

About LINK Strategic Partners

LINK Strategic Partners is a full-service communications and engagement firm built on a commitment to social impact. By understanding and respecting the communities in which we operate, we help intergovernmental groups, higher education institutions, municipalities, school districts, government agencies, and other organizations create and apply the right tools and strategies to translate challenges into opportunities for hyperlocal success.

LINK has worked for and with world-class higher education, elementary schools and colleges, and non-profit institutions and systems from across the country and around the world, assisting them with stakeholder engagement, facilitation, strategic communications, master and strategic planning, and community relations issues. LINK regularly presents and facilitates at national and international conferences and symposia on communications and engagement issues in the elementary, college, and higher education arenas, including convenings by the International Town & Gown Association (ITGA), the UK Town & Gown Association (UKTGA), South by Southwest (SXSW), National School Public Relations Association, and Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership. We have led countless research and engagement efforts, community meetings, focus groups, stakeholder discussions, and stakeholder research in communities across the country. While these projects have included varied topics, size and scope, there is one thing they all have in common: our team gives communities the opportunity to have a voice in shaping the future and we provide agencies and organizations the information they need to plan for that future.

Higher Education Expertise

Since its founding, LINK has worked with several leading educational institutions around the world, assisting them with master campus planning and community relations issues stemming from the growth of higher learning opportunities. We have also facilitated and presented at several conferences and symposia for our higher education clients. Along the way, the LINK team has conducted extensive research on community relations best practices and helped universities develop new institutional policies and procedures to effectively manage relationships with community stakeholders in a positive, equitable, and effective manner. LINK specializes in listening and responding to all stakeholder input, from faculty, staff and students, to administrators and community members, while delivering consistent messages that advance well-defined client goals. We aim for more than merely surface-level involvement; we help our clients build participatory and strategic decision-making processes involving all stakeholders.

We have worked closely with educational institutions like Gallaudet University, The George Washington University, Georgetown University, American University, the Virginia Community College System, Montgomery College, and the Consortium of Universities, as well as with national and international organizations such as ITGA and UKTGA.

Four members of the LINK team: Michael Akin, president; Josh Lasky, managing director and chief strategist; Corey Barenbrugge, chief operating officer and senior strategist; and Molly Barker, editorial manager and digital strategist, are also higher education subject matter experts,

having proudly worked in the field for a cumulative total of more than 25 years. Our team's areas of expertise are broad and diverse ranging from town/gown and government and community relations (a former assistant vice president of government, community, and international relations); strategic communications (including speech writing for a university president); sustainability (including standing up an Office of Sustainability at *two* DC universities and teaching courses on the subject); governance (serving in a university's general counsel's office); and development/fundraising (serving as a strategic advisor to a university vice president of development).

A Selection of Our Past Performance

International Town & Gown Association

In the spring of 2020, LINK was engaged by the International Town & Gown Association (ITGA) to convert its annual conference from an in-person event to a virtual experience. LINK also identified the conference platform (HeySummit) and built the virtual conference experience from the ground up. The magic of this online experience was not just in the adoption of a new platform, and the engagement of a newly-created online community; it was also in the ability of LINK and ITGA to pivot incredibly quickly to a new reality. When this was anticipated to be an in-person event, the topics involved more "standard" town/gown topics such as community partnership, mitigation of off-campus student issues, etc. When it was converted into an online experience, the topics shifted to a focus on how colleges and college towns were tackling the challenges of COVID-19; the team also quickly pivoted a second time to create a new track of programming on Day 3 of the conference entitled "Courageous Conversations Around Race" as the news of George Floyd's senseless death was breaking.

Members of the LINK team presented at the conference, moderated break-out sessions, handled speaker management, led tech support, and hosted virtual happy hours and other networking opportunities. The LINK team also worked with ITGA staff to ensure that attrition among existing registrants was low and to increase new registrations. The organization expected 100 attendees from their membership base to participate. With LINK's support around a comprehensive communications and outreach strategy, the number of registrants exceeded 300. Conference sessions also earned media coverage by Forbes, and conference-goers continue to engage with the content from the sessions, as a platform that enabled recording and providing replays was selected as the virtual site for this year's event.

Prior to this engagement, LINK has also managed marketing, partnership development, and communications efforts for ITGA's Certificate in Town and Gown Relations, as well as the organization's recent re-branding effort. LINK played a key role in developing and executing a plan to engage city and university officials to take part in a program that seeks to foster positive town gown relations. LINK also developed a new logo for ITGA that showcases the organization's roots as a convener between universities and the communities they serve. Michael has been a featured presenter at the last six ITGA conferences, providing informational sessions on community engagement best practices for ITGA's robust membership of colleges, universities, and municipalities from across the country.

Manchester, United Kingdom LINK Branch

In the fall of 2019, LINK established its first international branch in Manchester, England building upon several years of town-gown relations support, beginning with LINK President Michael Akin's presentation on Town Gown Relations in the US at the ITGA Conference in 2013. After speaking at several more international conferences with over 100 hundred UK universities over the past seven years, LINK opened a branch in Manchester to offer many of our established networks support with town and gown relations, community engagement, and strategic traditional and digital messaging. We are currently offering marketing and communications support for hyperlocal organizations serving Manchester and Salford's LGBTQ+ communities.

United Kingdom Town and Gown Association (UKTGA) Conference

After speaking at several International Town and Gown (ITGA) Conferences on community engagement in the town-gown sector, LINK was asked to serve as the keynote speaker at the inaugural UK-specific Town and Gown Association (UKTGA) Conference in 2016. LINK also worked with the UKTGA team to build the conference from the ground up, bringing together 130 universities from across the UK to problem solve around common issues universities and their neighbors face. After a successful presentation on utilizing social media to unite students, university faculty, and residents, team LINK was asked to present at the following UKTGA conference in Belfast in 2018. Once again, LINK has been invited to present at next year's conference, rescheduled to 2022 due to the pandemic.

Montgomery College

Montgomery College, a state school located in Montgomery County, Maryland near Washington, DC, engaged LINK to provide community engagement and public relations services as it embarked on a multi-year effort to design and build a new Math and Science building on its Takoma Park-Silver Spring campus in the heart of a residential neighborhood. LINK has successfully leveraged high-tech and high-touch strategies to translate the college's challenges into opportunities for local success. Before our work with the college began, tensions between the college and adjacent neighbors were high from decades of mistrust, largely due to inconsistent and fractured communication between the college and its neighbors and the college's interests to build and grow its offerings for students. LINK is currently assisting the college and its construction management team to create and facilitate a process intended to advance the construction steadily toward completion while providing opportunities for community members to voice concerns and share feedback in the way they feel most comfortable. Fully empowered by Montgomery College, LINK continues to communicate directly with students, faculty, staff, community members, and government officials, particularly the Takoma Park (MD) mayor and city council members, as needed to maintain positive, working relationships through to ribbon cutting and beyond.

Georgetown University

The LINK team understands how to bring people together to move higher education institutions forward on strategic priorities. Following a contentious campus planning process, Georgetown University brought LINK to work with University officials and community members, including

the Georgetown Community Partnership, a working group of officials, students, and residents that was formed as a condition of the campus plan. LINK helped Georgetown University create an effective community relations strategy to strengthen the university's relationships with its neighbors and enhance the quality of life within the broader Georgetown community.

American University

LINK partnered with American University to facilitate a resilience assessment workshop for staff and stakeholders. The full-day workshop brought together a diverse array of university stakeholders for learning and brainstorming, providing a starting point for AU's long-term resilience planning efforts. The workshop format and approach were inspired by the Community Building Resilience (CRB) model, and content was drawn from Second Nature's guidance on campus resilience. The workshop provided an important foundation for future cross-campus dialogue on resilience, and at the same time, served as a critical step in AU's follow-through as a signatory to the Second Nature Resilience Commitment.

Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area

LINK partnered with the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area to execute the media activation around the Consortium's *Capital Assets* report, a look at the economic impact of the Consortium's 14 D.C.-area member universities on both the region and the District. Consortium institutions educate students from all 50 states and more than 14,000 students from around the world. Six university presidents participated in the press conference. We also leveraged the communications channels of all regional colleges and universities by working with student publications and their social media networks. The regional media approach garnered 229 local and regional media impressions, including five stories in the Washington Post.

The George Washington University

With a history of local tensions and litigation, GW was bracing for battle over plans to add 2.2 million square feet to its urban campus as a part of its 20-year campus planning efforts. University leaders understood that the long-term success of the campus plan depended on creating a new dynamic with various groups of stakeholders such as neighbors, city officials, and the local business community. LINK helped GW craft an eight-point strategy to position the University as a community asset and neighborhood partner. The LINK team also led the formation of a cross-departmental task force comprised of the university's leaders to hone messaging about the plan and develop compelling ways to promote the benefits of the university's growth. The project team developed a strategy for creating buy-in for the university's vision among university stakeholders, its neighbors, and the city at large, which led to the adoption of the campus plan and several welcome additions to the campus, including the GW Museum, Science and Engineering Hall, and Square 54, a mixed-use commercial development.

Gallaudet University

Gallaudet University is the world's only university in which all programs are specifically designed to accommodate deaf and hard of hearing students. The LINK team served as a



strategic communications and community relations advisor for the institution in the initial stages of the campus planning process. Thanks in part to extensive community outreach, the plan received broad support and was approved by the DC Zoning Commission.