

Thank you for your interest in the Athenian Community project! It's kept students in my school connected and maintained a degree of normalcy after the abrupt switch to distance learning. I've worked on it for several months so far throughout the pandemic, and I'm really pleased with the positive impact it has had on my community. See [studentcommunity.kaveergera.com](http://studentcommunity.kaveergera.com) for more information.

Below are some testimonials from students who use Athenian Community:

"I found Athenian Community immensely useful for getting help for my classes. I feel like this server is the best alternative out there in lieu of being able to talk to my classmates in person. I am able to talk to people just in a certain class, or my whole grade, via voice or text. All of these options have definitely been extremely facilitative and salutary."

"Athenian Community connected me with many students, both within my grade and with other grades, and kept me entertained during the boring pandemic. The events we had, such as playing video games and trivia, were especially entertaining."

"Athenian Community helped me get back interactions between classes with my classmates that we have all been missing since we started distance learning. I have also talked to many students online who I never talked to in school."

Below is my account of the inception of Athenian Community (as of May 2021):

Towards the end of ninth grade, my school first transitioned to virtual learning due to the pandemic. Back then, there was still a sense of novelty; there were only a few more months until summer and it was difficult to truly comprehend that the pandemic could last for over a year. After ninth grade, we had summer break, but eventually it was time to start school again in late September. Once tenth grade started, the severity of the situation really hit me. I thought, "Whoa, we're going to be stuck at home doing this virtual school thing forever." There was no end in sight. The reality of the pandemic and the virtual school that came along with it was unmistakable and overwhelming. However, pretty quickly after the beginning of tenth grade and the 2020-2021 school year, I noticed a neglected problem. Normally, when you're at school, there's an opportunity for connection that's often overlooked but is quite valuable. When you're leaving math class, you can ask the person next to you, "Oh, what did you get for question 3?" or "What did the teacher say the homework was?" or "When did he say the quiz was?" or "Do you know if transformations of sinusoids are going to be on the test?". That casual connection had been abruptly and unceremoniously turned off like a binary switch when we started virtual school. If you had a question like that, maybe you could text your group of a few friends, but they're often not in the same class as you and, even if you are in the same class, there are far fewer people you can ask. Only one or two people are available to you, instead of the whole group. You could email your teacher or your class, but email is far from well suited for this kind of casual conversation. Firstly, you may not want to email your teacher because you don't want them to get the impression that you weren't paying attention in class. Emailing another

classmate is quite a pointed form of communication and can be rude or awkward, especially if you don't know them well. If you email the entire class, your emails can be disruptive and clutter their inbox, but if you email one person, there's a significantly smaller chance they will know the answer to your question. There was no good existing solution to this problem that had suddenly arisen. So I, using a platform called Discord, created a place that I thought would be able to replace that lost casual communication. While Discord servers can be very simple, Athenian Community quickly grew in complexity and features. When students first join, which they do by following a web link, they are presented with a list of classes, and prompted to select the ones they are enrolled in. Based on their selections, they are given access to text channels (places where people can chat with each other). Athenian Community includes channels for nearly all of the most popular classes, and even includes channels for grade levels and clubs. Each channel has unique permission settings which allow the students who are in specific classes to view and chat in the channels. Athenian Community includes bots, which are automated tools made by various developers which execute commands upon request, for a myriad of useful tasks. The math bot can act as a calculator, the chemistry bot can provide atomic mass values for an element, the translation bot can tell you what "pickup truck" is in Spanish, and a great deal more. The project also has plenty of other features, including an automated suggestions box that gives users the ability to vote on suggestions. Another of Athenian Community's strengths is its clear organization and tenacious infrastructure, which give Athenian Community the ability to respond effectively and consistently to any issues which may arise. The project has a clear and visible set of rules, along with an automated report system for rule-violations (though we haven't had any problems with rule-violations thus far). It also has a robust, largely automated disciplinary system, along with thorough and capable administration and moderation teams which have grown along with the project.

I first conceived of the idea to replace lost casual conversation in October of 2020 and, after working on it for several weeks and enlisting some friends to help me, was ready to launch a few weeks later. Since its launch, I've spent countless hours improving and adding features to the project. In the beginning, the project included a few of my friends and me. Now, in May 2021, we have over 100 members, with students from all four grades in my high school. We even have a *majority* of the 10th grade. In the future, I hope to grow the existing project at my school and expand the idea and structure to other schools, because I think it can have a genuine positive impact on students. The Athenian Community project has quite effectively helped to repair the sudden absence of casual conversation at school, even as we have transitioned to socially distanced in-person school, because the masks, distancing, and limited exposure still inhibit truly natural social interaction. Even though Athenian Community was invented as a result of the pandemic, I believe its usefulness, versatility, and convenience will enable it to continue to be useful to students even after the pandemic subsides, and the positive impact it has had on over 100 students (so far) has made the project a joy to create.

*Account written by Kaveer Gera.*