

IMPACT REPORT 2020-2021

# Today's LINK to Tomorrow's *Black* Leaders



**LINK  
Unlimited  
Scholars**

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**"Investments in *young people*  
yield greater returns than any  
other, because the upside is  
unlimited."**

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**JONATHAN T. SWAIN**  
President & CEO

## Dear LINK Family and Friends,

The past 18 months have been unforgettable. COVID-19 presented a unique set of challenges for LINK and our Scholars. As the pandemic continued through 2020 and into 2021, the disruptions and challenges became a new norm for us all. But thanks to you, our Scholars were able to overcome those challenges and keep moving forward on their respective journeys.

Your generous support made the LINK fellowship possible for both high school and middle school students. The impact you had in the 2020–21 fiscal year was remarkable. Your gifts had the following impact:

- Each Scholar completed over 120 hours of LINK's specialized Academic Enrichment support, achieving an average GPA of 3.2.
- Scholars engaged in many Leadership Development sessions during the school year, including 30 Schmitt Leadership Scholars who researched Chicago communities for their spring impact projects.
- More than 25 industry professionals invested in our Scholars as panelists and workshop volunteers to boost their Career Exposure.
- Our College Access activities successfully placed all 2021 graduating Scholars into competitive four-year colleges and universities, garnering \$12 million in scholarships and grants.

This is just a snapshot of the life-changing impact you made possible for LINK Scholars. You will learn even more within this annual report. By working together this past year, Black students in Chicago have had the support and resources needed to move to, through, and beyond college.

We look forward to sharing the continued impact your support will have for our Scholars and our great city in the year to come. Thank you for believing in LINK.



**Stephen Hackney**  
Chairman of the Board



## WHAT DRIVES OUR MISSION

**For Black students to become tomorrow's leaders, they must have access to educational resources and tools *today*.**

One of Chicago's biggest challenges is a system that exacerbates historical educational gaps for Black students. Black students are disproportionately impacted by systemic and structural forces that impede their ability to access opportunities, gain economic mobility, and become the community leaders our city needs.

***But with your support, LINK Scholars find the path of success  
—and that changes everything.***

Through our four-year fellowship, Scholars receive robust, multifaceted programming that reduces gaps. Scholars gain the opportunities and access they need to succeed, resulting in personal achievements and growth producing both short- and long-term outcomes. These outcomes impact the whole community and the city of Chicago for generations to come.

## DIRECTIONAL STATEMENT

**For Chicago to thrive, all of its young people must have the *opportunity* to maximize their potential.**

LINK's goal is to mitigate the effect of systemic and structural forces impeding Black students by improving and increasing educational opportunities and access. By equipping our Scholars with the knowledge, skills, resources, and social equity that further college completion and career placement, LINK is increasing the economic mobility and stability of Black students and cultivating a diverse leadership pipeline for our city.



22 YEARS AND COUNTING

**Since 2000, 100% of  
LINK Scholars have been  
accepted to a selective  
college or university.**

**Beloit**<sup>\*</sup>  
College

 **Pomona**<sup>\*</sup>  
College

  
MORGAN  
STATE UNIVERSITY

**Williams**<sup>\*</sup>  
College

**Duke**<sup>\*</sup>  
UNIVERSITY

**JSU**<sup>\*</sup> | JACKSON  
STATE  
UNIVERSITY

 **HARVARD**<sup>\*</sup>  
UNIVERSITY

 **ILLINOIS**  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

**Yale**

**M** UNIVERSITY OF  
MICHIGAN

 **PRINCETON**  
UNIVERSITY

**USC**

(\*) Colleges and Universities represented by Scholars featured in the 2020-2021 Impact Report.

# Connections that *change* lives.

Every day we make connections that change our course in life. Connections within the LINK community provide an entire network of support, strength, and wisdom for Scholars taking their next steps.

Jacquelin Baker drew on those connections as a Scholar from 2003 to 2007. That's when LINK Alum Robert Griggs, Class of 1997, returned to share his experience with Jacque's class during a LINK-sponsored college panel. She says: "I'll never forget the way Rob lit up when he talked about attending Williams College. As he was talking, I literally saw the campus. And I saw my future and a place I knew I belonged." Soon after hearing Rob, Jacque reached out to Williams; within a few weeks, Williams flew Jacque out for the visit that confirmed it as her college choice. Jacque's life changed dramatically thanks to Rob's connection and story. At Williams, she became passionate about educational equity and is now a proud Williams graduate herself. Her experiences in LINK and at Williams gave her the skills and confidence to start her educational and leadership consulting business to help others grow personally and academically as LINK helped her.

Like Rob, Jacque has stayed connected to our community over the years. She was even hired this year as our Vice President of Programs and Evaluation, where she will help a new generation of LINK Scholars make connections that drastically and directly change their lives. This new role brings her full circle—reconnecting her with Rob, who is now a LINK board member, so she could thank him for the part he played in her journey. When she spoke of his influence, he was moved too and grateful he made an impact.

Connections like these are an invaluable part of the LINK fellowship—and there are countless stories like Jacque's and Rob's! From the past, present, and future, the LINK community is a powerful force that is changing lives and shaping the professional landscape of our great city. Thanks for being part of this impact!



**"My Mentor went to Williams College, and he thought I should go. I ignored him every time! But I'm so glad I was open to visiting—and attending—Williams changed the direction of my life."**

**—Robert Griggs**

LINK Class of 1997  
LINK Mentor & Board Member  
Williams College

**"Because other LINK Scholars had attended [Williams College], I knew this was a place I would be successful and find a support system."**

**—Jacquelin Baker**

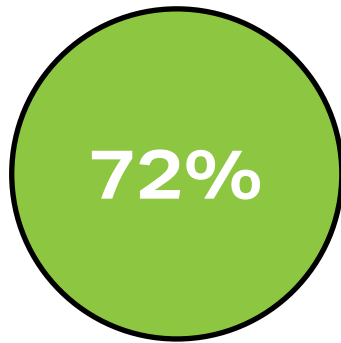
LINK Class of 2007  
LINK VP of Programs & Evaluation  
Williams College



## LIMITED ACCESS IS THE PROBLEM

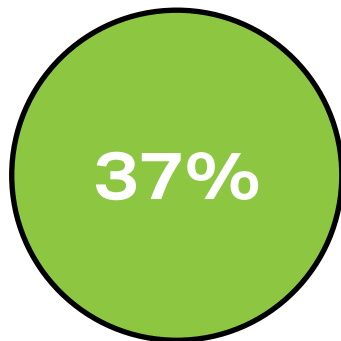
# Black students are not accessing college opportunities or graduating college on par with their peers.

The lack of access for educational opportunities and resources has a devastating impact, as seen in low rates of high school graduation, college acceptance, and college graduation. Even if Black students somehow defy the odds by graduating from high school, getting accepted to college, and graduating from college, their college debt weighs them down for decades to come.



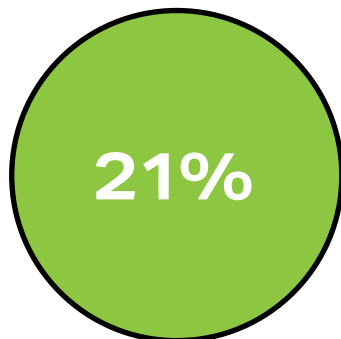
### **CPS graduation rate<sup>1</sup>**

**72% Black Students**  
**78.2% Latinx Students**  
**83.1% White Students**  
**85% Asian Students**



### **U.S. college enrollment rate<sup>2</sup>**

**37% Black Students**  
**36% Latinx Students**  
**41% White Students**  
**62% Asian Students**



### **Four-year college graduation rate<sup>3</sup>**

**21% Black Students**  
**32% Latinx Students**  
**45% White Students**  
**50% Asian Students**



# Out of 100 U.S. *Black* Students

Here's how Black students fair based on CPS graduation rates and U.S. college enrollment and graduation rates:

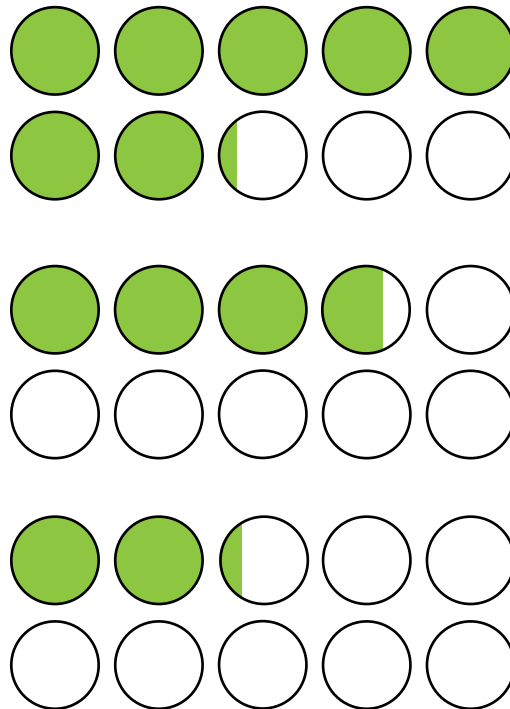
72 out of 100  
graduate high school<sup>1</sup>



of those, 27  
enroll in college<sup>2</sup>



of those, 6 graduate  
college in 4 years<sup>3</sup>



Without a college degree, earnings are **\$24K LESS PER YEAR**, for a total lifetime loss of \$1M.<sup>4</sup>

**85%** of Black college students carry debt.<sup>5</sup>

On average, it takes 25 years for Black college graduates to pay back college debt, as compared to just 10 years for White college graduates.<sup>6</sup>





## OPENING THE PATH OF SUCCESS

# Here's the way *forward* for Black students and Chicago.

When Black students are denied equal access to educational opportunities and college aid, our city is denied future community leaders, business experts, out-of-the-box thinking entrepreneurs, and problem solvers. LINK Unlimited Scholars changes that.

Our proven model equips Black students through a four-year high school fellowship. The four core programmatic elements—Academic Enrichment, College Access, Leadership Development, and Career Exposure—provide LINK Scholars with resources, tools, and opportunities that open the path of success. In addition, each Scholar is paired with a Mentor who guides them on their fellowship journey.

**Our fellowship model is today's link to tomorrow's Black leaders.**



### Academic Enrichment

*Academic Year-Long Classroom Support  
Computer Devices & Internet Access  
Tutoring  
Summer Learning*



### Leadership Development

*Cohort Class Retreats  
Community Service Projects  
Skill Building Workshop  
Monthly Academic & Leadership Workshops*



### Career Exposure

*Internships  
Industry-Related Workshops  
Job Shadowing*



### College Access

*Personalized College Selection Support  
Campus Tours & Fairs  
Standardized Test Prep*

Access to the path of success hinges on quality education from middle school to high school to college. That's why LINK launched a two-year fellowship opportunity called Junior LINK to prepare middle schoolers for the high school selection process. Learn more on page 14.

**Together with our donors, we provide programming that moves these outstanding Scholars to, through, and beyond college.**



## MENTOR SPOTLIGHT

# Mentors help Scholars become the *best* version of themselves.

Mentoring is a key component of the fellowship experience for LINK Scholars. Open to professionals and leaders from the Chicagoland area, LINK Mentors commit to guiding their Scholar on the four-year journey and connecting their Scholar to resources, including their professional network.

Robert Griggs, LINK Class of 1997, has enjoyed being a LINK Mentor for eight years. It was the impact of his own LINK Mentor, Kenard Gibbs, that inspired him to volunteer: "He changed the way I viewed the world and myself. My goal is to have the same impact on a student and help them become the best version of themselves."

Investing in young people is a priority for Rob, and the experience has been equally formative for him. "The most meaningful part is knowing I have something to give to someone else that is valuable," Rob shares. "It's also nice to know that during my life, I've learned enough lessons to be able to share that information and help someone else."

That's why the LINK Mentor Program is so powerful: it connects Scholars to the larger LINK community providing support, access, and meaningful life and career advice. The impact that started with Kenard continued with Rob and the Scholars he mentors, and their impact will keep growing for years to come.

**Robert Griggs**

LINK Class of 1997

LINK Mentor & Board Member

Williams College



"Being a Mentor reminds me that I can always do my part to help other people."

# Tomorrow's leaders took their first steps—thanks to you!

This past year was unlike anything in recent history. Our Scholars thrived, despite the disruption and personal loss brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to the steady support of partners like you, the LINK fellowship provided a network of stability and strength so our Scholars could continue our history of impressive achievements.

## 172 Scholars Served

**147**

HIGH SCHOOL  
SCHOLARS

**25**

MIDDLE SCHOOL  
SCHOLARS

**60**

COMMUNITIES  
REPRESENTED

## Corporate & Foundation Support

**76**

CORPORATIONS

**30**

FOUNDATIONS

## Volunteer Support

**246**

VOLUNTEERS

## 126 Education Partners

**40**

HIGH SCHOOLS

**60**

ELEMENTARY  
SCHOOLS

**26**

COLLEGE PANEL  
REPRESENTATIVES

## Mentor Support

**175**

MENTORS INVESTING IN  
SCHOLARS

**2,500**

VIRTUAL MENTOR HOURS  
WITH SCHOLARS

**4**

VIRTUAL MENTOR/SCHOLAR  
EVENTS

**"I can confidently say that LINK  
helped me prepare for my journey  
after high school."**

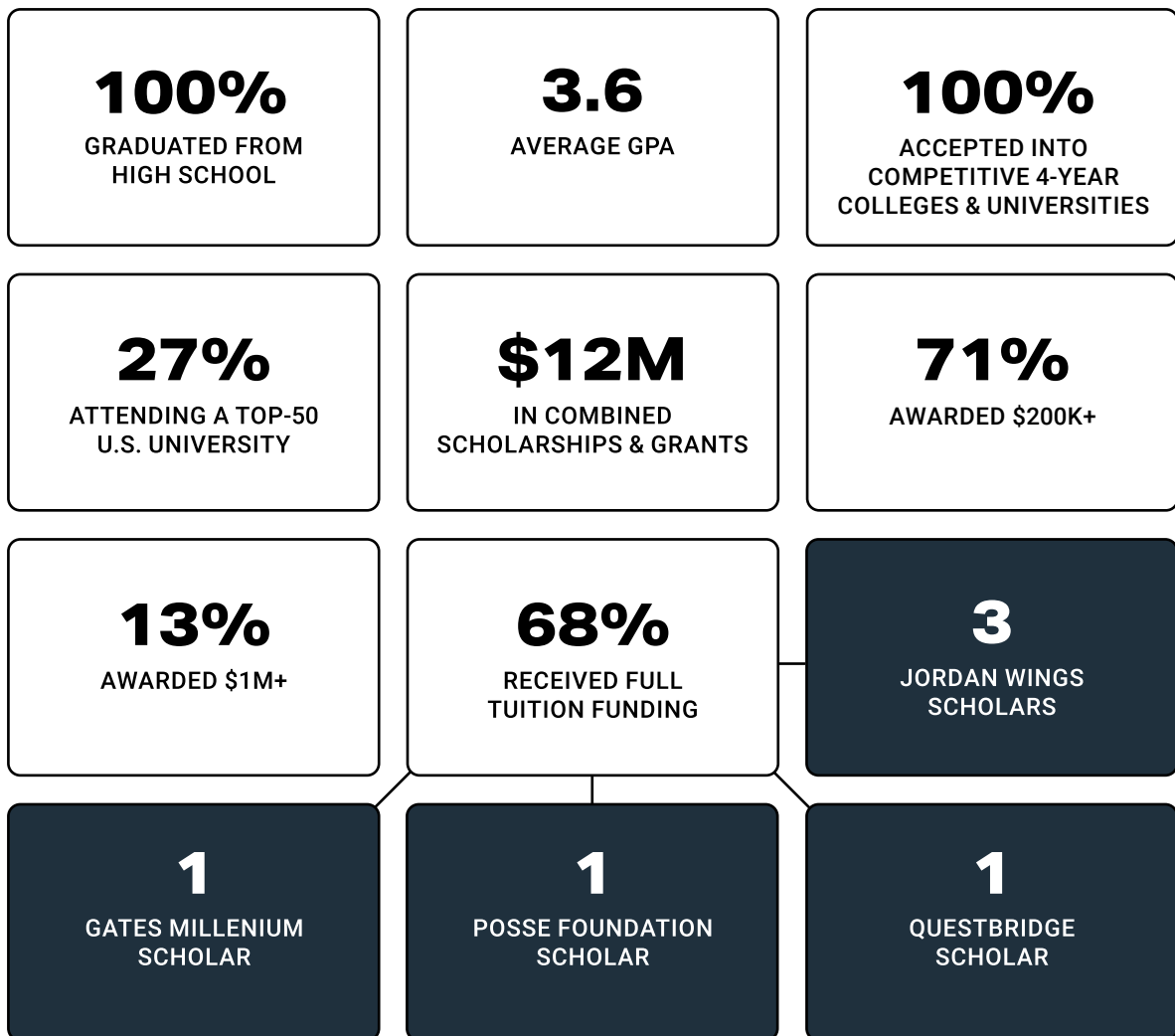
— Jordan Rice  
LINK Class of 2021  
Beloit College



## CLASS OF 2021 AT GLANCE

# Graduating Scholars *contribute* to a history of success.

When friends and partners like you invest through LINK, you open the path to a limitless future for our Scholars. And they are seizing every opportunity to shine!





## SCHOLAR SPOTLIGHT

# Vaughn discovered she was a true leader.

A bright student and a strong leader, Vaughn-Regan Bledsoe was excited to begin her LINK fellowship journey. But about midway through, she felt a bit unsure about her future. College was on the horizon, but Vaughn knew she needed to refocus and commit fully to the fellowship.

And Vaughn did it! She explains, “LINK has taught me that it is never too late to keep working and persevere. There were times where it seemed too late or that I was incapable of redeeming myself—and LINK kept encouraging me and stayed by my side.”

Vaughn’s persistence was evident especially during her senior year at Fenwick High School, where she earned top academic marks and was captain of the cheerleading team as well as president of the Black Student Union. Her hard work culminated in being selected as a 2021 QuestBridge Match Scholar. QuestBridge is a national program that connects students with full four-year scholarships to top colleges. As 1 of 1,464 Match Scholars, Vaughn received full funding to attend Duke University, where she is now a freshman.

“LINK shows its Scholars that there is a leader in everyone, and they give us the tools to tap into that potential,” says Vaughn. That’s exactly why donors like you make such a difference. Your support makes it possible for students like Vaughn to cultivate their leadership potential, which changes everything for the Scholar, their family, and our entire city. We cannot wait to see how Vaughn’s persistence will pay off in the years to come!

**Vaughn-Regan Bledsoe**  
LINK Class of 2021  
Duke University



## INTRODUCING JUNIOR LINK

# The road to college *beginning* in middle school.

For middle school students in Chicago, impressive GPAs and high school placement scores are determining factors for college access. Thanks to donors like you, middle schoolers in our Junior LINK program find the assistance they need through this two-year fellowship.



### Academic Enrichment

*Tutoring  
Summer Learning*



### Leadership Development

*Monthly Academic & Leadership Workshops*



### High School Options

*Personalized High School Selection Support  
Invitation-Only High School Fair*



### College Exposure

*Campus Tours & Fairs*

"This program has helped me get out of my comfort zone, and I have grown academically, mentally, and socially. I would like to thank everybody at LINK for the amazing experience. Our future is bright!"

—CHRISTIAN GATES, LINK CLASS OF 2026



## THE FIRST STEP IN COLLEGE PREP

# Preparing middle schoolers for lifelong success.

Chicago is home to several of the top public high school programs in the state, with many of them highly ranked nationally. With such coveted schools, access to these seats can be challenging. LINK aims to increase the success rate of Scholars by gaining entry to these life-changing seats to receive an education at one of these institutions. Through our programming, Scholars are positioned to maximize their potential to access these seats.

Due to the pandemic this past year, middle schoolers faced additional challenges in the high school selection process. But these challenges actually affirmed the benefits of our fellowship, as Junior LINK students were found to be ahead of their peers. They had higher GPAs and placement scores as well as stronger connections to teachers, resulting in stronger high school applications.



**100+**

**Programming Hours**



**4 Weeks**  
of Summer Learning



**Personal High School  
Selection Support**



**Summer Enrichment  
Electives**

Graphic Design | Fashion | Black Journalism | Chicago Black History  
Civil Rights & Housing | Music | Dance & Wellness | Black Cinema  
Career Exploration | Black People & Yoga | Personal Branding  
Solving the Gun Violence Plague | Ghanaian Culture  
Entrepreneurship

### WHAT'S NEXT?

Junior LINK is brimming with potential! One priority is strengthening LINK's connections with top CPS schools to make it even easier for Junior LINK students to gain acceptance to our city's top schools. That's why LINK's pipeline from middle school to high school is so important.

All Junior LINK Scholars are automatically granted an interview for our high school fellowship upon completion of an application in their 8th grade year. A goal for the future is for approximately 25% of each incoming freshman class to be former Junior LINK Scholars who have built a strong foundation through their two years of middle school programming with LINK. Junior LINK students will have greater access to the high school selection process and attend the best schools to receive the best academic opportunities for college placement.

## FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

# The power of your *investment* this year.

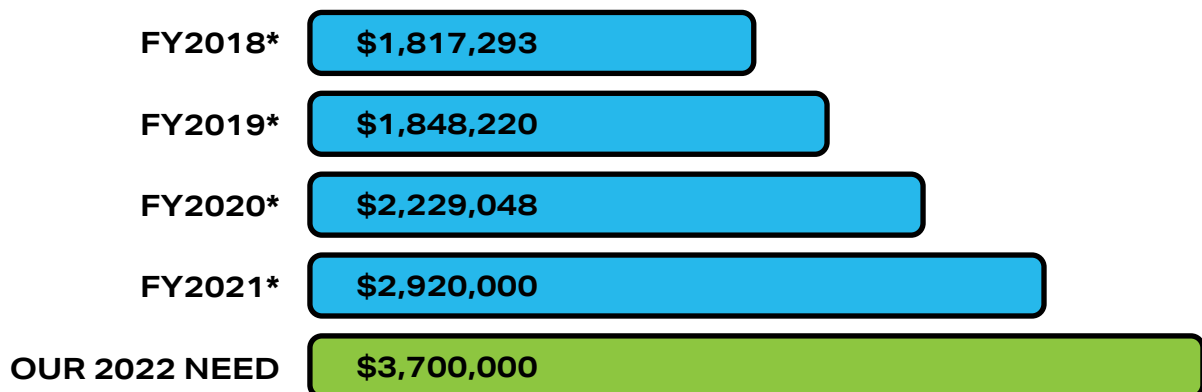
Your financial gifts have had an immeasurable impact upon LINK Scholars, their families, and our city. Because you gave through LINK Unlimited Scholars, our fellowship support to LINK Scholars didn't waiver. Your steady support enabled them to continue growing and moving forward on the path of lifelong success. We are grateful for your partnership in this mission that so positively changes the life trajectory of each Scholar and the professional landscape of our city.

**Here's how you are helping LINK Scholars become tomorrow's leaders through our comprehensive approach to educational equity. Thank you!**

## Annual Revenue by Year

Over the past five years, generous partners of LINK Unlimited Scholars have spurred significant growth to invest in LINK Scholars and build tomorrow's Black leaders today.

### OUR GROWTH



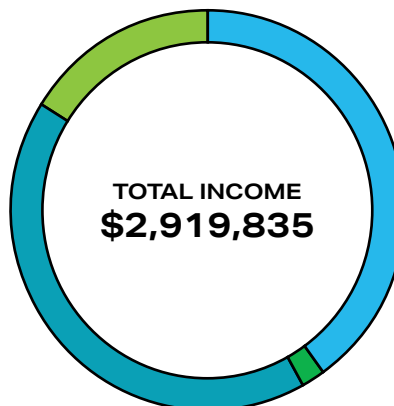
*\*based on audited financial reports*

## FY 2020-2021 INCOME

### Investment Summary

Generous partners invested in LINK Scholars with one-time and multi-year commitments to build tomorrow's Black leaders today. Here's a snapshot of the impact your gifts are making collectively for LINK Scholars:

● Individuals	42%	(\$1,218,019)
● Corporations	40%	(\$1,169,822)
● Foundations	16%	(\$467,250)
● Government & Other	2%	(\$64,745)

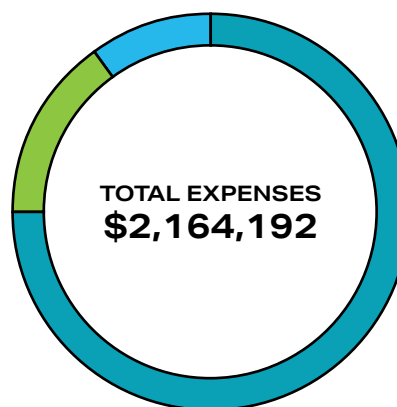


## FY 2020-2021 EXPENSES

### Highest Impact to Date

Last year's growth enabled us to invest in more LINK Scholars than ever before. Here's how your investment is building tomorrow's Black leaders today:

● Program	75%	(\$1,633,502)
● Fundraising	15%	(\$306,156)
● Administration	10%	(\$224,534)



## THE LINK TEAM

# Our team has *grown* to better meet the needs of LINK Scholars.

The growth and initiatives needed to support LINK Scholars are only possible with a strong infrastructure. That's why we're investing in our staff by expanding our team and adjusting responsibilities so each person's strengths are in use. Each person on our team works passionately and tirelessly to fulfill our mission.

### PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

**Jonathan T. Swain**, President & CEO

**Kelli Hobson**, Executive Vice President

**Vanessa N. Lewis**, Senior Director of Administration

**Damika Hayden**, Director of Finance & Operations

**Brittini Cullar**, Marketing & Communications Manager

**Lydia Jackson**, Database Administrator

### ADVANCEMENT

**Michelle Weiner**, Vice President of Advancement

**Elena Dennis**, Senior Manager of Corporate & Foundation Relations

**Jennifer Lennon**, Senior Manager of Fund Development

**Danah Bialoruski**, Development Coordinator

**Anicia Miller**, Advancement Associate

### PROGRAMS

**Jacquelin Baker**, Vice President of Programs & Evaluation

**Timeica Bethel-Macaire**, Director of Post-Secondary Success & Support

**Lamar Sanders**, Director of High School Success & Recruitment

**Danielle Moneyham**, Director of Mentor Relations & Recruitment

**Candace Witt**, Senior Manager of Post-Secondary Success & Support

**Rhiannon Rossi**, Manager of Mentor Engagement & Outreach

**Vilma Fermin**, Case Manager

**Shamerea Richards**, Case Manager

**A'Shontee Morgan**, Programs Associate

**Paige Horne**, Programs Associate



## OUR LINK FAMILY

# LINK *Alumni* are back!

**We often say the LINK community is like an extended family. LINK Scholars never graduate out—they stay connected to LINK for life through our Alumni group... many return to serve as Mentors... and some become part of our staff!**

Anicia Miller has recently been hired at LINK as an Advancement Associate to assist with gift processing, acknowledgement letters, general office management, and supporting the leadership team. "It has been very eye-opening to learn how LINK's meticulous processes play a role in both the Scholars' success and the advancement of the organization as a whole," Anicia shares. "Additionally, because I was already so close to the staff from being a Scholar and volunteering for Summer Learning 2020, coming back in this position just felt like coming home to my LINK family!"



**Anicia Miller**  
LINK Class of 2020  
Advancement Associate  
Harvard University

Tatianna Ramsey helped with Summer Learning 2021 as a teacher's assistant for 9th grade leadership, ELA, math, and a personal branding elective. "I decided to come back and help with Summer Learning because I remembered how other TAs from recent years made me feel while I was in class, and I wanted to give that to the younger LINK Scholars," Tatianna explains. "It gave me a newfound respect for other TAs and teachers, because now I know how hard it is to keep students engaged—especially for summer classes!"



**Tatianna Ramsey**  
LINK Class of 2020  
TA, Summer Learning 2021  
Jackson State University

## CONCENTRATED FOCUS FOR GREATER IMPACT

# Our five-year strategic priorities.

Our solution is focused on three strategic priorities that direct our programmatic impact where it is needed most. Here's the progress you've made possible in 2020–2021 through your investment!

### 1. Deepen Our Chicago Neighborhood Reach

We've focused our stated efforts to partner with 10 South and West Side neighborhoods: Auburn Gresham, Austin, Bronzeville, Englewood, Garfield Park, Greater Grand Crossing, North Lawndale, Roseland, South Shore, and Washington Park. These neighborhoods were selected because this is where our impact can be the greatest impetus for long-lasting change for our city.

**51% of the freshman Scholars accepted represent these 10 South & West Side neighborhoods.**

### 2. Broaden Our High School Horizons

Successfully moving Black youth to, through, and beyond college starts well before high school. That's why we launched a two-year fellowship for CPS students called Junior LINK to assist students with high-school placement and college prep—because plans for both begin as students enter 7th grade.

**In spring 2021, LINK expanded to 50 Scholars in Junior LINK.**

### 3. Expand Our Scholar Impact

Our goal is to grow the cohort size each year to create a long-lasting impact across the city. A major milestone will be reaching 500 high school students per year within 5 years.

**Our freshman class accepted 100 Scholars, putting us on track for our 5-year goal.**



A MESSAGE FROM JONATHAN

## What we can achieve *together* in the year ahead.

Remarkable is the word that comes to mind when I look back on everything that we achieved together in 2020–21. Because of your investment and commitment through LINK, more Scholars have received what they need to access the path of success. And their achievements produce a positive ripple effect for them, their families, our communities, and the entire city of Chicago.

That's a lofty assertion—but it's true. Our continued partnership is essential for reaching our strategic initiatives and ensuring Black students become the future community leaders, business experts, out-of-the-box thinking entrepreneurs, and problem solvers our city needs. Together in the year ahead, we will:

**Deepen Our Reach in 10 Key Neighborhoods** by concentrating our missional efforts for long-lasting change across our city.

**Broaden Our High School Horizons** by growing the Junior LINK fellowship to assure middle-school students are in the best position possible for high school selection and college prep.

**Expand Our Scholar Impact** by increasing our high-school Scholar reach to 500 students per year within 5 years. This will be possible as partners like you become cohort sponsors, growing the fellowship in 50-student blocks.

These strategic initiatives will require growth within our team to provide the high level of fellowship offering necessary for Scholar success and to fill Chicago's professional pipeline for years to come.

Your partnership in these initiatives is essential for advancing the LINK mission. We're so excited to continue our work together in the years to come and especially in the year ahead. Thank you for investing in the future for our Scholars, through our Scholars.



**Jonathan T. Swain**  
President & CEO





**LINK  
Unlimited  
Scholars**

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