

Student Experience Research Network

February 2025

Psychological research on students’ mindsets about learning and school garnered interest in the 2000s and early 2010s, with terms like “growth mindset” entering the public discourse. The research underscored that students do not learn in a vacuum, but rather are impacted by implicit and explicit signals in the environment about their ability, belonging, and the purpose of school.

As the research gained traction, scholars wanted to ensure it was not misunderstood. They also wanted to answer new questions by collaborating with colleagues in other disciplines, like sociology and economics. Originally called Mindset Scholars Network, [Student Experience Research Network](#) (SERN) was founded in the United States in 2015 to facilitate large-scale interdisciplinary studies, which were disincentivized by typical academic norms and structures. While it was not founded as a field catalyst, SERN [grew into the role](#), based on a desire for the research to have a real-world impact and increased understanding of the underlying system conditions shaping student experience.

Field Catalyst Role 1 Diagnosing and assessing the core problem and the full landscape of actors devoted to it

Disciplinary silos in research were one key barrier in the development of practically relevant knowledge. As SERN’s work continued, it came up against a number of other obstacles to research-based, structural change in the education system, and ultimately adapted to

FIELD
Student experience

YEARS OF OPERATION
2015 - 2023

APPROXIMATE ANNUAL EXPENSES
\$2M - \$4M (2024 USD)

KEY IMPACT
[Coalesced](#) the field of student experience and supported the integration of research-based knowledge into education practice, policy, and philanthropy

address multiple aspects of the [cycle of conducting, sharing, and using research](#). It synthesized research into accessible and actionable formats, centered around end users’ priorities. It also created opportunities for actors in the education system to grapple with and apply the research.

Over time, SERN observed a common insight from various areas of research and practice: In order to learn and thrive, students need to experience respect as valued people and thinkers. The organization identified and engaged scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and funders who had strategic roles to play in advancing this vision.

This case study was developed collaboratively by Student Experience Research Network and The Bridgespan Group, drawing on The Bridgespan Group’s [research](#) on the roles and assets of field catalysts, and Student Experience Research Network’s publicly available materials. It is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial NoDerivatives4.0 International License](#).

Field Catalyst Role 2

Advocating and shining a spotlight

SERN developed and disseminated a coherent body of knowledge about student experience, and supported partners to understand how the topic connected to their work. With fewer than ten staff members, SERN did not work directly with educational institutions, but instead engaged intermediary actors with significant reach and influence. Briefings for funder and policy audiences showcased relevant insights from research and practice, and close partnerships with funders and organizational leaders helped build their commitment to supporting student experience.

An [assessment of SERN's impact](#) found that it contributed to putting student experience “on the map” among influential education leaders, funders, and researchers. Ninety-five percent of funders in the evaluation improved their application of research and over half increased their funding for efforts focused on student experience as a result of engaging with SERN.

Field Catalyst Role 3

Connecting and organizing actors around a shared goal

By organizing convenings and brokering connections, SERN enabled collaboration among individuals and organizations that were typically not in contact, expanding the available base of knowledge and its application in practice and policy. Bringing together researchers from different disciplines, methodological backgrounds, and career stages, and bridging across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy required SERN to communicate effectively in diverse contexts and [scaffold opportunities for collaboration](#).

Through its advising and formal initiatives, SERN also mobilized and supported the field to attend to student experience. Its initiatives included a [fellowship](#) for scholars to bridge research on student experience with policy, and workshops and other [meaning-making opportunities](#) for practitioners and funders to consider how they might shift their work based on the growing body of research knowledge.

Field Catalyst Role 4

Filling critical gaps in collective effort

SERN [re-distributed](#) over 40% of the total funding it received. Leveraging its field-level view, the organization used grantmaking as a way to support the work that was most needed (yet disincentivized by existing structures in research), while addressing power dynamics that were holding the field back – like the [disproportionate flow](#) of private and public funding to white, male, senior scholars at high-status institutions. SERN's grantmaking directed attention to the questions that mattered most to practitioners and policymakers and elevated the leadership of a larger, more diverse group of people building the field's knowledge.

Serving an early-stage field

SERN catalyzed an early-stage field based around an [issue rather than a problem](#), meaning that its work did not have a clearly-defined endpoint, like ensuring every child has access to a healthy school lunch.

[Like other field catalysts](#), it tracked and contributed to field development while working toward longer-term systems change. In SERN's case, [early progress was observable](#) in the field's knowledge base and infrastructure – a larger body of knowledge was synthesized into an accessible set of insights, and there was growing collaboration –

ultimately leading to increased resources, a shared sense of responsibility for supporting student experience, and a broader and more diverse group of actors recognized as leaders.

In 2023, thanks to the collective efforts of SERN and others, the field had advanced such that it needed

something different than what SERN was designed to do and others across research, practice, and policy seemed better positioned to advance that work. The organization conducted a [strategic sunset](#) that involved investing in the field's next generation of leaders and elevating forward-looking field needs to expedite this transition in the field.

Building a shared identity and expanding the field

By 2020, SERN's work centered on how practices, policies, and norms in education shape students' experience of respect as valued people and thinkers in school. This broadly-applicable conceptual focus allowed SERN to bring more actors into an effort that

had begun with a narrower focus on learning mindsets from social psychology, and served as a "lens" relevant to numerous areas across research, practice, policy, and funding.

Examples of relevant domains engaged in the student experience field

