



NEAT Grant: Improving Attendance at NIU Football Tailgating at Mission's Grove

Project Date: September 23, 2023

Project Purpose

The purpose of this grant was to enhance relationships with campus partners and increase community attendance at Mission's Grove, which is an interactive outdoor gathering space for alumni and community members that occurs before Saturday home football games at Northern Illinois University (NIU). The team also strove to bring greater awareness of the programs and services offered at NIU, to the community by inviting campus partners to be featured in the grove.

The team applied to NEAT for funding for community advertising and to alleviate the costs associated with creating space for campus partners in the grove. NEAT's funding also provided a low-risk way to establish the importance of funding a broader marketing campaign and the value added by the inclusion of the campus partners.

Project Scope

Up until 2017, the Northern Illinois University Alumni Association hosted an interactive "Alumni Village" during home football games. This offering included the free provision of tents and food to campus partners who invited alumni back to connect. The space also included entertainment that alumni, friends, and their families enjoyed for free. However, this offering far exceeded our organization's ability to fund the endeavor and was cut when new leadership made necessary changes to balance our finances. Unsurprisingly, many expressed how much they missed the "Alumni Village" and their desire to see its return.

To meet the demand of our constituents, while being responsible fiscal stewards, the NIU Alumni Association re-envisioned "Alumni Village" as "Mission's Grove", named after our live mascot: Mission. Mission's Grove offers the opportunity for alumni and community members to connect and includes a special visit from Mission, lawn games, access to local food and beverage vendors with items for purchase. The event concludes with a parade, led by our marching band, from the grove to the stadium. A pop-up swag store and opportunities for groups to tailgate are also available.

Staff were very proud of the launch but felt that greater awareness of the space both in the University and alumni community would maximize its impact.

On top of recognizing the immediate impact that *more* advertising would have, staff hypothesized that recruiting campus partners to help spread the word would help diversify the initiative's reach and bring more attention to what NIU has to offer the community. Of note is that the original desire was for campus partners to be invited to participate in all three

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Mission's Grove opportunities. However, the timing of grant awards and low staff capacity for the homecoming date (in October) led the team to focus their efforts on the Sept. 23 Mission's Grove.

When considering who should be invited to participate in Mission's Grove, staff recognized that the experience would be a mutually beneficial opportunity for all involved. The NIU Alumni Association would but able to build relationship with campus partners and campus partners would have a unique opportunity to get the word out about their programs and/or services. As such, to create equity in access to the opportunity, applications were opened to the entire campus and announced through University's weekly announcements (Appendix A). Applicants were asked to include their organization's purpose, goals and mission and share how they could engage attendees (Appendix B). Additional announcements/reminders were sent throughout the three weeks that the application was open.

13 applications were submitted, and 5 were chosen based on which partners would most benefit from the community exposure while enhancing the experience at Mission's Grove.

Featured Campus Partners

- NIU Lorado Taft Field Campus – is a largely self-funded outreach campus with the primary source of funding being user fees. Applicants noted their interest was due to the valuable opportunity to market the campus and what it offers to the community, while potentially increasing business for both the outdoor education and conference programs.
- De La Vega Innovation Lab - creates an ecosystem of innovation and entrepreneurship for NIU students and relies heavily on the support of alumni and external partners. By connecting with community members and alumni, they posited that they could accomplish two key goals: showcasing the value in experiential learning that comes from an education at NIU, and building a network of mentors, leaders, and supporters that will inspire our students to pursue their goals. development.
- Center for Nonprofit and NGO Studies - applied to create awareness of the student initiated and led Huskie Closet -- a free clothing closet available to all on campus.
- NIU Ballet Folklorico Aztlan – a student organization interested in highlighting a specific feature of Latino dance culture.
- The Huskie Food Pantry – is a food pantry that serves NIU students and only functions through the support of the DeKalb, Sycamore, and NIU communities.

After establishing informing those who would be present, the team engaged with local advertising channels to increase awareness of the events and, ultimately, contracted with NIU's flagship radio station, which caters to existing NIU Football game attendees. Originally, the team also planned to leverage print advertising in addition to our traditional advertising (Facebook Boosts, Google Ads, local chamber emails). After the grant was awarded, the team was informed that advertising costs had increased and were forced to make a choice between print and radio. In the end, the team chose to focus on the radio advertisements. Unfortunately,

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despite having signed a contract and confirmed receipt of advertisement materials, the radio station later informed us that they did not uphold the contract and did not play the ad reads. Thus, additional advertising was also not implemented. However, the NIU Alumni Association upheld its original marketing plan and the campus partners were encouraged to advertise within their networks, helping to draw a diverse audience. An example alumni email and marketing materials can be found in Appendix B while full expenses can be found in Appendix C.

On the day of the event, campus partners were positioned near the entry of Mission's Grove and our team encouraged attendees to interact with them as they entered.

Process and Timeline

June 2023

- Notified of Grant Funding (June 30)

July 2023

- Applications opened to campus partners (July 24)
- Promotion for Mission's Grove begins

August 2023

- Applications closed Applicants notified selection (August 15)
- Promotion with campus partner features begins
- Digital Advertising begins

September 2023

- Mission's Grove occurs on September 23, 2023

Impact and Conclusions

This year's Mission's Grove (Appendix D) was successful due to the support provided through the NEAT grant. The grant created the opportunity to provide space for campus partners in the grove and, despite running into a critical roadblock with radio advertisements, catalyzed the team's marketing efforts. This enabled the NIU Alumni Association to double attendance over the Mission's Grove held at the same time the prior year and contributed to a 25% increase in the average number of attendees over all 3 events. This success is largely attributed to the word-of-mouth and digital advertising that occurred by incorporating campus partners back into the experience, emulating what had been done in the original "Alumni Village".

The efforts to build relationships with and support campus partners yielded results as well. Each campus partner expressed that they were able to meet their goals and the staff from the NIU Alumni Association was able to establish additional opportunities for alumni engagement as partnerships were formed for fundraisers and volunteer opportunities for the Huskie Food Pantry, the Huskie Closet, and the De La Vega Innovation Lab. Lastly, the team was able to demonstrate the importance of incorporating campus partners into the Mission's Grove

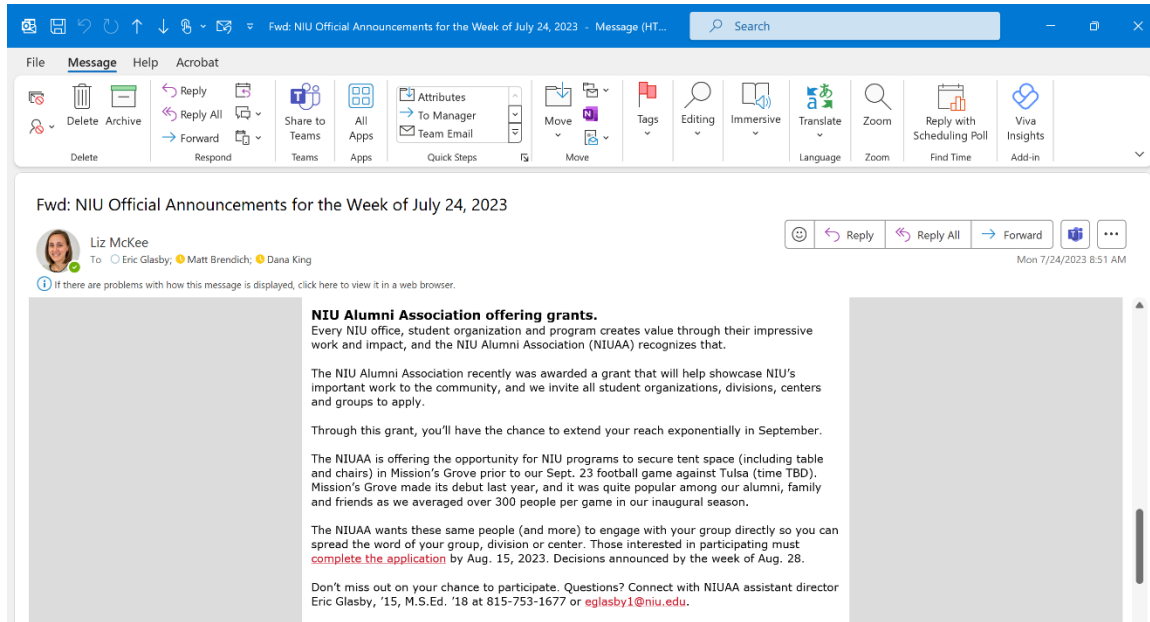
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experience and has support from the organization to continue to provide opportunities like this in the upcoming year.

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Appendix A: Marketing materials and event photos

Campus-wide call for applicants



Email invitation copy in newsletter



NIU vs. University of Tulsa

Saturday, Sept. 23

Opens: 9 a.m.

Mission's March: 10:15 a.m.

Kickoff: 11 a.m.

Visit the following groups and organizations at Mission's Grove:

[Lorado Taft Field Campus](#)

[De La Vega Innovation Lab](#)

[Center for Nonprofit and NGO](#)

[Studies at NIU](#)

[NIU Ballet Folklorico Aztlan](#)

[The Huskie Food Pantry](#)

Join us as we celebrate [Family](#)

[Weekend](#) in the [Mission's](#)

[Grove](#) alumni tailgating area

prior to the NIU/Tulsa football game.

Mission's Grove is located in Oderkirk Field, which is adjacent to the Barsema Alumni & Visitors Center. Mission's Grove will

open two hours prior to kickoff and will offer a variety of food

from local food trucks and beverages for purchase from

[Pollyanna Brewing & Distilling](#) and [Waterman Winery & Vineyards](#).

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Additional invitation images and copy:



Mission's Grove is Back

Get ready for another season of football and fun at Mission's Grove! Join your fellow NIU alumni and friends before select home games for this one-of-a-kind tailgating experience. Mission's Grove will once again feature alumni-owned [Pollyanna Brewing & Distilling](#) and [Waterman Winery & Vineyards](#), along with a variety of unique and eclectic food trucks that will appeal to all ages. Admission to Mission's Grove is always **free**!

[Read more](#) →



Website

- <https://www.myniu.com/missionsgrove>

Appendix C: Budget

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Description of Expense	Amount
Two 20' x 20' Tents for Featured Partners, six 6' x 30" Banquet Table, and twelve White Folding Chairs with charges & fees	\$1,148.49
Total	\$1,148.49

Appendix D: Photo of Mission's Grove

