student experience
R E S E A R C H   N E T W O R K

Student Experience Research Network, formerly known as Mindset Scholars Network, is grounded in an interdisciplinary understanding that, in order to learn and thrive, students need to experience respect as valued people and thinkers — and that the practices, policies, and norms in education and society have inequitably shaped this experience of school depending on who students are and the opportunities they are afforded.

Our work connects people and ideas across research, practice, and policy to advance relevant scientific knowledge and improve decision-making by education system and institution leaders so that every student's experience of school sets them up to learn and thrive.

What We Do

We create opportunities – in the form of resources, events, and network- and capacity-building – for stakeholders across research, practice, and policy to conduct and engage with research related to student experience. We build relationships with researchers who are advancing our collective scientific knowledge and with education influencer and intermediary organizations, such as policy organizations, system-level providers, funders, developers of education resources, and teacher preparation and professional learning organizations, that play a key role in shaping decision-making by leaders in education systems and institutions.

Currently, few established feedback loops exist between research on student experience and education practice and policy. At the same time, research that is responsive to the priorities and insights of practice and policy stakeholders is often disincentivized by the structures of the academy.

We bridge these gaps so that research on student experience informs policy and practice decisions and so that questions and insights from policy and practice stakeholders can shape future research. The pillars of our work include:

Creating Connections

We connect researchers and education influencers and intermediaries with one another to share knowledge and contribute to a chorus of voices that center student experience in shared efforts to improve education.

We host events and facilitate conversations that advance new scholarship and elevate insights and applications from relevant research.

We invest in the power of the collective: We bring groups of individuals and organizations together to share learning, develop skills and knowledge, cross-pollinate between the disparate initiatives and networks they are part of, and build and reinforce important narratives in the national conversation in education.

Facilitating Research Through Field-Building

We enable research on student experience that can contribute to long-term structural change in education.

We invest in the leadership of researchers doing practically relevant scholarship that is interdisciplinary and equity-centered, by connecting them to funding and professional learning opportunities, providing resources and connections that can support their work, and serving as an ally to partners who are pursuing longer-term structural shifts in the academy to better support this kind of scholarship.

We share insights from our engagement with education practice and policy stakeholders that have the potential to spark or inform future research.

Making Research Clear and Meaningful

We synthesize, translate, and help organizations make meaning of key research insights that speak to how practices, policies, and norms shape student experience.

We translate key research into clear insights by creating accessible resources and looking beyond individual studies to consider the implications of bodies of research holistically.

We work with leading education influencers and intermediaries to consider their strategies, messaging, programming, advising, and investments through the lens of research on student experience.

What We Believe

We envision a just and equitable education system in which practices, policies, and norms collectively and consistently affirm students' humanity.

We believe that problems in education are rooted in structures, not students. We believe that scientific knowledge – and its use by decision-makers – can help create a system that respects every student as a valued person and thinker.

What We Mean by Student Experience

The structures – or practices, policies, and norms – that comprise the United States education system reflect those in our broader society. They advantage some students and disadvantage others, along the lines of race, ethnicity, indigeneity, class, gender, sexuality, language, ability, and immigration status. This happens directly, through disproportionate access to learning opportunities, and indirectly, through repeated signals about which people and knowledge are valued by the system, and which are not.

Student Experience Research Network was founded in 2015 as the Mindset Scholars Network, based on a growing body of evidence showing that how students make meaning of their experiences in school, through the lens of their beliefs about ability, belonging, and relevance of their schoolwork, influences their learning and well-being. This research makes clear that it is not enough to focus exclusively on inputs and outcomes in education; we must also consider how students are experiencing the system itself.

This means interrogating every aspect of the education system: what's taught, how it's taught, who is teaching, what's assessed and how, how students and families are treated in schools, how schools are resourced, and much more. The signals conveyed through these structures can either support or undermine a student's ability to bring their full self to school and devote their full attention and energy to learning.

Over time, we identified a through line in various scientific fields, disciplines, and concepts that have been part of our work over the past six years. In order to learn and thrive, students need to experience respect as valued people and thinkers. This experience of respect cannot come from interpersonal interactions alone, although relationships are critical. It must also be embedded in practices, policies, and norms that communicate to every student that they are valued as a person and thinker by their institution and by the education system.

Research that speaks to this idea affirms what stakeholders across the education system intuitively know, including what we've heard from speakers at our events, about how to create learning environments that support students to learn and thrive.

> **"When students feel their voices and perspectives matter, their education becomes a transformative experience." – Ana De Almeida Amaral, student at Stanford University**
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> *Hear Ana's story of starting an ethnic studies course at her high school with her colleague Izadora McGawley, which they shared at our 2019 funder briefing.*
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> **"Being seen and heard is a basic human need and fundamental precursor to learning." – Na'ilah Suad Nasir, President of the Spencer Foundation**
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> *Read about our Inclusive Mathematics Environments Early Career Fellowship, in which Na'ilah was an advisor and mentor.*
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> **"Belonging is students' deep and abiding sense that they are welcome, supported, and respected in their classrooms and schools." - Thomas Dee, SERN Scholar**
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> *Explore Thomas's SERN-supported research on the African American Male Achievement Initiative in Oakland Unified School District.*

However, this truth is yet to be manifested in our K-16 education system. Institutional segregation and resource inequities are upheld by legislation, judicial decisions, and individual choices. Curricula and instruction have traditionally privileged certain knowledge and cultural legacies and excluded others. Institutional policies and national trends have produced an instructional workforce that does not reflect the diversity of the student body. Policies around tracking, assessment, special education, and discipline are exclusionary and punitive and disproportionately deployed.

Research demonstrates how students' experiences of these structures affect their learning and well-being:

In a study of 33 teachers of Latinx students in grades 3-5, Matthews and López (2019) found that teachers who practiced critical consciousness – an awareness of and commitment to challenging historical and contemporary inequities – were more likely to integrate content related to students' culture into instruction, and in turn, were more likely to incorporate and honor Spanish language in their classroom. Students of these teachers had higher mathematics achievement, highlighting the importance of language and culture in a subject that is often misconstrued as being "culturally neutral."

Cheryan and Markus (2020) studied a computer science department in which prior programming experience was highly valued. While this may seem innocuous on paper, men are more likely than women to have prior experience, and students with less experience had a lower sense of belonging in the introductory course. When the department allowed students to self-select one of two options for the introductory course, one for students with prior experience and one for students without (both of which prepared students equally well for subsequent courses); trained faculty to redirect students who dominated class discussion and intimidated their classmates; and sent women majors to the annual Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing, the percentage of undergraduate degrees going to women increased from 10% to 55% over ten years and the program's U.S. News & World Report ranking improved.

Widely held beliefs in the U.S. about academic success value competition and individual achievement over collaboration and contribution to communal goals. This can contribute to "mismatch" between students' goals and the norms in the environment. Shifting these norms supports students from collectivist contexts to learn and thrive. Research by Gray, McElveen, Green, and Bryant (2020), for example, found that Black and Latinx sixth graders in a Design and Modeling course were more engaged when learning opportunities were oriented toward serving the community. Dittmann, Stephens, and Townsend (2020) demonstrated that working in groups improved the performance of postsecondary students from working-class contexts and that groups with more students from working-class contexts earned higher grades on group assignments than those with fewer.

Research that draws on rigorous approaches from across the social sciences and integrates the perspectives of education stakeholders is essential to understanding the complex ways these practices, policies, and norms systematically and differentially shape students' experience of school—and how they can be changed. But this type of scholarship is not supported by the current structures of the academy, and the knowledge that is created often doesn't reach decision makers in a timely or useful fashion.

Student Experience Research Network advances scientific knowledge – and brings it to decision-makers – to create a better system: one that supports every student's learning and well-being by respecting them as a valued person and thinker.