received nearly 60% of the funding SERN regranted during that period. SERN's regranting also broke the near monopoly on funding to a small handful of people in the field: the top 10

---

[1] While challenging to get a complete picture of wider sector trends, analyses of available private and public funding in Foundation Maps as of winter 2023 showed an increase in funding activities labeled as "student experience" and related terms between 2014 and 2018 (at the time they were still collecting data for years following 2018).

most-funded people in this same sample received nearly 80% of all public and private funding and that group of 10 was overwhelmingly white, male, and at elite institutions. In contrast, the top 10 most-funded people by SERN were disproportionately women of color and more than half were from non-elite institutions.

Below are three lessons learned from SERN's efforts to understand and influence funding flows in our field:

Lesson 1

Field catalysts' ability to understand and inform how funding flows into the field is critical to the field's overall health and development; a field catalyst's strategy and leadership should thus maintain a sharp focus on field-level financial resources.

Regardless of whether a field catalyst engages in regranting, such an entity's ability to see and inform funding flows is critical to the field's overall health and development. As a function of how they operate, field catalysts have their ear to the ground and are constantly listening to and learning from a wide range of actors in the ecosystem. In their work to continuously diagnose the field and assess the barriers to systems change, they also possess a keen understanding of the needs and opportunities in the field. This benefits both funders and other actors in the field.

Field catalysts are uniquely poised to offer funders information about where financial resources are needed to advance the overall field and who might deploy them effectively, both individually and collectively. They can also help funders see emerging opportunities and areas where they may currently be under- or over-funding or funding in

> Field catalysts are uniquely poised to offer funders information about where financial resources are needed to advance the overall field and who might deploy them effectively, both individually and collectively.

ways that are causing distortions and inequities. To do so, field catalysts' leaders need to operate with the field as a whole in mind. They also need to be skilled in building trusting relationships and partnerships with funders above and beyond seeking to fundraise for their own organization's activities.

At SERN, we worked to build an understanding of funders across our entire team and it was a particular emphasis with our leadership. We invested in the development of SERN directors to build expertise in engaging productively with funders as thought partners and advisors. This entailed both seeking funders' input on SERN's work and serving as a resource to funders in their activities.

Our leadership team discussed SERN's funder relationships and broader funder engagement routinely at our weekly meetings, sharing insights and coordinating on responses to funder queries and strategic opportunities for influence. Engaging directly with funders was also built into project plans. Staff at multiple levels within the organization contributed to materials and participated in meetings with funders where we sought their feedback and shared in-progress insights from our work and our perspective on the broader field.

In addition to informing funders' resourcing of the field, field catalysts are also a valuable source of information on funding to the rest of the field. While being careful to protect confidential information (as we did in all relationships we held), SERN shared information on what we learned from funders–both relevant trends in funding overall as well as general lessons learned about engaging funders–with other actors in the field. This enhanced their understanding of the dynamic funding landscape and their capacity to engage productively with funders. When brokering specific introductions between funders and other field actors, we also provided both parties with context on the other to ameliorate information and power asymmetries. Our field partners saw SERN as a valued source of information on the funding landscape and navigating funder relationships and increasingly turned to us for counsel in this arena.

Beyond its direct impact on the overall field, SERN's ability to understand and inform funding flows was also an important factor that enhanced our credibility and influence within the field. We became seen as an entity that built funders' awareness of the field and could draw in new dollars to the field. We took this seriously and sought to represent the field as authentically and responsibly as we could. However, this also became a double-edged sword as SERN grew in stature and budget. While many saw SERN as an asset to the field, some viewed SERN as a threat because they believed that we siphoned funding that could have gone to them. This created political challenges we had to navigate as an organization.

In addition to informing funders' resourcing of the field, field catalysts are also a valuable source of information on funding to the rest of the field.

Lesson 2

A field catalyst's decision to regrant can be fraught and politically challenging but it can also be a high-leverage means of advancing the field.

Not every field catalyst can or should engage in regranting; however, it was vitally important to SERN's work to advance our field given its state of development. SERN's regranting enabled us to encourage knowledge and capacity building in high-value areas we knew were disincentivized by the current structures in the academy and education–both through the use of the funds themselves and the signals they sent to the broader field. Our regranting also helped connect more people to the field and elevate the leadership of

SERN's regranting enabled us to encourage knowledge and capacity building in high-value areas we knew were disincentivized by the current structures in the academy and education–both through the use of the funds themselves and the signals they sent to the broader field.

a larger, more diverse pool of actors. Our specific approach to regranting–the use of RFPs and RFAs (samples here and here), which emerged from our organization's grounding in the norms and practices of academic research–also helped us to more systematically surface emerging priorities and areas of innovation from the field itself. This approach stands in contrast to the grantmaking practices of many education philanthropies who invite proposals aligned with their organizational strategies, and it allowed us to get authentic information on the field's needs and interests. Our funders appreciated that our approach, combined with our strategic outreach to the field (described below), yielded a broader and more diverse pool of applicants doing relevant work than what they typically would have identified and funded themselves.

That said, regranting can be challenging politically for field catalysts. Questions we encountered directly and indirectly included: Who gets to decide what and who is funded? Is SERN "taking" funding that would otherwise go to my research / my organization?

While we continued to improve our regranting practice over time as we listened to others and learned from our experience, we held a few key principles at the core of our approach from the beginning of our foray into grantmaking early in SERN's history. Enacting these principles in our regranting activities enabled us to produce knowledge that was being demanded by the field, cultivate a larger and more diverse network of potential applicants over time, and bring greater legitimacy to decisions about what and who SERN funded. Notably, these types of practices also align well with the more general field listening and relationship-building in which field catalysts need to continuously engage.

Listen to the field to generate priorities for a new funding opportunity. Using both informal and formal means, we gathered insights from a wide range of people in the field to glean what topics were important for new knowledge building, relationship building, and action–and where there was overlap with areas that SERN's current or prospective funders were willing to invest in. In our case, this also entailed looking at the existing scholarly literature. This helped us understand the extent to which these were true gaps in the available knowledge and/or siloed information was not yet penetrating beyond the walls of a specific academic discipline or across sectors. Doing so also allowed us to understand how a variety of actors understood and talked about the issue, which shaped how we scoped and framed the funding opportunity.

This entire process was important to ensure that our funding opportunities met the broader field's needs–not just those of a small group of actors–and it also positioned us to fundraise for such efforts with strong information in hand on the needs we were meeting.

Act on feedback in designing funding opportunities. We sought upfront input as well as feedback on drafts of RFPs / RFAs from a heterogeneous group of people to ensure that they would appeal to prospective applicants' interests and meet their needs (including the timeline, allowable funding uses, and budget ranges). That said, no RFP or RFA could or would meet everyone's needs; thus it was also important we cultivated other meaningful avenues for engaging members in our community beyond these funding opportunities.

Conduct targeted, individualized outreach to potential applicants. We engaged in proactive, tailored outreach to cultivate potential applicants with relevant knowledge, relationships, and interests. For SERN, this took the form of direct outreach to such people with whom we or our allies had existing relationships as well as targeted outreach to well-connected "nodes" in the field who could disseminate the calls to their contacts, especially those with whom SERN did not yet have relationships. Building relationships with such nodes was thus a high priority for SERN.

Engage in robust review processes that leverage the field's expertise. We used a combination of carefully selected external and internal reviewers to score proposals using holistic criteria. In this case, SERN benefited from established norms for peer review in the academy in which proposal decisions are based on an invited set of reviewers' ratings of proposals. We selected reviewers for the range of complementary knowledge needed to comprehensively evaluate proposals (e.g., topical expertise; sophistication in evaluating for equity) and used review processes as an opportunity to invest in the development of people earlier in their careers in addition to more experienced reviewers.

Our brief on sharing power in philanthropic relationships includes more information on our regranting practices as well as specific examples from our work; see also this list of internal resources shared as part of our sunset to access all of the RFPs and RFAs issued by SERN.

Lesson 3

Monitoring funding-related information and outcomes for both the field catalyst organization and the field can be an important component of a field catalyst's measurement, learning, and evaluation efforts.

Monitoring funding-related information through the close relationships we held with several funders was essential to SERN for several reasons. As noted above, it was valued as informational currency that helped us better serve our colleagues in the field (both funders and other field actors alike) and contributed to our credibility as a field-level intermediary. It also enabled us to make more informed strategic decisions. For example, our close relationships and information sharing with funders provided a detailed sense of the funding outlook that factored into major strategic decisions we made in our new three-year strategy in spring 2020 in the face of multiple transformative societal crises and again in summer 2022, when we decided to pursue a strategic sunset.

The third-party impact assessment conducted as part of our sunset also revealed that we likely should have tracked funding outcomes more closely as part of our ongoing measurement, learning, and evaluation work. It turned out that a major aspect of SERN's field-level contribution related to the resourcing of the field (both increasing the overall investment in the field and shaping what and who

was funded for knowledge building); however, it was not something that we had been systematically gathering data on as a target outcome of our work. A better understanding of this would have sharpened our view of the field and informed our strategic decision-making and organizational messaging.

In retrospect, we could have gathered a broader set of information and done so more systematically from both funders and field partners. This might have looked like gathering more targeted information throughout our regranting processes (from the design and application phases to the completion of portfolios), surveying a sample of funders and other field actors annually, and seeking information on a specific set of questions about this topic in opportunities we had to engage periodically with our partners in the field. While we certainly did this more informally, we and the field could have benefited from more systematic information on this front throughout SERN's trajectory.