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# Launching a Field Catalyst: Creating Favorable Conditions for Field-Level Impact

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Date: **February 2025**

[Like many organizations before it](#), SERN did not set out to serve as a field catalyst, nor did we engage in all of the typical roles of a field catalyst at first. Our transition to [becoming one](#) wasn't intentional at the beginning—nor was it linear or easy—and there are many things we would likely do differently. This piece shares lessons from SERN's initial experience growing into the field catalyst role with the hope that they may be useful to others early in their field catalyst journey.

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 documented a notable effect of such interventions among American students from minoritized and marginalized groups because our society has always questioned these students' ability and undermined their sense of belonging in school.

The founding scholars established what was originally called the “Mindset Scholars Network” around two large scale experimental studies of mindset interventions and convening a

## THREE LESSONS LEARNED

- 1. Prior to launching or formally announcing themselves as a field catalyst, entities can explore and learn into the role by taking on discrete opportunities to perform the functions of a field catalyst.**
- 2. How a field catalyst defines its field and its purpose matters for who feels included and its ability to advance progress on questions of practical import.**
- 3. Field catalysts need to find (or build) an organizational home and create governance and advising structures that enable the type of work they anticipate engaging in and align with their role in serving the field as a whole.**

multidisciplinary group of researchers to collaborate on them. The initial goal was to understand for whom and under what conditions such interventions were effective.

But as we began engaging with more people over our first year of existence—a wider group of researchers across multiple disciplines, educators, policymakers, and funders—it became clear that 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 by The Bridgespan Group on why field catalysts emerge and how they can overcome common challenges
- [Becoming a Field Catalyst](#); an article on how SERN became a field catalyst and findings from an impact assessment about the core assets it brought to this work
- [Public messaging of SERN's new strategy and name](#)
- [SERN's first request for proposals on mindsets and the learning environment](#)
- [SERN's Annual Funder Briefing](#)
- [SERN's first research synthesis on mindsets and the learning environment](#)
- [Reflections from a Strategic Sunset](#); an article on why and how SERN engaged in a strategic sunset in 2023

priority was the learning environment being created in schools and classrooms. We asked them what questions they were grappling with in their work and what they needed. Collectively, 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?*

Our efforts to answer these questions changed everything about our organization—from our conceptual focus to the type of work we did and who we engaged to our very [name](#) (in 2020, we became “Student Experience Research Network”). It also led us to grow into the role of a field catalyst.

With a north star of serving educational equity, our driving goal became building an education system in which every student experiences respect as a valued person and thinker so they can learn and thrive. This meant flipping our perspective from trying to change students to working to shift the root causes that shape the environments in which they learn (i.e., pursuing systems change). To this end, we connected people and ideas across the realms of research, practice, policy, and philanthropy in order to advance relevant scientific knowledge and improve decision-making by system and institutional leaders in education. And what exactly this looked like—and whom it involved—evolved as we, and the field learned and grew.

Below are some examples of how SERN evolved to address this question:

**We began regranting.** We started to regrant funds to encourage cross-disciplinary knowledge building on how the environment shapes students' beliefs and how it can be changed.

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The ripple effects of our evolution into a field catalyst reached every aspect of our organization: our strategy, programming, internal processes, staffing, governance, communications, fundraising, culture, and even where our organization was housed.

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**We shifted our programming and networks.** We shifted our programming and the networks we tapped into in order to connect with and elevate the work of a larger, more diverse group of scholars who were studying the educational environment and how it is experienced, especially by marginalized students, using a wider set of methods and theoretical frameworks.

**We expanded who we targeted.** We broadened the groups we engaged from a sole focus on scholars to include practitioners, policymakers, and funders working in education to cultivate more practically relevant knowledge—and ensure that people in a position to impact the experiences of millions of students were learning what we were learning and unpacking its implications for their programming, strategies, communications, policy and advocacy efforts, and products.

The ripple effects of our evolution into a field catalyst reached every aspect of our organization: our strategy, programming, internal processes, staffing, governance, communications, fundraising, culture, and even where our organization was housed. Several of these topics are covered in greater depth in other pieces in this series. This piece highlights three key takeaways for launching a field catalyst—whether that is happening at year 0 or year 20 of an organization's life cycle.

One important note is that depending on whether a new entity is being *launched as a field catalyst* or if it is an existing organization that is *experimenting with or evolving into a field catalyst role* (as was the case with SERN), that organization may engage in the types of activities outlined below to varying degrees and in different orders. For context, the lessons learned are outlined below in an order that aligns with SERN's specific experience.

## **Lesson 1**

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### **Prior to launching or formally announcing themselves as a field catalyst, entities can explore and learn into the role by taking on discrete opportunities to perform the functions of a field catalyst.**

SERN began trying out activities early in our organizational trajectory that gave us a sense for what it would take to hold a field-building role and the types of capabilities we would need to develop on our nascent team. These activities also began to build our external reputation and credibility as a field steward.

#### **Seeding new knowledge building via regranting.**

As we began to understand more about what the broader scholarly and education community was looking for, we realized we needed to have a stronger hand in building new knowledge. The status quo did not incentivize scholars to collaborate across fields and disciplines, let alone in partnership with educators or policymakers. We also needed to seed more practically relevant knowledge building if we wanted to change the education system that students experience. All of this took putting new money into the field in the form of grantmaking. We gathered feedback from our community on an initial concept and, 18 months after SERN was founded, we issued our [first request for proposals](#) (RFP) in fall 2016 to study how the

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learning environment shaped the mindsets students came to hold.

#### **Cultivating awareness of the issue among funders.**

At around the same time, we hosted our first [briefing for funders](#), introducing them to this body of research and its applications in practice and policy.

These two activities—our first RFP to encourage new knowledge building and our first funder briefing—allowed us to experiment with this field-building role and begin developing the relevant organizational muscle and our reputation for acting on behalf of the broader field.

#### **Building new narratives and shared understanding of the knowledge base.**

In 2017, we expanded our field-building repertoire by releasing our [first translational synthesis](#) of research on the topic for education audiences, drawing on a broader body of literature and using it to direct focus toward the learning environment. The synthesis emerged from a series of conversations I had engaged in with education funders and nonprofits that touched on why mindsets mattered and how the learning environment shaped these beliefs. This process taught us how to build materials in response to the questions we were hearing in the field.



It also helped us learn how to engage a wide range of scholars as part of the review process—both to ensure the materials we developed represented the field accurately and to build their awareness of a new, shared narrative being built in the field.

Collectively, these early activities lay an essential foundation for our evolution into a more “formal” field catalyst, allowing us to try on the role and build a reputation for effectively carrying out this type of work.

## **Lesson 2**

### **How a field catalyst defines its field and its purpose matters for who feels included and its ability to advance progress on questions of practical import.**

We were founded by psychologists so the language and “conceptual sandbox” at our launch reflected their language and theories. Our incoming purpose and approach also reflected an underlying orientation toward better understanding and spreading a particular *solution* (mindset interventions that aim to change individuals’ beliefs). This stands in contrast to marshaling people and organizations to diagnose and shift the underlying conditions (e.g., policies, practices,

mindsets, resource flows<sup>1</sup>, etc.) that hold in place a long-standing systemic *problem*: in this case, the fact that many students experience school as dehumanizing and demotivating as a result of how they are seen and treated by that system. Our incoming focus resonated with some of the people with relevant knowledge and agendas but not others; this was a barrier to building and applying the knowledge the broader field was demanding.

It took us from 2015 to 2020 to evolve the field we were focused on from “learning mindsets” to “students’ experience of respect as valued people and thinkers in school”—or “student experience” for short. The field of “student experience” was intentionally broad enough to hold multiple relevant bodies of work while also being something that no one scholarly discipline or programmatic approach could claim ownership over. This was complemented by the concordant shift in our emphasis from changing students’ beliefs to changing structures in education.

The evolution happened in steps. First, we evolved our language and emphasis more informally through changes in our programming and publicly citing a more expansive body of scholarship and frameworks. Ultimately, we changed our formal focus and organizational name as part of rolling out

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<sup>1</sup> “Resource flows” includes but extends beyond funding; it [refers](#) to how money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed.



our new strategy in 2020. It took a lot of money and effort to make the shift. It also took a great deal of care and intentionality with our communications internally and externally.

We could never have articulated this new field focus alone—or by engaging with a relatively homogeneous group of actors. We got there by listening to many people who held vastly different experiences and perspectives, from scholars working in social psychology to pedagogy to educators working in North Carolina and students organizing in California. We also learned from the work of leaders advancing systems change.

Our new focus did not satisfy everyone in our community. But it fundamentally expanded who wanted to collaborate on the work we were seeding. Our work was more widely relevant and inclusive. It allowed us to set a larger, more diverse table that would not have been possible five years prior—and it gave us greater traction on the underlying questions education practitioners and policymakers were asking. In retrospect, it would have been better to begin the listening work far earlier in the process.

### **Lesson 3**

**Field catalysts need to find (or build) an organizational home and create governance and advising structures that enable the type of work they anticipate engaging in and align with their role in serving the field as a whole.**

As we grew into a field-building intermediary, we realized the need to make changes to our organizational home and build governance and advising structures in alignment with the new roles we were taking on organizationally.

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SERN was launched out of an interdisciplinary center (the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences) at Stanford University, which had a long history of seeding cutting edge interdisciplinary scholarship. After our first RFP, we knew that regrantsing was something we would do more of. But regrantsing was not something that our existing home at Stanford was capable of accommodating long term. We needed a home that matched the type of work we would be engaged in as a field catalyst.

In 2017, we evaluated multiple options for a new home, including becoming a standalone 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and becoming a project housed within a fiscal sponsor. We weighed several considerations, such as:

- Did we have sufficient staffing and annual grant funding to warrant becoming a 501(c)(3), rather than paying fees to exist as a fiscally sponsored project?
- What were the credibility and branding implications of different scenarios?
- How would the available governance structures impact our effectiveness as a field-building organization and our operations?
- What type of regrantsing could we engage in and at what cost under each scenario?

We saw multiple advantages and few downsides to proceeding with a fiscal sponsorship arrangement. Tactically, we set it up at a point at which we had mostly spent down our founding grant funds at Stanford and were poised to do a major round of new fundraising—the grants from which all went immediately into the new fiscal sponsor while we took the necessary time to transition the organization and staff to our new home.

Our need to evolve our governance structures followed a similar trajectory and timeline. At its founding, SERN had two faculty co-chairs, modeled after the interdisciplinary research networks funded by the MacArthur Foundation. The co-chairs set the network's priorities and worked with a managing director on administrative matters; however, unlike a MacArthur model, SERN did not have funds to pay the co-chairs for their time. The co-chair model also meant that the network priorities were influenced by a relatively small group of people.

When we moved from Stanford to the fiscal sponsor, we transitioned from co-chairs to a five-member “scientific steering committee” to facilitate input from a larger and more representative group of scholars in the network. It provided guidance on our scholarly priorities and activities. We supplemented their input with significant informal and formal feedback opportunities from the rest of the network membership and other participants in our programming.

At the time, the fiscal sponsor required our “advisory board” (the functional equivalent of a regular nonprofit board) be composed of our funders, which we staffed with a rotating group of our funders over time. This group was responsible for managing the executive director, provided input on strategy and organizational matters, and approved the organization's annual budget.

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A key lesson from our organizational journey is that to represent and serve the field as a whole, governance and advising structures and feedback mechanisms need to reflect the field holistically and not be beholden to any particular group within that field.

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Before the board and I made the decision to [strategically sunset SERN](#), we had plans to further evolve our advisory and governance structures to make the organization more responsive to the priorities of the larger field and reflect the expansion of the constituencies we served. This plan included establishing a larger committee of external advisors across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy who would weigh in on matters of strategy and field stewardship. We also planned to expand and broaden representation on the board to reflect all of these groups, as well.

A key lesson from our organizational journey is that to represent and serve the field as a whole, governance and advising structures and feedback mechanisms need to reflect the field holistically and not be beholden to any particular group within that field. Our work became more inclusive and practically relevant the more we sought and responded strategically to the input of a more representative group of actors. These efforts enhanced our ability to know what the broader field needed and how they experienced our work, positioning us to be a more credible and effective field-building actor.