

High School District Establishes an Alumni Nation to Enhance Communication, Generate Greater Engagement

“It was very important to our community and stakeholders that alumni were not forgotten, that they were engaged. They are crucial because they were our students, they are part of our family... we needed to be able to support them, but we just had to make those systems easier.” — Jordan Smuksta, JTHS Multimedia Communications Specialist

Since its founding in 1899, Joliet Township High School District 204 has seen thousands upon thousands of students walk through its halls. While the district has always recognized the importance of connecting with its alumni, until a couple years ago, its system and processes for doing so were impractical and time consuming.

Recognizing the need for a more intuitive way to engage its former students, JTHS began working with Alumni Nations to streamline its alumni engagement and optimize its alumni database. Its Nation now serves as a [hub for district news](#), event information and alumni engagement efforts throughout the year.

“When JTHS merged its Community Relations and Alumni Relations offices, it became clear we needed a process to engage alumni online,” said Kristine Schlismann, Director of Community and Alumni Relations. “We had a method in place, but it was simply one-way communication and pushing out information. Our alumni have deep pride in their alma mater, and we needed a way to reach them.”

Carly Ringo, Administrative Assistant to the JTHS Office of Community and Alumni Relations, says that the Nation marks a considerable improvement over its old system, which involved the use of Excel spreadsheets and form entries.

“It has been crucial in getting organized,” Ringo says. “Prior to launching our Alumni Nation site, we were using four spreadsheets with 80,000 records that included phone numbers, updates and random notes. There was a lot of information to navigate.”

Updating these spreadsheets manually was difficult and time-consuming, not to mention the sizeable potential for human error.

“When launching our JTHS Nation, the distinguishing factor for us was that alumni could now add and update their own information online. Our data is more accurate as a result of this, and it easy for staff to sort by class, school and even geographic location,” Schlismann says. “More importantly, Alumni Nations allows JTHS to regularly communicate with and engage our alumni, inviting them to events and keeping them informed of recent news.”

Alumni engagement much improved

JTHS has a massive database of graduates. Many of them coordinate class reunions for their fellow alumni, but getting information for the relevant contacts was an enormous undertaking. Prior to working with Alumni Nations, JTHS focused much of its time and energy on the coordination of resources. With support from the reunion coordinator, the school mailed invitations, managed invoices and completed all clerical aspects pertaining to reunions.

Fast Facts

The challenge	The district's existing process for engaging its alumni was cumbersome and ineffective, depending largely on Excel spreadsheets. As a result, JTHS struggled to maintain updated databases and could not effectively communicate with its former students.
The solution	Through JTHS Nation, the district can maintain accurate records and cultivate meaningful connections with its former students. This makes it easier for the district to facilitate and spread the word about alumni events, while enhancing its alumni engagement overall.
The results	District staff have experienced a streamlined process for gathering and updating information, as well as for fundraising. The district has been able to centralize information and communicate with its alumni from one central hub.



JTHS Nation gives reunion coordinators access to all the tools they need to effectively plan alumni events. The district's team provides extensive venue and catering recommendations, a comprehensive reunion checklist and a reunion coordinator contract that outlines the role and responsibilities of the reunion coordinator, particularly when it comes to managing reunion funds.

The Nation makes it easy to access alumni information and increases efficiency for the reunion coordinator and the Community and Alumni Relations Office.

“We wanted to empower reunion coordinators, and we now have the tools to be able to do that,” says Jordan Smuksta, JTHS Multimedia Communications Specialist. “What we were looking for was a system that was going to support our alumni in a way that allowed them to take ownership of their event planning.”

Since launching its Nation, JHTS has promoted engagement among graduating seniors, as well. As an incentive for registering online, JHTS offers prizes to students who sign up. This incentivization, paired with the accessibility of the JHTS Nation from a laptop or mobile phone, has helped drive registration to greater levels.

Last year, JHTS secured signups for roughly 50 percent of its graduating seniors, enabling the school district to reach out to these individuals with important information, announcements and event invitations in the years to come. This, again, has led to significant improvements in the district's alumni engagement outcomes.

Fundraising capabilities

Increased engagement with JTHS Nation has also driven charitable giving for numerous school fundraisers. On top of that, the Alumni Nations donation platform is far easier to manage than the systems formerly used by staff.

Prior to having a unified donation platform, coaches, teachers and officials set up independent fundraisers on sites like GoFundMe and SnapDonate. Having so many different fundraisers administered by different people throughout JTHS made it challenging to effectively track funds and mitigate fees.

Through JTHS Nation, the district has consolidated its fundraising management efforts and significantly reduced the costs associated with fundraising fees.

“Last year, we were able to raise \$30,000 through the system just for athletics alone, so we're slowly growing and becoming as organized and efficient as possible,” Smuksta says.

District Profile

Joliet Township High School District 204 (JTHS) is a high school district located in Will County, Illinois. Established in 1899 and founded in 1901, it is one of the area's oldest school districts, also serving as the site of Joliet Junior College, the first Junior College in the United States, until 1969.

With a population of over 6,500 students, the district has two campuses—Joliet Central High School and Joliet West High School. Each JTHS high school promotes academic success and instructional relevance through rigorous academic academies, which include a Freshman Academy and five Career Academies. The JTHS Career Academies of Health and Medicine; Arts and Communication; Business Management and Information Systems (BMIS); Human Services; and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) are designed to give today's students a head start on their post-secondary pathway by providing career-themed content aligned to academic standards and college/career readiness goals.

