



An Inside Look at the Partnership Between Funders and Field Catalysts

By Lisa Quay, Lija McHugh Farnham, and Zach Slobig

Before joining the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (now the Gates Foundation) in 2019 as a program officer, Titilola Harley had spent a decade helping build effective education solutions as a consultant, beginning in the DC public schools and subsequently in partnership with many, varied organizations including districts and state departments of education. Education had long been Harley’s field of expertise, but education grantmaking was new ground.

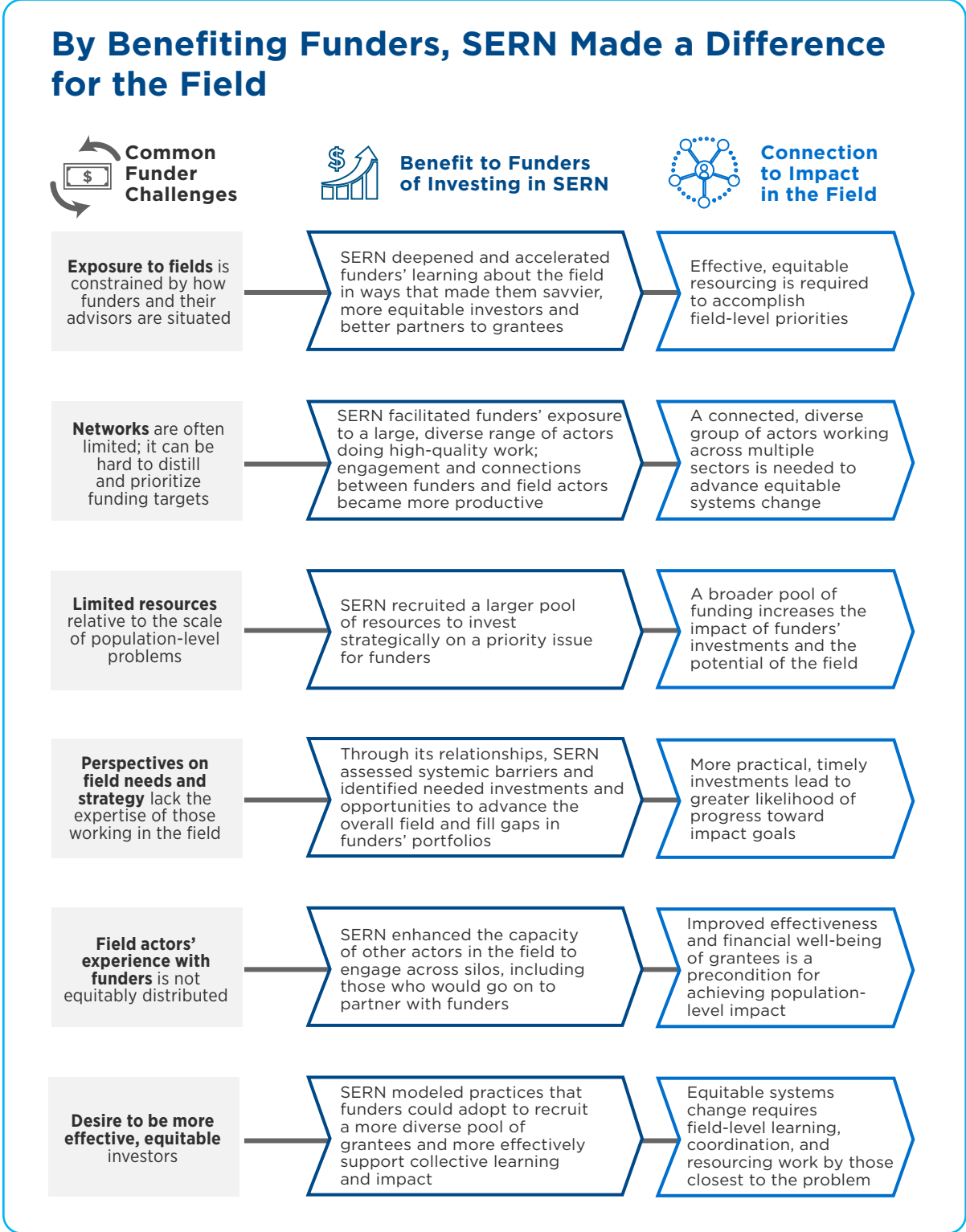
One of the grantees she inherited was [Student Experience Research Network](#) (SERN), a now sunsetted “field catalyst” organization that sat at the center of the movement to account for the impact of “student experience” on learning outcomes.¹ When students feel like they belong in the classroom, for example, their well-being increases, as do their grades. As for SERN’s sunset, we’ll come back to that later.

But what’s a field catalyst? Equitable systems change requires a diverse set of actors playing distinct and complementary roles across a field to shift narratives, power dynamics, practices, and policies in ways that produce equitable outcomes at a population level. Field catalysts harmonize and drive that multifaceted work. The Bridgespan Group, where two authors (Lija Farnham and Zach Slobig) work, has an ongoing research initiative spanning several in-depth reports that explores the power of this vital type of field-building intermediary and the many ways funders can—and should—support them.² SERN, where co-author Lisa Quay was executive director, was a quintessential field catalyst, marshaling the field’s efforts to build and apply knowledge about student experience that could help transform inequitably designed education systems.

This is not a case study of SERN’s impact on the education field. That’s documented elsewhere—an array of influential education leaders credits it with putting student experience on the map and building the field’s understanding of the issue.³ In short, SERN helped make the case that it’s not enough to focus exclusively on inputs, like curricula, and outcomes, like test scores, in education. This research shows the importance of how students experience the system itself—and that inequities in student experience contribute to inequities in educational outcomes. This article takes a closer look at how SERN, as a field catalyst, worked arm-in-arm with key funders to make that case and build knowledge on how to address it.

In its work advising philanthropy, Bridgespan sees more and more funders who want to better understand what systems change looks like. They want to be more effective, equitable investors in systemic solutions that drive impact. Not just in a few places—but on a massive scale. They’re curious to learn how to work horizontally across issue area silos and invest in organizations that shift unjust systems. They crave access to a larger and more diverse set of actors doing meaningful work in any given field.

From Bridgespan's growing body of research and its pattern recognition across its advisory work, one answer to those questions is clear: partner with and invest in field catalyists. The graphic below shows how SERN's catalyzing of the field benefited funders by addressing a common set of funder challenges while driving field-level impact.



Back in 2019, Harley quickly recognized how unusual SERN was within her larger portfolio. In fact, SERN’s network, expertise, and ability to bridge research and other sectors within education tangibly benefitted her other grantees. It also helped a newbie grantmaker situate herself in the field. “SERN gave me a lens that I wouldn’t have ordinarily had,” says Harley, now a senior program officer at the Gates Foundation. “It helped me ask better questions of other active investments, helped me identify opportunities for additional exploration, and I could leverage that in real time. It’s hard to articulate how valuable it was for me.”

Funders’ Introduction to a Field Catalyst

In 2016, in the Raikes Foundation’s rooftop conference room overlooking Lake Union in Seattle, SERN held the first of a regular cadence of unique knowledge-sharing convenings. Every year, these briefings brought together education funders, researchers, and practice and policy leaders to explore the latest developments in the student experience field.

Speakers invited by SERN offered a distilled, translated snapshot of current research findings and their applications in education. Funders shared observations from their perch in philanthropy—trends in funding patterns, and what they were seeing and hearing from their broader portfolio of education grantees.

Such a convening hadn’t existed. It was something of a highly curated learning potluck that coalesced and galvanized the field—everyone came with a hunger for each other’s knowledge. Leveraging its unusual proximity to all the participating sectors and its relationships with philanthropy, SERN set a table where everyone was positioned as both expert and learner.

“This was an opportunity for the field to tell a bigger story together about what we know from the science and its practical applications. That’s why funders wanted to show up. They not only came, they kept coming, and they were really engaged.”

ZOË STEMM-CALDERON, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF YOUTH SERVING SYSTEMS, RAIKES FOUNDATION

Like Harley, Zoë Stemm-Calderon, senior director of youth serving systems at the Raikes Foundation, was new to philanthropy when she inherited SERN as a grantee in 2015. Early on, she saw SERN’s potential to get funders thinking differently, to invest in the kind of emergent student experience research that could inform policy change. That first rooftop potluck was Stemm-Calderon’s idea.

“This was an opportunity for the field to tell a bigger story together about what we know from the science and its practical applications,” says Stemm-Calderon. “That’s why funders wanted to show up. They not only came, they kept coming, and they were really engaged.” This felt different from convenings funders were accustomed to—pitches from potential grantees or philanthropic collaboratives where funders only interacted with other funders.

Brad Bernatek, former K-12 senior program officer at Gates, was one of those other funders who showed up, and eventually became a key funding partner. “I remember being blown away that day,” says Bernatek, a seasoned foundation professional by that point in his career.

“Often you go to convenings and they’re just simply not productive. SERN was exceptionally talented at bringing together these different points of view—researchers, practitioners, policy makers, funders—and creating a day that generated insights from all directions, to help people connect the dots.” While the first gathering may have been Stemm-Calderon’s idea, only a field catalyst like SERN could execute it. It brought a depth and breadth of relevant, cross-sector expertise that bridged the gaps between disparate actors.

“SERN was exceptionally talented at bringing together these different points of view—researchers, practitioners, policy makers, funders—and creating a day that generated insights from all directions, to help people connect the dots.”

BRAD BERNATEK, FORMER K-12 SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER, GATES FOUNDATION

For years, Raikes, and later Gates, hosted on-site briefings, which connected more funders to the conversation and built a shared understanding, vision, and identity among both speakers and attendees that they were all in the business of student experience. Regardless of their focus—curriculum and instruction, educator training, or student well-being—these funders came to see how their work connected to student experience and how they and their grantees could use and contribute to the field’s knowledge.

For Bernatek, these convenings also became an opportunity to influence his peers within the foundation. “I used it as a mechanism to evangelize about the kind of work SERN was doing,” he says. “It gave me the tools to make the case internally.” When Harley took over the SERN grant from Bernatek, she realized that the convenings helped deepen and accelerate work within the foundation. “It shifted the conversation [at Gates] in ways that were really exciting and unexpected. Those briefings were a bird’s eye view of all the insights being generated.”

The perspectives and knowledge shared in the convenings informed attending funders’ investments—from Gates and others. And SERN got as much as it gave in these gatherings. It influenced the field through funders who walked away with new relationships and lessons for their other grantees—especially from scholars of color and earlier career scholars whose work is all too often overlooked. It exposed SERN and the speakers to funders’ field-level perspectives and emerging questions in the field. These gatherings also built SERN’s credibility, granting access to tables set by others to which it could contribute the lens of student experience to broader conversations about education.

The Evolution of a Field Catalyst and Its Work with Funders

Back in 2015, SERN hadn't yet assumed the role of a field catalyst. It was founded around two large-scale experimental studies of psychological interventions led by scholars who had pioneered promising work on growth mindset, purpose, and belonging. These interventions were delivered directly to students and aimed to change their beliefs about learning and school. The founding scholars wanted to collaborate with cross-disciplinary colleagues on high-profile studies that could advance understanding of such interventions.

Collectively, this body of research revealed the impact of student experience on key educational outcomes at a time when many education decision makers were focused on other levers entirely—and without the results they desired. This early research helped SERN convince influential decision makers to take student experience seriously and consider a wider array of solutions that would advance educational equity. But SERN realized a growing number of practitioners, policy makers, and a broader set of scholars wanted to understand how educators and schools could improve student experience, especially for those students from marginalized groups for whom schools in the United States were never designed to serve.

SERN understood that answering this question was essential to translating this core insight about student experience and educational equity into broader, systemic impact in education. But it would require a vastly different set of collaborations and people at the table than was incentivized by the typical structures and norms of the research academy.

By centering on the *field's* problems and needs rather than what any individual group of actors wanted, a field catalyst like SERN, working in partnership with its funders, was poised to create the necessary conditions for building the knowledge the field needed to unlock systems change. Such knowledge would not be produced under “business as usual.”

A strategic collaboration with Raikes, its founding funder, laid the groundwork for this pivot that shifted and accelerated the field's knowledge building. In 2016, Raikes funded SERN's efforts to expand the field's knowledge building with an RFP to researchers focused on understanding how the learning environment (for example, what's taught, who's teaching, and how) influences the beliefs students hold about learning and school. Raikes also used its connections and credibility with other funders to support SERN, as a brand-new field catalyst, to raise dollars from other funders to support this effort.

“With SERN, we helped move resources to get people to work together in new ways to solve more practical problems,” says Stemm-Calderon. “We're not research funders, and it was exciting to fund SERN to be the expert, to identify what research could have the greatest impact, and incentivize that change.”

This was the start of what would become an ongoing effort to resource the field by regranteeing through RFPs and fellowships—in partnership with Raikes followed by Gates, the Bezos Family Foundation, and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. It helped SERN build relationships with, and fund knowledge building and cross-sector engagement by, a larger and more diverse set of researchers in partnership with educators and policy makers.

Over the years and in close collaboration with its funders, SERN cultivated the practically relevant, equity-centered knowledge building that is increasingly defining the field. For example, such efforts included collaborations between scholars and school districts and universities with students and educators from traditionally marginalized groups as members of research teams in ways that centered their expertise in conceptualizing studies, gathering and analyzing data, and engaging with decision makers about the implications of findings for system-level policies.

SERN connected several of the leading education organizations in the United States to a synthesized version of this growing knowledge base and supported them in distilling the implications for their strategies, investments, programming, and products. As these users surfaced new knowledge needs, SERN seeded these priorities back into the research community to inform the next wave of knowledge building and cross-sector collaborations. This marked a stark difference from funders having to hope that the latest research study they funded would reach practitioners and policy makers in a meaningful form and that researchers, in turn, would be listening.

SERN also played another vital role in resourcing the field's knowledge building that gave their funder partners much-needed leverage and expertise, and ultimately better served the field. The practical knowledge the field wanted required scholars with greater proximity to the demands and lived experiences of the practitioners and students in American schools. However, these are not the scholars that have traditionally been well connected to or funded by philanthropy.³ Over time, SERN expanded its network of relationships with scholars who brought this expertise and instituted programming and funding practices that more equitably resourced their work. This provided SERN's funder partners with a valued opportunity.⁴ It also became a model for how to reach a larger, more diverse group of scholars skilled in partnering with the people who were the ultimate targets of those funders' strategies. That feedback loop worked to build the knowledge the field needed.

In that process, SERN had lasting influence on how some leading education funders think about funding knowledge building that addresses the field's practical questions getting in the way of impact. "One of the initiatives within our research strategy now is to strengthen the pipeline of diverse scholars very explicitly," says one funder. "That's directly a result of what we did in partnership with SERN."

Between 2014 and 2023, funding data for a sample of 100+ student experience scholars show how **SERN's regranting funding broke up the status quo**

40%

of the scholars were **Black or Latino**



10% of the public and private funding went to those scholars



60% of SERN's regranting funding went to those scholars

80%

of this public and private funding went to **10 scholars**

of these scholars...



8

were **white**



5

were **white men**



7

were at **elite institutions**

SERN's

10 most-funded scholars...



9

were **people of color**



7

were **woman of color**



6

were at **non-elite institutions**

Leaving a Collective Legacy

In 2021, SERN received a resounding affirmation of its work—a \$4 million gift from MacKenzie Scott, which allowed it to take stock of what the field needed most and how SERN might use a large gift of unrestricted capital to meet those needs. In short, it did what field catalysts do as core to their DNA—and as SERN had done all along.

The takeaway from dozens of field conversations and detailed analysis: it had helped advance the field in such a way that the field needed something different from what SERN was equipped to do. The field was demanding more applied work and technical assistance. This would have required a significant expansion and adjustment to SERN’s organizational structure at a time when other leaders across research, practice, and policy appeared better poised to advance that type of work. Furthermore, the long-term funding climate for SERN was challenging despite the one-time gift by Scott.

SERN decided to sunset and—building from the regranting practice it had developed over the years—to use the Scott funding to help expedite the transition to this next generation of field-level leadership. That strategic sunset would seed progress on field-level priorities, to continue movement toward an education system that consistently and equitably centers student experience.

SERN’s funders were disappointed by the decision. But, after years of partnering closely with SERN, they had built a strong relationship with its leadership and understood the rationale for the sunset. They also knew that their continued partnership, with SERN and each other, was vital to sustaining and accelerating the field’s ongoing momentum as SERN passed the baton to others.

Throughout its sunset, SERN partnered with its funders to help coalesce and elevate a shared vision and agenda at this key point in the field’s evolution—to invest in the next generation of field leadership and priorities. “When they first announced their plan to sunset, I was skeptical because of the value I know they brought to the field,” says Harley. “But the conversation became about how do we sunset SERN in a way that leaves the field better than we found it.”

The investments SERN made through its final round of grantmaking and the co-funding partnerships initiated as part of its sunset are just starting to bear fruit. Those grantees are extending field-building work SERN began into new areas of demand in the field, with an even larger and more diverse group of leaders at the fore. For example, multiple grantees are founding new cross-sector efforts that connect a wider range of youth-serving organizations and scholars beyond those that SERN could convene, to advance systems change that prioritizes student experience.

When funders work in partnership with a field catalyst organization, it builds a lasting understanding among both donors and doers of how a new lens drives change on a seemingly intractable problem. “SERN was a ‘door in’ that helped funders see the importance of student experience,” says Stemm-Calderon. “Now, even though SERN is gone, these funders are still carrying on that work funding research and organizations leading that change. Some of these organizations, which benefited from SERN’s work to

build connections and capacity in the field, are now exploring how to evolve and grow into similar roles themselves. As they do so, they'll bring new insights, relationships, and experiences that will expand the impact potential of the field in ways we need as we continue to face new threats and opportunities.”

In addition to their support of SERN's sunset grantmaking to seed the field, SERN's funders are also making their own investments that build on SERN's foundation. As one example, two funders collaborated on a multiyear effort led by Scholars Strategy Network that carries on work that began in partnership with SERN, to bridge research and policy via the leadership of scholars from historically marginalized groups.⁵

SERN's funders invited it to adapt its grants, to deploy these funds to seed the next generation of work demanded by the field, and co-funded efforts that would last beyond SERN's existence. Funders could have easily decided to pull their resources once SERN announced its intent to sunset. Instead, they leaned into the systems change work they had been betting on all along and the adaptive mindset it requires.

Funders Should Give Field Catalysts a Second Look

So many funders are intent on enabling equitable systems change—and so many are not quite sure how to go about it. They can start by partnering with a field catalyst. Field catalysts are essential for advancing equitable, systems-level change and are the most effective systems-change tour guides around. They are also smart, high-leverage investments for any funder in any field, with any investment approach, at any stage in their strategy and journey—deepening and extending funders' reach and turning relatively small amounts of dollars into disproportionately large impact across entire fields.

“An organization who, in partnership with funders, can navigate that interstitial space and be the connective tissue among different groups of stakeholders with different needs and priorities is powerful.”

BRAD BERNATEK, FORMER K-12 SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER, GATES FOUNDATION

Fields navigating periods of uncertainty, volatility, and urgent need can benefit from the value of field catalyst organizations even more. Field catalysts have their ears to the ground and can capitalize on emergent opportunities and efficiently marshal field-level responses given their extensive networks of relationships and skills in organizing diverse ecosystems of actors. “An organization who, in partnership with funders, can navigate that interstitial space and be the connective tissue among different groups of stakeholders with different needs and priorities is powerful,” says Bernatek.

Effective field catalysts shake up the predominant power dynamics of the donor-doer relationship, making space for deep, authentic, mutually accountable—even vulnerable—collaboration. “Sometimes being in philanthropy, wielding that power, feels like an inhibitor

to your learning because you get less ground truth from people—you get the shiniest, slickest version,” says Stemm-Calderon. “When people are comfortable being in the messy parts together, that’s when you get the learning, insight, and impact.”

Importantly, field catalysts—even the most influential and effective—need not live in perpetuity. In fact, the conditions that may bring a field catalyst organization to the end of its time may also be evidence of a step change in progress in the field.

When a coastal redwood tree comes to the end of its life and eventually is little more than a stump in the forest, it begins to resprout. Years pass and the stump fades into the forest floor. Around it, in a near perfect circle, a ring of younger trees rises. It’s often called a “circle of daughters.” That’s what is happening right now. That circle of daughters—the next generation of scholarship and collaborative efforts to apply it in practice and policy—is perhaps the ultimate expression of the bidirectional growth, vulnerable relationships, and power-sharing that SERN and its funders built over eight years of work together.

“When people are comfortable being in the messy parts together, that’s when you get the learning, insight, and impact.”

ZOË STEMM-CALDERON, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF YOUTH SERVING SYSTEMS, RAIKES FOUNDATION

Lisa Quay is a consultant who supports social sector leaders and organizations to build fields that can achieve population-level change. She was previously executive director of Student Experience Research Network, a field catalyst organization working in the education sector in the United States. **Lija McHugh Farnham** is a partner at Bridgespan’s San Francisco office. She joined The Bridgespan Group in 2007, and currently serves as a leader in Bridgespan’s work in education, early childhood, racial equity, and field building. **Zach Slobig** is an editorial director at Bridgespan’s San Francisco office.

Endnotes

- 1 Molly Watkins, "[Reflections from a Strategic Sunset](#)," Student Experience Research Network, May 2023.
- 2 [Fieldbuilding for Equitable Systems Change](#), The Bridgespan Group.
- 3 Molly Watkins, "[The Evolution and Impact of Student Experience Network](#)," Student Experience Research Network, May 2023.
- 4 Chloe Stroman and Lisa Quay, "[Sharing Power in Philanthropic Relationships to Enhance Impact](#)," Student Experience Research Network, March 2023.
- 5 [Education Scholars Training Program](#), Scholars Strategy Network.

THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP

BOSTON 2 Copley Place, 7th Floor, Suite 3700B, Boston, MA 02116 USA. Tel: +1 617 572 2833

JOHANNESBURG Bridgespan Africa, The MARC, Tower 1, 3rd Floor, Corner Maude and Rivonia Road, Sandown Johannesburg, South Africa. Tel: +27 11 012 9280

MUMBAI Bridgespan India Private Limited (registered address), 11th Floor, Platina, G Block, Plot C 59, Bandra Kurla Complex, Mumbai, 400051, India. Tel: +91 022 6628 9624

NEW YORK 333 Seventh Avenue, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10001 USA. Tel: +1 646 562 8900

SAN FRANCISCO 88 Kearny St., Ste. 200, San Francisco, CA 94108 USA. Tel: +1 415 627 4500

SINGAPORE The Bridgespan Group, Sponsored by Bain Singapore, 38 Beach Road, 15th Floor, South Beach Tower, Singapore 189767



www.bridgespan.org

contact@bridgespan.org
contactindia@bridgespan.org

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://www.bridgespan.org/about-us/terms-and-conditions>