



May 2023

SERN'S STORY

The Evolution and Impact of Student Experience Research Network

This piece was authored by Molly Watkins and draws on documentation provided by Student Experience Research Network (SERN), conversations with SERN staff and partners, and a third-party assessment of SERN's impact.

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In September 2021, Lisa Quay, the executive director of Student Experience Research Network, was sitting on some big news.

She wasn't allowed to tell anyone yet, but the philanthropist MacKenzie Scott was giving SERN the largest grant it had ever received. These now-famous "[money bombs](#)" are, in theory, what every nonprofit leader dreams of, but this one arrived at a time of uncertainty for SERN and it wasn't immediately clear whether a one-time gift was going to change that.

The transformative crises that began in 2020 had brought with them a set of huge challenges for the education field that SERN was attempting to respond to, and Lisa knew that receiving this grant was a good reason to do what SERN had done regularly throughout its seven-year history – talk to its partners and others in the student experience field across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy and get their input about what should come next. It had been a year and a half since SERN had engaged in a systematic way with the field as part of updating its strategy in 2020 and the Scott grant only added to the urgency to do so again.

In late spring 2022, after these conversations had concluded and Lisa learned more about what it would take to do the work the field needed, she saw clouds on the horizon. SERN would need to restructure and expand its staffing and organizational capabilities to meet what the field was asking for, and doing so would take significantly more funding. While the Scott grant could have enabled some of the necessary changes to SERN's approach in the short term, it would not address long-term financial sustainability as it was a one-time gift. It also would not solve the types of challenges in growing and evolving the organization that are common among field-level intermediaries like SERN given the complex and dynamic nature of field-building work, which had been ratcheted up in recent years due to the pandemic and shifts in the education sector. After exploring several

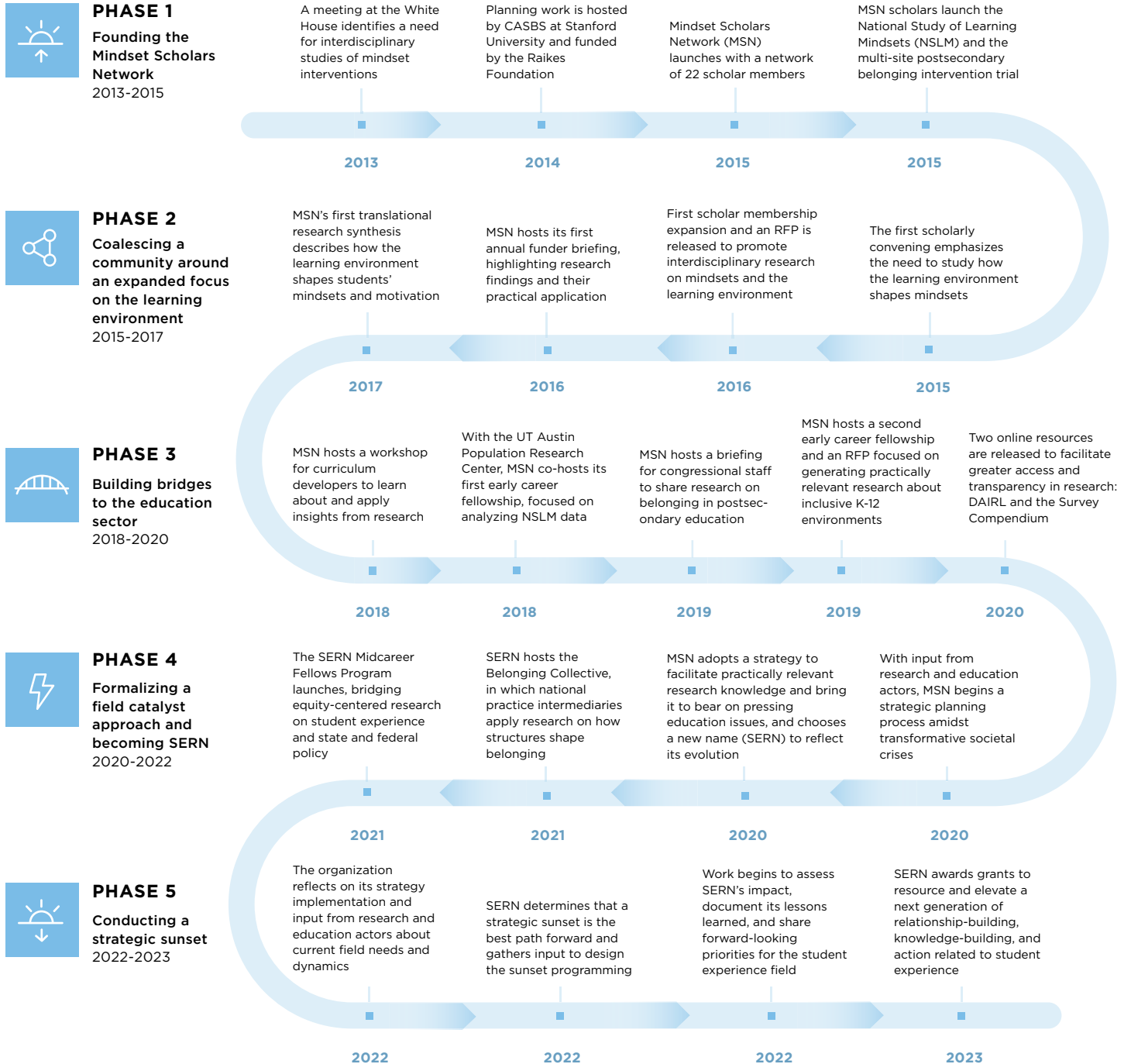
What SERN accomplished, borne out by a new impact assessment, demonstrates significant contributions to the student experience field.

organizational and financial models to determine if SERN should continue, the decision was made to sunset over the next year and as SERN was closing its doors, disburse its assets in a targeted and strategic way to help seed the work the field needed.

SERN's strategic sunset work included telling the story of how SERN got to this point, starting with what it was founded to do; how it evolved over time; how it came to embody what is now known as a "field catalyst;" and the impact it has had on its research, practice, policy, and philanthropic partners and on the wider field of education, as well as how it hopes the work it has stewarded can continue on in new ways.

What started as an ambitious, but relatively small, group of researchers studying promising new student mindset interventions became something even more powerful – a "big tent" that included a diverse group of researchers and a wide set of education actors from practice, policy, and philanthropy producing and using research in service of building learning environments where all students are respected as valued people and thinkers. What SERN accomplished, borne out by a new impact assessment described below, demonstrates significant contributions to the student experience field and contains insights that can inform the work of other people and organizations both within education and beyond.

TIMELINE OF SERN'S KEY MILESTONES AND INITIATIVES



SERN's Evolution

Phase 1: Founding Mindset Scholars Network (2013-2015)

More than four decades ago, psychology professor Carol Dweck and her colleagues began a series of studies that formed the foundation of their work on growth mindset. It was based on observations that people's beliefs about whether their abilities could be developed shaped their behavior in achievement contexts. In the following decade, psychology professors Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson had begun developing a theory of stereotype threat based on observations that people's performance dropped when concerned about confirming a negative stereotype about their group. As this body of work matured in education contexts, it repeatedly demonstrated that students' beliefs and perceptions, or "mindsets" about learning and school, can affect their motivation, resilience, and achievement.

This body of social psychological research more widely entered the public eye with numerous stories in the [press](#) and Dweck's 2006 book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, as well as Steele's 2010 book, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*. In May 2013, the Raikes Foundation sponsored a [national summit](#) on the research co-hosted by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and the U.S. Department of Education, which centered on a research agenda articulated in a white paper by David Yeager, Dave Paunesku, Gregory Walton, and Carol Dweck.

Dweck and others were [concerned](#) that the growing popularity of this research could lead to it being



[The researchers] ...were concerned about having fidelity to the way that mindset interventions or messages were structured. It's not just saying you're smart. It's actually about challenging somebody to do something so that through the struggle they're actually going to grow.

— FUNDER, INTERVIEW

misunderstood and misused and the researchers wanted to carefully steward and expand this promising body of knowledge.

"Saturday Night Live had this recurring skit back in the 1990s that made fun of affirmation: 'you're good enough, you're smart enough' and so on. But the truth is that there is a literature on affirmation that if accurately deployed will make a big difference in the way that kids understand themselves, and that potentially has implications for education. [The researchers] ...were concerned about having fidelity to the way that mindset interventions or messages were structured. It's not just saying you're smart. It's actually about challenging somebody to do something so that through the struggle they're actually going to grow." — Funder, interview

In the wake of the White House event, the Raikes Foundation expressed interest in funding an interdisciplinary research network that could enable the field to do more than advance any

one researcher's individual agenda, while helping to responsibly steward the science. A network could launch studies and initiatives that no single researcher or discipline could take on alone.

Funded by a planning grant from the Raikes Foundation, the network was incubated at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University and championed and directed at CASBS by Ellen Konar and Margaret Levi. This initial grant enabled a core founding group of Stanford psychologists, including Carol Dweck, Claude Steele, David Yeager, and Gregory Walton and their collaborators to [begin holding meetings at CASBS](#) as the "Mindset Collaborative" to plan the network and large-scale studies that could shed light on "for whom, and under what conditions, mindset approaches are most effective."

With a subsequent three-year, \$2 million grant from the Raikes Foundation, Mindset Scholars Network (later Student Experience Research Network, or SERN) was formally launched in spring 2015 with

David Yeager and sociology professor Barbara Schneider as co-chairs and Lisa Quay as managing director.

The network's aims were to advance an interdisciplinary research agenda to expand our understanding of mindsets in social contexts. As David Yeager noted at the time, "What we realized in writing the white paper [for the White House summit in 2013] was that there were questions about mindsets that were bigger than the psychological perspectives we'd been taking." As part of the network's launch, the multi-year [National Study of Learning Mindsets](#) was designed to help a cross-disciplinary team of researchers understand the contexts in which intervening on students' mindsets is most beneficial for students in the transition to high school. Another flagship study was the multi-site study of a belonging intervention in postsecondary environments upon which the [College Transition Collaborative](#) (now part of the [Equity Accelerator](#)) was founded. See below for more information about these studies.

National Study of Learning Mindsets

The National Study of Learning Mindsets was designed to understand which kinds of students, in which kinds of classrooms, and in which kinds of schools are most likely to benefit from a short online program designed to foster a growth mindset during the transition to high school. The research team delivered the growth mindset program to more than 12,000 students attending 65 schools in the United States. In addition to exploring variation in the effects of the intervention, the study was designed to create a rich, longitudinal dataset that would enable research by experts from multiple scientific disciplines on a broad array of research questions in education for years to come. Findings from the study on the effects of the growth mindset program were [published](#) in the journal *Nature* in 2019.

Postsecondary Belonging Trial

The College Transition Collaborative (CTC) conducted a multi-site field trial in partnership with 22 colleges and universities across the country to deliver a brief, targeted program designed to cultivate students' sense of social belonging in the transition to college. The goal of the trial was to understand how the effects of the belonging intervention varied across different student groups and settings. CTC delivered the program to more than 26,000 students in the trial. Findings from the study on the effects of the belonging program were [published](#) in the journal *Science* in 2023.

SERN had an initial membership of 22 leading scholars from psychology, as well as other social science disciplines who have a long history in education research. These included researchers from statistics, sociology, and economics whose expertise spans developmental stages from early childhood through adulthood, cutting edge advances in study design and measurement, and applications of research to practice and public policy.

Working in an interdisciplinary way in academic research is both rare and difficult because, among other reasons, there is little professional incentive or support for doing so. Building an environment where interdisciplinary work could thrive was an essential part of SERN's focus in its early years. Among the founding scholars' early goals were aims of advancing rigorous, practically relevant research knowledge in service of educational equity and expanding and diversifying the field in order to better study complex social phenomena. These aims became north stars used to steward the network that remained constant throughout SERN's lifespan and played an important role in pushing it to form partnerships with the wider field.

Phase 2: Coalescing a Community Around an Expanded Focus on the Learning Environment (2015-2017)

With SERN formally launched, it held its first convening for scholars in fall 2015. The focus was primarily on the two studies described earlier, and it also included presentations on developing bodies of work focused on “putting mindsets in the social context” and a discussion about future needs for the education field. A key topic that came up was the need to understand how the learning environment itself shapes students' beliefs about learning and school.



Because of SERN's size and its careful investment – through small, focused meetings, mentorship programs, and grants – I was able to develop relationships with researchers in other fields. These have continued to this day, enabling me to continue to develop interdisciplinary research.

— RESEARCHER, SURVEY

Some questions emerged during that convening, particularly among the scholars who weren't participating in the two big studies the network was founded around. These members wanted to better understand what the network was and who was driving the agenda. Given this, the managing director decided to hold off on hosting the next convening until she could hold a series of individual conversations with the full membership to better understand what would be of value to them. She also wanted to gauge support for, and gather feedback on a request for proposals (RFP) that would distribute funds to groups of SERN members collaborating across disciplinary lines to study how the learning environment shaped students' mindsets about learning and school. Such an RFP could engage a larger proportion of the membership in the work of the network and drive the field's research priorities forward.

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— Researcher, survey

The series of conversations led to what would become three key aspects of how SERN operated for the rest of its lifespan:

1. Consistent conversations with, and responsiveness to, its community as a whole
2. Intentional effort to build relationships and connective tissue across silos, and
3. Strategic re-granting to push the field in both what was studied and who was included.

In addition to what the scholar membership surfaced in its first meeting about the need to study the learning environment, conversations with policy and practice experts over this period also revealed an interest in understanding how the environments created in schools affected students' mindsets and how these environments could be changed. And SERN's founding funder, the Raikes Foundation, was interested in this approach, as well.

In 2016, SERN invited six new researchers to join the scholar membership who brought further expertise in how the learning environment shapes students' mindsets. Based on feedback from scholars, and bolstered by interest from policy and practice experts, SERN released an RFP on the same topic to coincide with its next scholars convening in fall 2016, which was designed to be what could be considered a "soft re-launch" of the organization.

"It was designed to be more of a retreat. It was a two-and-a-half-day event. We went out to dinner. We went out in groups to do activities in Seattle together. People had working time together to come up with ideas for the RFP. So, it was much more of a relationship-focused event and, in some ways, a refresh. I told the group: Here's what I heard from you. Here's how we're going to change what we're doing. It was an important moment for us to try to create a space where all the scholars felt included." — Lisa Quay, SERN executive director



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— LISA QUAY,
SERN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This convening was different and set the tone for how SERN would operate in the future, both in style and in scope, as it also included policy experts to start the conversation about getting the work out to other parts of the education sector. The day before the convening, SERN held its first funder briefing featuring researchers sharing their latest findings. SERN scholar and inaugural chair Carol Dweck was a draw for funders as she is one of the preeminent scholars studying student mindsets. But she was featured alongside other researchers funders may not yet have heard of, which was intentional and an early sign of what would become a key aspect of how SERN operated – elevating the work of a broader group of scholars with influential education actors. SERN wanted to contribute to the long-term health of the field and expanding the pool of scholars who could engage in this kind of work – and who were recognized as field leaders – was essential to do so. Funders also heard from practitioners illustrating some of these concepts in practice contexts to show the connection and relevance of the research.

While the first convening had surfaced issues for the SERN community that needed to be addressed, the core substantive questions it raised about

how the learning environment shapes students' experience of school and the actions that resulted from the event set SERN on a path that defined its approach for the rest of its existence. It changed the way SERN approached communications and engagement, not just with researchers, but with funders, and increasingly with policy and practice actors. Shortly following the conclusion of the second convening, SERN had four new funders to add to its list, the Bezos Family Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Overdeck Family Foundation. It also received additional funding from the Raikes Foundation to co-fund the RFP on studying the learning environment. The RFP signaled an important shift in perspective on the part of the evolving network – expanding from a focus on changing students' beliefs to changing the learning environment and what it needed to provide for students. This shift meant SERN was evolving to focus on systems change in education.

Phase 3: Building Bridges to the Education Sector (2018-2020)

“We were recognizing that it’s fine and good to support studies, but if this was such compelling evidence and it wasn’t getting into the water system where it could be leveraged and used, it wasn’t going to matter if you did one more big study. You needed a field-building effort that really shaped how the science was answering relevant questions that mattered to educators and shaped how that science was translated to practitioners in ways that they could really use and begin to fully understand how powerful attending to the learning environment that we’re creating is.”

— Funder, interview

SERN began to receive more requests for research-based insights from education organizations, indicating a growing interest in the work.



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— FUNDER, INTERVIEW

These conversations also pushed SERN in new directions. It realized that a broader range of scholarly expertise and scholarship was needed to address the questions SERN was hearing from practitioners, policymakers, and funders, and that looking at the learning environment holistically and through a social, cultural, and historical lens was essential from an equity perspective.

As a result, SERN membership expanded in both 2018 and 2019 and had an increased emphasis on people studying how structures, including exclusionary structures, shape students' experience of school and advancing innovative equity-centered approaches in their scholarship.

At the same time, expanding the pool of scholars who could engage in practically relevant research that was rigorous, interdisciplinary, and transparent required investing in the next generation of scholars. The early career stage is a crucial time in scholars' development, and SERN chose to focus on it, recognizing that early career scholars are well-positioned to integrate new perspectives and strategies into their research and influence both their peers and the more senior scholars who serve as their mentors, advisors, and collaborators.



To facilitate this, SERN designed two early career fellowships (the National Study of Learning Mindsets Early Career Fellowship in partnership with the University of Texas at Austin Population Research Center, and the Inclusive Mathematics Environments Early Career Fellowship) and welcomed early career scholars to its annual scholarly convenings and other research meetings. It also designed RFPs that explicitly asked how early career scholars would be developed as members of the project teams.

In response to the questions it received from education audiences, SERN increased its focus on research on belonging and relevance. It also drew in related concepts that spoke to other bodies of relevant scholarship, including a focus on inclusion and marginalization, and culturally responsive and sustaining education, among others. Practitioners, policy actors, and philanthropic funders wanted to dig in deeper on understanding the role of the learning environment and in particular, how students' beliefs were shaped through academic instruction and in specific academic content areas.

Translation of the research for practice, policy, and philanthropy was a growing focus during this period. Summarizing individual studies and posting them on SERN's website was no longer enough – research synthesis that pulled together insights across broader bodies of research was needed. Synthetic work also allowed SERN to elevate scholarship that is often marginalized in academia and in the wider education sector.

SERN published its first research synthesis in 2017 on how [learning environments](#) shape students' mindsets and motivation, followed by subsequent syntheses on [inclusive mathematics environments](#), [postsecondary success](#), and [environments that support students' belonging](#). These syntheses grew out of specific interests from practitioners, policy actors, and funders and SERN used them to achieve broader goals, including elevating equity-centered research approaches and work by early career scholars, as well as responding to a growing number of questions SERN was getting about the role of the learning environment in shaping students' experience of school.

“You have to go to people in the field, policy influencers and policymakers, nonprofits who are trying to drive change. And you have to say, ‘Hey, we’ve got this really interesting research over here about how important student experience is. What would you need to take this research seriously to use it in your work?’ And they’re going to tell you that they need the research translated into pithy things they can send around and use and understand, not the report or the research papers.”

— Funder, interview

SERN used the syntheses to begin a new phase of its evolution by providing meaning-making opportunities, including both events and advising conversations with practice and policy intermediaries and funders, in which those actors could unpack the implications of research for their work. These meaning-making efforts would not have been as successful as they were, however, without SERN’s continued focus on building relationships and connective tissue. What started as an effort to build relationships between scholars of different disciplines now included bridging across sectors. And SERN put a great deal of thought and planning into constructing interactions to ensure they were meaningful.

“If you’re in a different discipline, a different field, if you’re from a different professional background, you speak different languages. There’s also this idea of status differentials. Where are you in your career? How are different professionals seen? What’s the ranking of your institution? What kind of work do you produce? What’s your methodological approach? There are status rankings within that. These things are not neutral. There are racial and gender issues to be thinking about. So, the space we convened required taking into consideration the kind of multiple dimensions along which people differ and vary and understanding and trying to come up with a formula for creating spaces and contexts for that specific set of people to engage productively. I think something we’ve been good



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— FUNDER, INTERVIEW

at that we’ve refined over time is really figuring out what are the basic ingredients of that. And then how do we adapt? There’s an art to this.”

— SERN staff member, interview

SERN also tried out new kinds of outreach and engagement with its partners, including:

- SERN brought together researchers and curriculum developers for a workshop to generate ideas about how to address issues of student engagement in the context of standards-aligned curricula in a 2018 event, Curriculum x Motivation.
- In response to growing interest in the issue of college completion, SERN hosted a briefing on Capitol Hill in 2019 for postsecondary-focused policy audiences. To shift the conversation, SERN used synthesized and translated research demonstrating that institutions have an important role to play in shaping college success by attending to how their institutional actions impact student experience.

- SERN turned its popular funder briefing into an annual event and opened it to a larger group of attendees and speakers. These briefings equipped funders with information they could use internally and externally to build awareness of the importance of student experience and helped them apply a research-based student experience lens in considering their strategies and investments.

“There’s a lot of great research out there. Some people know how to access it, some people know how to read it, some people know how to interpret it, but that number gets smaller and smaller as you go down the pipeline to finally now not only interpreting it, but making meaning of it, using it, applying it. I was part of some of the earlier meetings where it was just a group of researchers and that was great and I loved being part of that, but I think it became much more impactful with this collective when we could bring in all these different organizations that can take this information and really apply it to our own programming, to our own stakeholders in ways that will translate.”

— Practitioner, interview

These events, and the conversations they generated internally, made clear for SERN that it needed to share feedback and ideas among and between the various audiences it was engaging - information couldn’t be flowing in just one direction from research to education. But creating this bidirectional feedback loop between researchers, policy and practice actors, and funders was challenging. SERN needed to upgrade its field engagement strategies and skills as well as its internal capacity. In 2018, it added two new research roles and a communications and outreach associate. And in 2019, it beefed up its outreach and partnerships capacity, as well as supplemented the research-focused staff. SERN also moved its organizational



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— PRACTITIONER, INTERVIEW

home from CASBS to New Venture Fund in 2017, which allowed SERN greater ability to re-grant and have more administrative flexibility in line with its growing body of work.

“The SERN convenings that I attended were one of the few spaces where individuals from practitioner organizations and researchers could spend a lot of time together, some structured, some social, and talk through some of the complexities of the relationship... And that’s a real barrier in the sector is researchers and practitioners don’t always know how to talk to each other.” — Practitioner, interview

By the end of 2019, SERN had brought more funders and funding on board including two providing core operating funds, as well as additional funding for research portfolios and fellowships. SERN’s membership now stood at 42 researchers, having nearly doubled from the original membership of 22. The disciplinary diversity represented in this membership had expanded to include computer science, economics, education, neuroscience, psychology, sociology, and statistics.

SERN had expanded the type of initiatives it was pursuing, engaging a larger pool of potential partners across research, practice, and policy. This growth enabled SERN to expand its field-building vision and connect more people to the work. SERN was poised for more growth in the future and had secured funding for a strategic planning process, which was set to start in the beginning of March 2020, just as the world started to lock down.

Phase 4: Formalizing a Field Catalyst Approach (2020-2022)

“The magic of SERN was that they were our true partner, and they were the intermediary that was really thinking about, not just them as an organization, but how can we move the field forward? And you just don’t find that very often.”
— Funder, interview

SERN’s strategic planning work in the spring of 2020 overlapped exactly with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the national uprising for racial justice. The context for SERN’s strategy and work overall suddenly became dramatically different as it did for many organizations during this time. SERN needed to be responsive to a rapidly evolving context and pressing questions as the education sector grappled with the pandemic and a legacy of systemic racism. SERN adopted a three-year adaptive strategy and fully embraced the field catalyst role it had been “unofficially” embodying previously.

According to The Bridgespan Group’s [research on field catalysts](#), “equitable systems change requires a diverse set of actors playing distinct and



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complementary roles across a field or ecosystem.” Field catalysts like SERN “harmonize and drive that multifaceted work, serving as a kind of nerve center for the matrix of activity needed to transform our inequitably designed systems.”¹ Unlike traditional direct service or advocacy organizations, field catalysts are not interested in scaling programs or organizations. Instead, they focus on large-scale impact by brokering relationships, coordinating learning and information sharing, and facilitating shared strategies and goals across actors throughout the ecosystem.

“One of the challenges with this work is that it’s not always easy to demonstrate outcomes and to signify the progress that’s being made. How do you demonstrate influence and really claim, I don’t want to say ownership, but claim some kind of association with that influence? So, that’s one challenge. Another is trying to describe our [work] to people... So, I think that’s always going to be a challenge for field catalysts because you’re doing so many different things and you live in a gray area.” — SERN staff member, interview

¹ Farnham, L., Nothmann, E., Crouch, K., & Daniels, C. (2023). Equitable Systems Change: Funding Field Catalysts from Origins to Revolutionizing the World. The Bridgespan Group. <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/funding-field-catalysts>

In many ways, SERN's adaptive approach made it as well-positioned as any organization of its kind could be in the cataclysmic year that was 2020. The body of research it was stewarding had huge implications for the current moment. But this was a big test.

“It's some of the hardest, most challenging work in the field. Half the people who are really going to benefit from your work, at first, they don't want it because they see you as competitive. They're not trusting that you're going to actually listen to them and meet their needs. People aren't even going to thank you for it, let alone have people who benefited from it in the field support it. Funders will have to foot this bill.” — Funder, interview

Leaders in the education sector were looking for ways to respond to these transformative crises, and SERN recognized that it needed to increase its engagement with the education sector quickly, mobilizing its affiliated researchers and the research base it had been cultivating and connecting to for the past five years. SERN focused on engaging intermediaries, funders, and other influencers in education who had significant reach with system and institutional leaders and with whom SERN or its existing partners had connections to support them in integrating insights from the research into their strategies, investments, programming, and resources. It sought to connect researchers with these kinds of education actors to continue building and applying practically relevant research that would respond to the needs of education systems under significant pressures. SERN launched two major initiatives during this time as an attempt to meet the moment: the Belonging Collective and the SERN Midcareer Fellows Program.

The Belonging Collective was based around a SERN-produced [synthesis](#) of research on belonging-supportive environments. Over a six-month period, nine national practice intermediaries



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— SERN STAFF MEMBER, INTERVIEW

gave and received feedback on their internal research agendas and processes related to student belonging. Member organizations also worked with the synthesis to create resources and materials to support internal teams, districts, and educators with measurement and professional learning.

“We loved working with the belonging synthesis because we could build it into our offerings and resources. Teachers and coaches can understand what we mean when we say belonging – not just a variable and a dataset, but what does this look like in practice? How do we support it? How do we foster it? What does it actually mean?”

— Practitioner member of the Belonging Collective, interview

The SERN Midcareer Fellows Program supported a community of 15 fellows in collectively bridging research with state and federal policy. It was designed for midcareer faculty who identify as a member of one or more minoritized groups in academia and who conduct equity-centered empirical research. Fellows advanced their knowledge about policymaking and how research is taken up in policy and provided input that shaped the design of the fellowship itself. They produced policy briefs and engaged policy intermediaries, as well as scholarly deliverables designed to speak back to academia.



“Being a part of the SERN fellowship has been truly life changing in that I feel seen, heard, and valued in ways that are not normatively rewarded, encouraged, or nourished in academia. Specifically, in SERN I found a space that nourished equity-minded policy impact, that had an expansive view of how one could pursue such an impact, and that modeled and created a culture of mutual growth and learning.” — Researcher fellow in the SERN Midcareer Fellows Program, survey

A focus on relationships and building connective tissue had been a part of SERN’s approach since its earliest years, but in 2020 it sought to be more systemic and instituted “organizational relationship reviews” to ensure it was communicating regularly, effectively, and intentionally with the practice, policy, and philanthropic organizations it had been cultivating relationships with. It took similarly intentional approaches in documenting and learning from the arc of its engagement with individual researchers with whom it was partnering. SERN used this engagement to deepen existing relationships and broker new ones and create opportunities for researchers to get their work out into the wider field.

To continue to meet the needs of its community of researchers, SERN also needed to find creative ways to facilitate new and increasingly practically relevant research knowledge in a climate in which funding for new academic research from education

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— PRACTITIONER MEMBER OF THE BELONGING COLLECTIVE, INTERVIEW

philanthropies was likely to drop. The pandemic and strategic shifts funders made to respond to it was a key reason. But for some funders SERN had engaged who had internalized the student experience lens, they also were seeking to move more downstream toward implementation of some of these ideas. To some, that meant shifting funding away from new research, despite the important role for research throughout the lifecycle of a field, from case-making through implementation.

In this difficult funding climate for research, SERN leveraged public resources that it had built previously to enable important career-building activities for scholars, making small grants to early career scholars to analyze existing datasets at a time when new data collection was difficult due to the pandemic. SERN also sought to foster a continued sense of community and progress for its researcher community, hosting virtual scholarly convenings and lab meetings to facilitate cross-sector feedback on SERN-funded research projects that had begun in 2019, as well as continuing to broker connections between researchers and practice, policy, and philanthropy.

Mindset Scholars Network Becomes Student Experience Research Network

The development of its 2020-2023 strategy led SERN to assess its name, and possibilities for a new name that would better reflect the organization's work and focus as it had evolved over time. The strategic planning process identified *students' experience of respect as valued people and thinkers in school* as a through line in the various concepts from research that had been part of SERN's work. This new conceptual focus was inclusive of the learning mindsets from social psychology around which SERN had been founded, but also responsive to input from SERN scholar members and other partners who saw the mindset concepts as too narrow to include their work and noted that there were additional bodies of relevant research that were not well represented by that term. The organization had also expanded from solely engaging scholars to supporting use of their research across sectors, making "research" a more inclusive term than "scholars." It retained the term "network" to continue to emphasize relationships and community, which remained core to its work. Student Experience Research Network was a better fit for what the organization had become by 2020.

Fully living into SERN's role as a field catalyst required more growth and it brought on three new staff roles focusing on operations, strategy, and outreach in the education sector. SERN also recognized the need during this period to better align its talent development systems with its evolved work. It needed to support its team's ongoing development in project and people management as they were taking on more complex projects as the organization grew. SERN required staff who not only understood research, but who were also skilled at building trusting relationships, and creating the right opportunities to learn together, all while having a strategic, field-level view. SERN had a team who performed these functions well but finding and hiring new people was difficult and required significant investments of time for recruiting, onboarding, and training, given the unusual nature of the work. It also made succession-planning more challenging.

"It's really hard to find people who have this intersecting skillset. People who know the research base, they believe in research, they have an equity value set and orientation, they understand education practice. You're just looking for unicorns... The bench you pull from, most people haven't sat at that altitude and looked across the field and thought about strategy and how do we move the field. It's almost altitude sickness."
— Funder, interview

Not only is it hard to find the right people to staff a field catalyst organization, operating in that way year after year can lead to burnout, as recent [research](#) by The Bridgespan Group pointed out. The desire to meet field needs can mean an ever-expanding and evolving workload and new skills required of the staff. In 2022, SERN scaled back its volume of work to reduce staff burnout and respond to staff transitions, but SERN's executive director knew that some of what was taken off the table was important to sustain SERN's impact and funding.



It was during this time – nearly halfway through SERN’s three-year strategy adopted in 2020 – that it received the \$4 million gift from MacKenzie Scott. The questions SERN was asking itself when the check arrived included:

- Amidst a drought for funding new research, how can SERN continue to convene and expand a heterogeneous scholarly community and support new practically relevant knowledge building in research?
- How can SERN continue to pivot and evolve the work in response to rapidly evolving field needs and the organizational capacity needed to execute it?
- How can SERN continue to be responsive to multiple distinct audiences effectively given their vastly different needs?

As it had often done, SERN turned back to people in the field to seek input on how it could best serve their needs during this challenging time and use the Scott gift to advance progress on its organizational purpose.

Phase 5: Conducting a Strategic Sunset (2022-2023)

“We have not done a successful job of translating for the leadership [at my foundation] how going slow and building relationships amplifies impact.”
— Funder, interview

What SERN’s executive director Lisa Quay heard in her conversations with the field in spring 2022 both heartened her and gave her pause. On the one hand, she heard, again and again, that SERN was a valuable field builder, an organization upon whom many relied, but she also picked up a version of what she had started to hear two years ago during SERN’s strategy development process – the field’s

needs had changed. And they had changed in part because of the work SERN had done to push the actors within it to understand and use a student experience lens in their work.

But to meet the field where it was now, SERN would need to evolve and grow again, this time more expansively than it ever had. In short, the field was asking for more from SERN: more of the valued work it had done to date, as well as new and evolved capacity to meet the additional demands of a field focused increasingly on applied work and implementation.

To do so would require significantly more funding at a time when the long-term funding prospects for SERN's work were weaker than they had been historically. SERN's existing funders and other education funders it had engaged over the years were signaling they were not poised to cover the increased cost of expanding SERN's organizational footprint. While the Scott grant could have enabled some of the necessary changes in the short term, it would not address long-term financial sustainability as it was a one-time gift.

SERN was also nearly two years into the implementation of its new strategy, and it had learned more about what it took to do this type of work. It was challenging, not easily scaled, and as described earlier, SERN was grappling with organizational capacity issues that are common among field catalysts given the complex and dynamic nature of field-building work. Meeting the field's needs would have entailed major new investments in hiring, talent development, organizational infrastructure, new programming, and fundraising for a team that was already stretched and had evolved significantly in recent years.

Given this multifaceted set of issues, SERN concluded that the growth and evolution being demanded by the field at this moment was a challenge it was not poised to successfully take on, including relative to others in the sector. But rather than just close its doors, SERN wanted to be a field catalyst until the end – disbursing its assets in a targeted and strategic way to help seed the work the field was demanding, elevate the leadership of those who would lead the work in the years to come, and share takeaways from its work in ways that others could learn from.

SERN's experience demonstrates the importance of being transparent about the needs, challenges, and lessons learned in doing field-building work to help normalize an open discussion about them and the choice points that many organizations have faced and will face, especially in an uncertain climate for funding and as changes in society impact organizations and staff. It's tempting when faced with clouds on the horizon to consider hunkering down and continuing the work for as long as possible. But SERN's executive director, Lisa Quay, said it's important to consider multiple scenarios and paths to impact when it becomes clear that major changes might be needed to achieve your mission. More information about how SERN made this decision and designed its sunset programming is included in this [complementary resource](#).

“As a funder, you need to ask yourself if you have the patience to build for the long haul... Funders will have to foot this bill. There is no other source of this capital for driving a field-wide agenda and field-wide R&D.” — Funder, interview



Through its sunset, SERN wanted to achieve a few important goals, including investing SERN's assets to support and elevate others well-poised to lead work on the field's priorities and draw more people and organizations into the field, and using SERN's positioning and financial assets to draw in new funding to support work on field priorities. It did this through both its largest-ever round of re-granting and continued field engagement. SERN also wanted to collect and disseminate its knowledge to share with the broader field. And, importantly, it wanted to celebrate the SERN team, scholars, and partners, and inspire people in the field to continue to expand upon what SERN started and take up the next phase of work demanded by the field.

"I think under the auspices of student experience research, a lot has been accomplished that made it okay to set down this particular container. The body of research had been growing for 30 years and no one had brought it all together and people didn't really understand it... So that's when a field catalyst is important. There's an asset here that we are underutilizing, so let's build something so we can shape the questions it's answering and utilize the research better. That's happened here."

— Funder, interview

Resources for the Field

SERN developed [a memo sharing priorities for the student experience field](#) that it heard in its multiple touch points with a diverse group of researchers, practice and policy leaders, and funders leading up to and throughout its strategic sunset. It also produced [briefs documenting organizational lessons learned](#) in four areas:

1. Accelerating the leadership and growth of early career scholars
2. Designing inclusive scholarly events that foster relationships and engagement across silos
3. Empowering practitioners, policymakers, and funders to apply insights from research
4. Sharing power in philanthropic relationships to enhance impact

It documented the [steps it took to create its popular funder briefings](#) and amplified [insights from the SERN Midcareer Fellows Program](#) for supporting the leadership of scholars from minoritized groups in bridging research and policy.



SERN's Impact on the Field

SERN'S STORY

SERN's position at the intersection of research, practice, policy, and philanthropy meant that it could serve as a connector, sharing insights between sectors. Scholars who engaged with SERN valued opportunities to collaborate with others in the research community beyond their disciplinary silos and for their research to have a greater social impact. Practice, policy, and philanthropy valued SERN's familiarity with a deep body of research knowledge and its synthesis and translation of that knowledge. Over the course of several years, what had started as a relatively small group of researchers studying mindset interventions became a "big tent" hub of relationship-building, knowledge generation, and research mobilization that engaged a more heterogeneous group of hundreds of influential education actors across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy in service of producing and using research to help build learning environments where all students are respected as valued people and thinkers. Through this hub, SERN punched above its weight and by the time of its strategic sunset, it had contributed significantly to the student experience field in specific ways.

The concept of student experience is "on the map," in that a wider set of influential education

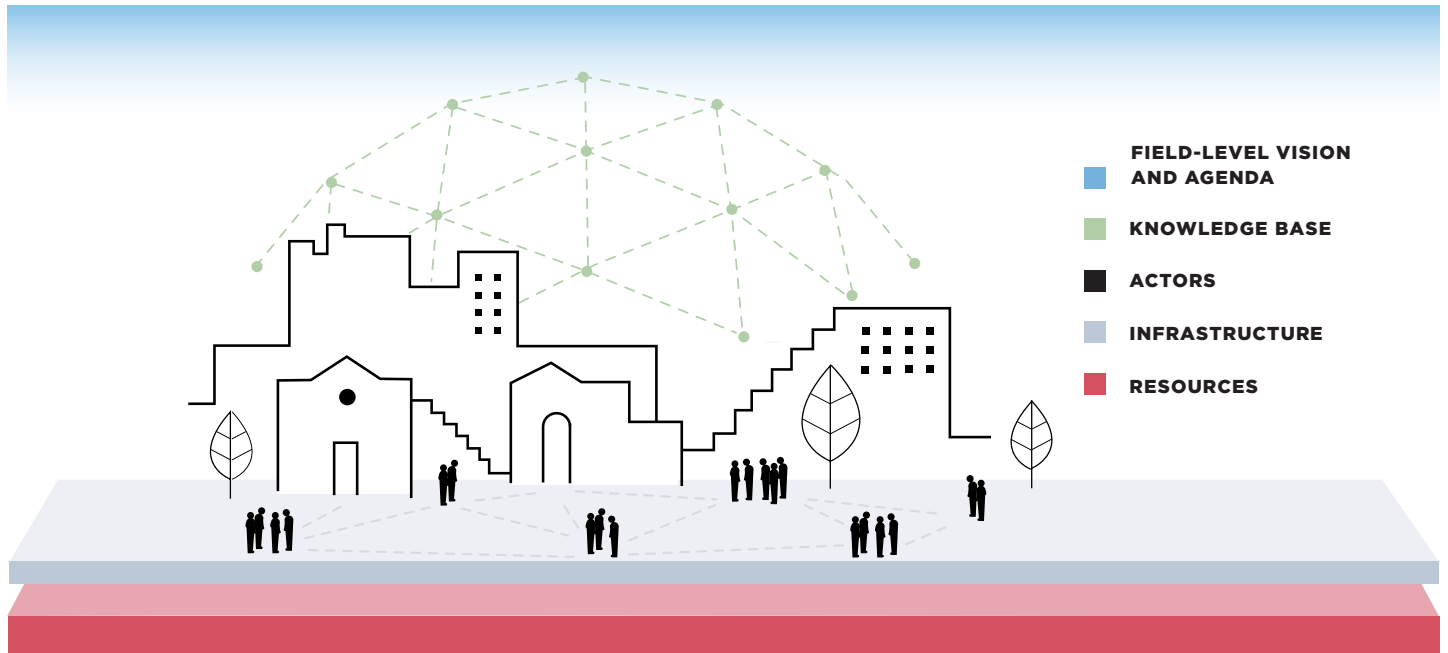
leaders, funders, and researchers now see student experience as connected to their work and feel responsible for stewarding its progress. More interdisciplinary, practically relevant research on student experience exists because of SERN and key student experience research findings have been identified and synthesized into a coherent body of insights and made accessible to actors outside academia who are using it to inform their work. And a broader, more diverse group of scholars have gained recognition and funding for their research and field leadership because of SERN. It re-granted funds from education philanthropies to a more racially diverse group of scholars as well as to more early and midcareer scholars from a broader range of disciplines and institutions.

SERN also helped to create stronger relationships and increase collaboration in the field, both among researchers and across other groups in education. Because SERN was regularly engaging with its partners in the field and in adjacent spaces, it was in a good position to broker relationships between people based on shared interests and increase the practical application of student experience research in education.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FIELD DEVELOPMENT AND SERN'S IMPACT

In its [research](#) on field catalysts, The Bridgespan Group points to five characteristics of a field that can be used to assess the impact of a field catalyst since the ability

to advance equitable systems change relies on a field's development across these domains.



DEFINITIONS

FIELD-LEVEL VISION AND AGENDA

The combination of approaches field actors will pursue to address barriers and develop solutions to the field's focal problem or issue.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

The body of academic research and practical knowledge that helps actors better understand the issues at hand, and identifies and analyzes shared barriers.

ACTORS

The set of individuals and organizations that together help the field develop a sense of shared identity and common vision.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The "connective tissue" that enables greater innovation, collaboration, and improvement among a field's actors over time.

RESOURCES

Financial and non-financial capital that supports the field's actors and infrastructure.

SERN'S IMPACT

FIELD-LEVEL VISION AND AGENDA

The concept of student experience is "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 forward.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

A larger body of practically relevant, interdisciplinary research is contributing to our understanding of student experience, and key findings from this research have been identified, synthesized into a coherent body of insights, and made accessible to actors outside of academia.

ACTORS

A broader, more diverse group of scholars have gained recognition for their research and leadership in the student experience field.





INFRASTRUCTURE

There are stronger relationships and growing collaboration in the field, both among researchers and across sectors and silos (e.g., across research and practice), as well as increasing practical application of insights from student experience research.

RESOURCES

Funders are allocating more resources to projects that integrate student experience and related concepts, and SERN's re-granting directed more philanthropic funding to racially minoritized scholars and early career scholars in the field.

HOW SERN CATALYZED FIELD CHANGE

	KNOWLEDGE DEMOCRATIZER	Synthesized and translated student experience research and made key insights accessible and digestible for non-academic audiences
	DISRUPTOR OF POWER DYNAMICS	Elevated diverse voices and interrogated conventional thinking and practices, including via (re) distribution of resources
	EFFECTIVENESS AMPLIFIER	Enabled other actors in the field to “move further faster” and be more effective at what they did
	SILO-BUSTER AND BRIDGE BUILDER	Intentionally constructed spaces and brokered relationships that spanned the realms of research, policy, practice, and philanthropy; enabled interdisciplinary dialogue and cross-pollination of ideas

SERN's impact was assessed by an outside consultant, drawing on the field development framework illustrated on the previous page. The assessment was informed by interviews with SERN staff and more than 30 constituents across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy; survey data from an additional 83 individuals across these domains; an analysis of funding in the field and documents and data gathered by SERN from its programming over the years; and insights from a survey conducted by SERN of its scholar membership and other participants in its past research initiatives (completed by 44 respondents), as well as analysis of data gathered from their CVs (available for 92 of 103 people).

The assessment found that SERN had impact in each of these categories, moving the field in the following ways.

Field-level vision and agenda

The concept of student experience is “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 its progress. SERN achieved this through its deep engagement with a diverse community of researchers and its partnerships with practice, policy, and philanthropy, including providing input on their messaging and programming, as well as advice on strategic plans and learning agendas.

“[Student experience] ... doesn't feel like a trend we can unsee. Growth mindset was super faddish when we started. It's not like we hadn't been there. And all the scholars lamented that. I actually think part of what [the researchers] did together and

what SERN did to support them to do is dig in when that was happening and say, we're not just going to allow for superficial understanding and implementation of these ideas. We're going to embed this knowledge in a bunch of leaders in the [education] field who will help it to be more robust in its implementation." — Funder, interview

The analysis found that 92% of survey respondents observed some or significant improvement in understanding the importance of student experience in the field. And 79% of respondents believed SERN made some or significant contribution to this shift.

"There's a greater understanding that children's perceived experiences should be the burden of the environment and the adults around them - 'if adults produce better learning environments, the students' perceptions will improve.'"

— Researcher, survey

"SERN convened a highly credible group of scholars who could speak in a unified voice about the importance of student experience. The 'strength in credible numbers' made it easier for student experience to 'punch through the noise' and get on the radar of education leaders, policy makers, and funders in ways that have greatly accelerated the impact of the student experience field."

— Researcher, survey

Knowledge base

More interdisciplinary, practically relevant research on student experience exists because of SERN and key student experience research findings have been identified and synthesized into a coherent body of insights and made accessible to actors outside academia. SERN and the researchers it engaged recognized the need to bring multiple lenses, methodologies, and theoretical tools to bear in generating research knowledge that could help



There's a greater understanding that children's perceived experiences should be the burden of the environment and the adults around them - 'if adults produce better learning environments, the students' perceptions will improve.'

— RESEARCHER, SURVEY

illuminate and address complex social phenomena like those in education. And they wanted to engage with practitioners and policymakers to ensure the research was answering the questions those people were asking. Beyond these efforts to conduct this type of relevant new research, SERN's syntheses of existing research knowledge on topics of interest to practice and policy audiences brought together previously disparate strands of research into a more coherent body of knowledge referred to as "student experience." Together, this research generation and synthesis work enabled SERN to serve as a knowledge hub and trusted expert for its partners.

The impact assessment found that 90% of survey respondents observed some or significant improvement in the field's knowledge base on student experience, and 76% believed SERN made some or significant contribution to this shift. SERN and the researchers it engaged published 30 scholarly working papers and more than 70 research translation briefs, including 33 non-technical briefs on new findings from SERN-funded research initiatives, all of which expedited the pace of findings from new research getting out into the fields of research and education.

Respondents also spoke to the building of a larger, more cross-disciplinary body of knowledge, as well as more practically relevant research.

“I think [SERN’s] biggest contribution has been broadening the idea of student experience from core psychologists to bring in others: sociologists, public policy, other social science research.”

— Researcher, interview

“I have appreciated the practical nature of [the] research. [SERN is] pushing the field away from stuff in a lab, translating findings and ensuring we conduct research in a way that is applicable to the field.” — Practitioner, interview

Respondents also appreciated how clear, understandable, and accessible SERN’s work was, including its searchable online research library with more than 300 technical and translational items. SERN’s website was visited over 300,000 times, and its video content was viewed more than 30,000 times.

“I could just take their materials and drop it into a binder and share it and people would get it.”

— Policy actor, interview

“SERN has been a dependable and reputable site for research summaries and best practices.”

— Researcher, survey

Field actors

A broader, more diverse group of scholars have gained recognition for their research and field leadership because of SERN. It observed and disrupted some of the dynamics that hold back many fields, such as the lack of diversity along multiple dimensions (e.g., career stage, race and ethnicity, gender, institutional status, discipline) in the relatively small and homogeneous group of



I could just take their materials and drop it into a binder and share it and people would get it.

— POLICY ACTOR, INTERVIEW

scholars who are typically called upon by practice, policy, and funders. It did this through elevating a wider group of scholars and their research with influential education leaders through events, consultations, and publications, and re-granting funds from education philanthropies to a larger and more racially diverse group of scholars as well as to more early and midcareer scholars from a broader range of disciplines and institutions. SERN was also able to connect funders with researchers based on its deep knowledge of both funders’ and researchers’ needs and interests. SERN’s fellowships elevated the leadership of early and midcareer scholars and provided professional learning experiences focused on taking practically relevant, equity-centered, and interdisciplinary lenses to their work.

SERN’s efforts led to a significant increase over time in the involvement of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) participants in high-profile SERN activities, including the number of BIPOC scholars in SERN membership cohorts and fellowships, and the number of BIPOC speakers at SERN funder briefings.

This was a strong theme that came through in the interviews conducted as part of the impact assessment, as well as 86% of survey respondents observing some or significant improvement in the field’s elevation of the scholarship and profiles

of researchers from minoritized groups, and 69% of respondents believing SERN made some or significant contribution to this shift.

“I can’t overstate the joy and value for me personally of being in a space that featured scholars of color and a rich, rigorous academic conversation that was top to bottom, young Black and brown men and women doing really promising work. I can’t overstate how hard it is to find that outside of SERN.” — Policy actor, interview

“I... don’t want to underemphasize the impact SERN had on elevating scholars of color and more junior [and] midcareer scholars... The inequity around that in research, which has huge implications for the evidence base of pretty much anything in education; that is so skewed in one direction [and] that perpetuates the school design and education system as we know it. It has everything to do with whose voices get listened to, and who produces the prevailing research and evidence.”

— Funder, interview

Infrastructure

SERN helped to create stronger relationships, connective tissue, and increasing collaboration in the field, both among researchers and across and within other sectors. Because SERN was regularly engaging with its partners in the field and in adjacent spaces, it was in a good position to broker relationships between people based on shared interests and increase the practical application of student experience research in education. These conversations and relationships meant that SERN staff and affiliated researchers got invited to inform and participate in field initiatives to bring this research to bear on current discussions in education. Information reported back to SERN that it tracked over the years showed that it also had



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— POLICY ACTOR, INTERVIEW

an impact on shifting the organizational strategies, messaging, resources, and learning agendas of influential organizations in education.

Seventy-five percent of survey respondents observed some or significant improvement in the strength of their relationships with other field actors working in student experience, and 67% of respondents believed SERN made some or significant contribution to this shift. Further, 82% of survey respondents observed some or significant improvement in collaborations among thought partners on student experience as a result of engaging with SERN. In addition to its brokering activities behind the scenes and the intentional cross-sector events it hosted, this was also due to the way SERN scoped its RFPs, with 68% of the 38 projects SERN funded being cross-disciplinary, and 61% being cross-sector.



“It was really this networking, field-building role that I have not seen any other organization really playing in my career time, where people were carefully identified and then brought to the table in a way that they felt respected.” — Researcher, interview

“A gap [when SERN sunsets] will be safe and authentic convening across sectors. That was unique and I don’t know that I’ve been in other spaces where that has happened successfully and on an ongoing basis.” — Funder, interview

The impact assessment further found that 63% of the 44 SERN-affiliated researchers surveyed reported some or significant increase in collaboration with people outside their discipline or field due to SERN, which is rare in academia given existing structures and incentives.

“As an early career academic, I received funding from SERN at a point in my career that was pivotal. It also helped me broaden my scholarly network and center the experiences of students rather than any one disciplinary perspective. That has sharpened the kind of interdisciplinary education scholar I am today.” — Researcher, survey

Resources

Funders are allocating more resources to projects that integrate student experience and related concepts, in part due to the work of SERN. Increased allocation of resources demonstrates funders’ commitment to the application of the student experience lens in their work. SERN’s re-granting helped funding flow to scholars

² Although it is challenging to get a complete picture of broader sector trends, analyses of available private and public funding data in Foundation Maps show an increase in funding activities labeled as “student experience” and related terms between 2014 and 2018 (Foundation Maps is still collecting data for the years following 2018 so trends in the last few years are currently incomplete).

As an early career academic, I received funding from SERN at a point in my career that was pivotal. It also helped me broaden my scholarly network and center the experiences of students rather than any one disciplinary perspective. That has sharpened the kind of interdisciplinary education scholar I am today.

— RESEARCHER, SURVEY

who systematically receive less recognition and resources due to structural disadvantages and systemic biases. It gave funders a vehicle to diversify who they funded, through SERN’s innovative approaches to grantmaking and the way it expanded and diversified its community of researchers over time. And SERN funded and facilitated collaboration between scholars, practitioners, policy actors, and philanthropies.

In the impact assessment, 95% of the 20 funder survey respondents observed some or significant improvements in applying research takeaways to their work as a result of engaging with SERN, and over half of funder survey respondents observed at least some increase in their funding for efforts focused on student experience as a result of that engagement.²

“SERN brought us information to make our strategies smarter and improved our giving. They brought us research-based ideas, which is important.” — Funder, interview

“SERN helped funders understand what the work is and what it needs to be in order for more evidence-based practice to happen in the world.” — Funder, interview

“[The foundation I worked for] never funded SERN, but they fund differently because they learned about student experience.” — Funder, interview

SERN also modeled approaches to grantmaking that increased support of BIPOC scholars, early career scholars, and those outside of the highest-status institutions.

“SERN’s sub-granting provided leverage to philanthropy to fund more BIPOC and early career scholars... I think that will be a gap when SERN is gone to connect funders to good research.” — Funder, interview

“So many of us at [our foundation] appreciated [SERN’s] commitment to who got a seat at the table. What I mean by that is they were laser-focused on students in public schools, who’s in the schools. And a lot of [them are] students of color. And they wanted to make sure researchers of color were at the table and not in a superficial way. That is, they legitimately did the groundwork to do that. And it is so different than how philanthropy usually works with researchers. It is usually the old white men at elite universities that get our funding.” — Funder, interview

“SERN brought new researchers into focus, particularly for funders who typically didn’t look to people outside the big names in the academy.” — Funder, interview



[The foundation I worked for] never funded SERN, but they fund differently because they learned about student experience.

— FUNDER, INTERVIEW

Using data from CVs supplemented by data from public and private funders, when looking at total funding for research and research bridging on student experience that was received by the SERN membership overall and the participants in SERN-funded portfolios between 2014 and 2023, 70% of the funds re-granted by SERN went to BIPOC project leads (e.g., principal investigators, fellows) compared to 41% of non-SERN funding (i.e., federal government, philanthropy, higher education institutions, and other sources) going to BIPOC leads in the same sample. Relative to the sample composition, SERN’s funding disproportionately supported Black and Latinx leads and non-SERN funding disproportionately supported white and Asian leads.

SERN’s re-granted funds were also relatively less concentrated. The top ten recipients of non-SERN funding in this sample of just over 100 people received nearly 80% of all non-SERN funding compared to the top ten recipients of SERN funding, who received 43% of all SERN funding. Among these top ten recipients of non-SERN funding, white people were overrepresented (eight of the top ten), especially white men (five of the top ten), as well as people at the highest-status universities (seven of the top ten); whereas among the top ten recipients of SERN funding, nine people were BIPOC, seven were BIPOC women, and three were at the highest-status universities.

SERN's Approach

Field-building work requires specific skills, capacity, and ways of working that can drive outsized impact, but can be difficult competencies to build and maintain. SERN's experience provides insight into what it took to advance progress in the student experience field. Field catalysts like SERN take on several activities in support of collective progress, including brokering and supporting relationships; enabling joint learning; helping the field develop shared strategies; garnering funding and re-granting to other organizations in the field; translating academic research and practical knowledge; and tracking collective progress toward shared goals.

Importantly, however, the impact assessment revealed that it wasn't just *what* SERN did, but *how* it did it that unlocked its impact. SERN had underlying skills and assets that drove its success as a field catalyst including its depth and breadth of relevant knowledge, attention to ecosystems and power, a relationships-first approach, and a service and growth orientation. More information about how SERN enacted the field catalyst role is included in this [complementary resource](#).

Depth and breadth of relevant knowledge

SERN had a deep knowledge of research and researchers in the field, as well as an ability to understand the contexts of multiple actors across education and communicate effectively with all of them. The importance SERN placed on precise and inclusive language and careful framing to build trust and collaboration among and between its partners – as well as its understanding of their contexts and needs – was essential to its success as a field catalyst.



SERN was always in touch with the latest and most novel ideas... It's difficult to identify another entity like SERN in that respect.

— RESEARCHER, INTERVIEW

“SERN was always in touch with the latest and most novel ideas... It's difficult to identify another entity like SERN in that respect.” — Researcher, interview

“We never declined an opportunity [from SERN]... maybe the reason we never said no was because of how opportunities were presented and the intentionality around the language used not only in written communication, but also in shared spaces.” — Practitioner, interview

Attention to ecosystems and power

SERN's navigation of complex ecosystems and power dynamics was also essential in the work of breaking down silos between disciplines and sectors. SERN was capable of bringing together leaders from across the field who did not typically interact, and it worked to create shared spaces where people could have productive disagreement and feel safe to ask questions and share challenges. Through strategic re-granting and fellowships, SERN elevated the profiles of scholars from minoritized groups and invested in early and midcareer scholars' leadership.

“SERN was committed and connected enough to bring people together. When you see presidents of major foundations and top public school leaders in a room with scholars and students... I hadn’t seen all those people put in conversation before.”

— Researcher, interview

Relationships-first approach

Relationships were essential to SERN’s work, and it took a human-centered and strategic approach to building and sustaining them. It conducted organizational relationship reviews yearly and staff regularly talked about what they were hearing from their partners and how individuals and organizations were engaging in initiatives. SERN consistently sought to build trust and learn from its partners. SERN’s events were continually referenced as important spaces for sharing ideas, building relationships, and increasing collaboration.

“They made you feel like you were the only one in their network... They met up for socials and were really authentic... My work is better from their structures... and having meaningful conversations offline on ways to develop the work.” — Researcher, interview

“The level of responsiveness, whether it had to do with personal interactions, fellowship programming, or deliverables, really made me feel heard and seen.” — Researcher, survey

Service and growth orientation

SERN was highly adaptive in responding to what the field needed. This required having systems in place that allowed it to do so. Strong project scoping and project management were essential on a small team taking on a large volume of



The level of responsiveness, whether it had to do with personal interactions, fellowship programming, or deliverables, really made me feel heard and seen.

— RESEARCHER, SURVEY

consistently evolving work. SERN also had a strong feedback culture, both internally and externally. Team members gave and received feedback on all the work they did together and made changes based on the feedback they received from external partners, as well, to continuously learn and grow and refine SERN’s approaches to the work over time. SERN was also willing to give away its intellectual capital and credit, a collaborative orientation that enhanced the field’s trust in the organization.

“One of SERN’s qualities was that in some ways it didn’t hold a lot of strong opinions on the direction the work needed to go. They brought a malleable mental model and were willing to change beliefs about how they see the world.” — Funder, interview

Importantly, data from the impact assessment and the data SERN gathered itself on all of its events and initiatives over the years illustrated that these approaches are both meaningful and measurable: it was clear, observable, and felt by the people SERN engaged – and it was consistent over time.

Challenges SERN Faced

Building heterogeneous communities and developing and bridging practically relevant research across silos is complex, difficult, and deeply relational work that is necessary to advance systems change. SERN recognized the power of the collective to drive attention to an issue and change behavior in the field, and had some real success in doing this, but also ran into multiple challenges and tensions.

The Bridgespan Group's research on field catalysts has found that they [commonly struggle with the following issues](#): insufficient, long-term flexible funding necessary for adaptive field-building work; talent constraints given their unusual work; measuring impact in ways that align with the type of work they do; and navigating tensions between addressing the immediate needs of the community and the long-term field catalyst work needed to make progress on root causes.

The impact assessment revealed that SERN had mixed experiences across these four areas.

SERN benefited from typically receiving multiple, multi-year grants, which were weighted toward flexible core support, as well as many forms of valuable, non-financial resources its funders provided. This type of funder support for a field catalyst is unusual and notable in how it facilitated SERN's impact. SERN's "servant leadership" approach, however, made the organization itself less visible and it was sometimes overlooked by funders. In addition, some of SERN's funders' interests evolved, and philanthropy as a whole was shifting in recent years. That meant SERN faced challenges in continuing to secure funding for key aspects of its work as a field catalyst – particularly for research –



This work is hard... you need funders who are up for risk and who are in this for the long haul.

— PRACTITIONER, INTERVIEW

which was essential to sustaining its role in the field and meeting the field's needs, as well as to adapt to new demands.

"This work is hard... you need funders who are up for risk and who are in this for the long haul."

— Practitioner, interview

"I think funders get into this, 'Okay, we're going to fund you for five years, but then you should be self-sufficient. You should be self-sustaining,' which is so bananas because there's no way for [organizations like SERN] to build a revenue model for field-level work." — Funder, interview

SERN had a talented and committed team, and the organization invested significantly in the development of skills specific to SERN's unusual work. But SERN's responsiveness to the field and opportunities left the team stretched thin, and it wasn't always afforded the bandwidth and resources to recruit and train staff. As noted above, key elements of staffing, including recruitment, onboarding, succession-planning, and staff coverage were also complex given the nature of its work.



SERN's funders supported SERN in developing its own metrics for measuring the impact of the work, but it was still difficult to communicate its impact broadly. Like many field catalysts, SERN's metrics differed from more traditional nonprofit metrics, which made telling a straightforward and relatable impact story challenging. Its diverse set of partners also cared about different goals and metrics. And gathering data on SERN's impact was challenging because often the ripples of impact SERN helped instigate took years to play out and relied on individuals and organizations maintaining a long-term relationship with SERN in order to share back these stories as they unfolded over time.

SERN also grappled with serving the interests and needs of a heterogeneous and cross-sector community. As its work evolved, SERN increasingly invested in activities focused on research use and a broader group of researchers and types of scholarship, which contributed to disengagement among some SERN scholar members. The balance between serving education actors operating on faster timelines with the longer time horizon that is important for conducting research and creating rigorous translational content also posed challenges. And as SERN increasingly engaged a broader set of field actors, some in SERN's community felt that research and researchers were being deemphasized; while others felt SERN remained too focused on research.

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While SERN was a scholars' network at its heart, they understood that meeting the needs of the [non-researcher] stakeholders was essential... But attending to [the field's] needs creates all kinds of tensions.

— FUNDER, INTERVIEW

“While SERN was a scholars' network at its heart, they understood that meeting the needs of the [non-researcher] stakeholders was essential... But attending to [the field's] needs creates all kinds of tensions.” — Funder, interview

“We need more entities like SERN that are unapologetic and unafraid to confront some of the false narratives about equity that are being thrown out there. When the politics get difficult, [some organizations] shift their perspectives away and SERN has not done that.” — Researcher, interview

Needs and Opportunities for the Field Going Forward

More work remains to build on the progress SERN and its partners made if the education system is to fully center student experience. This includes both continuing some of the work led by SERN and pursuing new directions. This [memo](#) created by SERN provides details on field-generated priorities that emerged from SERN's engagement with a diverse group of researchers, practice and policy leaders, and funders over the past year. For each field-generated priority, SERN developed calls to action, which are designed to help advance the priorities immediately and in the future.

Going forward, the field is calling for more applied research and meaning-making opportunities that enable structural change in education to support student experience. Students, their families, and their communities must play a more central role in how we develop new knowledge and apply it in practice and policy. The work and leadership of racially minoritized scholars and early career scholars must continue to be invested in and elevated in the field. And convening and relationship-building must be prioritized so that people and organizations across the field can build connections, share and apply knowledge, develop shared agendas, and coordinate action, especially on high-impact and high-leverage topics in education connected to student experience.

All of this work requires resources. While the philanthropic community that SERN engaged has increasingly begun to apply a student experience lens, federal funding is how most research is paid

for today and federal funders must make changes to their practices that enable more funding and incentives for practically relevant, interdisciplinary, and equity-centered research on student experience and bridging between scholars and education actors in this domain. Philanthropic funders must play a targeted, complementary role that leverages their specific assets. Both public and private funders need to change practices that shape how financial resources are distributed, used, and reported on to promote a well-networked, learning-oriented, and diverse student experience field.

This work also requires shifts in broader structures that shape both the field of student experience and other fields. Structures in academia must shift in ways that support these goals, and a broader range of research evidence must be taken up in practice and policy in education. The field of people and organizations working on student experience can take up these issues alongside many others who are also contributing to progress on them.

Finally, more work remains to affirm that student experience is a critical contributor to academic outcomes, *and* should be inherently valued in its own right – and that K-12 and postsecondary schools must attend to student experience as central to their work. SERN and its partners have developed a strong foundation from which more leaders throughout the field can build to create an education system that supports every student's learning and well-being by respecting them as a valued person and thinker.

SERN'S EDUCATION SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

SERN engaged over 130 practice and policy leaders from organizations and systems across the country in its research and outreach events and initiatives between 2015-2022. It also engaged representatives of nearly 50 private and public funding organizations.

It hosted six funder briefings, five workshops and other major events, and dozens of individual consultations with organizations as part of its outreach in the education sector. Organizations and institutions that SERN and its partners have engaged include:

Policy and Advocacy Organizations



Practice Intermediaries and Institutions



Research Entities and Consultancies



Media and Communications



Funders

