

Secrets of Success from Top College Drumlines

By Paul Buyer

Have you ever wondered how the best drumlines achieve excellence? What are their secrets to success? To stay on the cutting edge of any profession, it is always valuable to find out how everybody else does it. In fall 2007, I was on sabbatical visiting seven college marching bands around the country doing research on how their drumlines achieve performance excellence. Spending roughly a week at each school, I attended rehearsals, meetings, and football games and interviewed the band directors, drumline instructors, and section leaders. For three months I observed how other percussion instructors and band directors rehearse, teach, lead, and communicate with their bands and drumlines.

I was most interested in learning how other bands rehearsed and prepared for game day. My purpose was to learn about each drumline's goals, expectations, leadership style, practice habits, rehearsal techniques, rehearsal schedule, repertoire, facilities, instrumentation, and traditions.

SELECTING THE BANDS

With over 20 bands on my initial list, I decided to choose seven schools based on their home football schedules, diversity in location, athletic conference, marching band tradition, and reputation for having an excellent marching band. What evolved was a list of schools that I believe are seven of the top college marching bands and drumlines in the country.

They are:

Louisiana State University
University of Alabama
Western Carolina University
Michigan State University
Ohio State University
University of North Texas
University of Arizona

After deciding on the schools I wanted to visit, I wrote a formal letter to each band director and drumline instructor soliciting interest. I am happy to say that all the schools agreed to host me, and no one declined my request. I then composed a detailed itinerary for each school including rehearsal schedules, interviews, and clinics, and then communicated at length with each band director throughout the planning process. I was intent on not being a



bother, as I was fully aware of how busy the directors were going to be during the season. The only thing I asked for, in addition to their time, was a parking pass.

FIVE FACTORS INFLUENCING EXCELLENCE

After traveling to seven beautiful campuses, conducting over 20 inspiring interviews, and becoming part of each band's culture for a week, I discovered my research could be summarized into "Five Factors Influencing Excellence":

1. Culture
2. Staff and Student Leadership
3. Rehearsal Time
4. Number of Shows
5. Competitive Auditions

These factors are the main reasons why, I believe, college bands and drumlines achieve excellence or fall short of it. For the purposes of this article, I have included a portion of my research from the 2007 season. I will also highlight one factor influencing excellence within each band program.

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

- 5-6 shows
- 325 band members, 20% music majors, 24,000 undergraduate students
- No marching band requirement for majors

Factor #2 – Staff and Student Leadership

When describing his leadership style with the Tiger Band, LSU Director of Bands Frank Wickes says it's important to put the ownership on the students. "Having them take ownership in the band and exhibit the pride that they feel as leaders and as returning members is what we want them to experience," explains Wickes. "We want them to raise the standards of that citizenship and make everybody responsible for their preparation and for their actions, and to wear the uniform with pride. The student leadership is pretty special here."

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

- Band rehearses M-F 4:00–5:30 P.M.
- Drumline rehearses M-F 3:30–4:20 P.M. and W 6:30–9:30 P.M.
- 400 band members, 15% music majors, 21,000 undergraduate students

Factor #2 – Staff and Student Leadership

Head Drumline Instructor Neal Flum is proud to say his leadership style has been shaped and influenced by DCI Hall of Famer Thom Hannum, Associate Director of Bands and Percussion Instructor at the University of Massachusetts. Flum explains, "In keeping with Thom Hannum's work at UMASS, the big thing we focus on at Alabama is 'Role Model Leadership.' You don't really need to say

anything. You don't really need to ask anything. You just need to perform in a manner that is an excellent example, hoping that they'll follow that example. Role Model Leadership includes being on time, working hard, and exhibiting passion, commitment, and respect. If I succeed at those things, I expect my students to do the same."

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

- 1 show
- 300 band members, 32% music majors, 7,100 undergraduate students
- Instrumentation: 10 Snare, 5 Tenors, 6 Basses, 12 Cymbals, 15 Pit

Factor #4 – Number of Shows

At Western Carolina, percussion instructor Matt Henley explained their one-show philosophy: "Our number-one goal is to prepare our music education majors for the real world as a high school band director. Since most high school band programs compete and only do one show, our students will be prepared for that. Our second goal is to give our music education majors, student coordinators, and staff teaching and administration experience running a band program. Another important goal we have is to perfect a performance, achieve a high level of excellence and quality, and give the students a strong sense of accomplishment. We also found that our football crowd loves our show, and they seem to appreciate the quality and enjoy seeing what new things have been added to the show each week. We also do one show to give the band what they want in terms of a very difficult musical book. Finally, we do it for recruiting. We host our contest, the Tournament of Champions, and also do exhibitions. The students in the band love [the show] and the crowd loves it, too."

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

- Band rehearses M–F 4:30–6:00 P.M. and M 7:00–9:00 P.M.
- Drumline rehearses MWF 3:30–4:30 P.M.
- Game day rehearsal lasts 2 hours/drumline meets 60 minutes prior

Factor #1 – Culture

There was something about the way Michigan State rehearsed. I couldn't put my finger on it until the Saturday morning rehearsal on game day. After practice was over, I went up to one of the cymbal players and commented, "I'm really impressed with how consistent your work ethic is. Every time you rehearsed something, it was done at a high level. Every time! I was waiting for you guys to relax." After giving me his full attention and catching his breath, he simply responded, "Not the Spartans." After that brief but powerful exchange, I realized this work ethic is not only embraced, but imbedded in the culture of the Michigan State band members. To put it

simply, this is how they do things, and this is the only way they know how to rehearse.

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

- Band rehearses M–F 4:00–6:00pm
- 7 shows
- Instrumentation: 14 Snare, 4 Tenors, 4 Basses, 5 Cymbals, 0 Pit

Factor #5 – Competitive Auditions

The practice habits and work ethic at Ohio State are driven by two great traditions: challenges and music checks. Challenges occur every Monday and allow alternates to challenge for a spot in the historic pregame show. Challenges take place on the practice field and test marching and playing ability. I had the chance to observe the challenges and was thoroughly impressed with the level of discipline, desire, and passion these students put forth as they challenged for a spot. They all gave their best effort and left everything they had on the field.

Tenor section leader Justin Argentine adds, "We pride ourselves in discipline, tradition, and execution. I think you would be amazed at what it takes to get into the band, and what everybody out there has to show to walk in these doors."

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

- 2–3 shows
- 260 band members, 80% music majors, 27,000 undergraduate students
- Three-year marching band requirement for majors

Factor #1 – Culture

At North Texas, band director Nick Williams says, "The things that we talk about all the time are do the right thing even though no one's watching, and respecting each other, the process, and everyone who's involved in the process." The other thing is work ethic. One of Williams' favorite quotes is, "You don't get to choose when to be great." This applies to consistency and coming to practice every day ready to work and ready to improve. Sometimes students make a decision not to work hard, for whatever reason. "If you do that in the real world," says Williams, "you get fired. If you don't get fired, you don't get raises or you don't get promotions."

PAUL RENNICK

One of the highlights of my travels was interviewing Paul Rennick, director of the 14-time PAS Champion University of North Texas Indoor Drumline. One of the great stories Paul shared with me was about a competition he judged where he noticed an extra stick bag attached to the snare drums at the two-o'clock position (too far away to use for sticks). He later became aware that there was a 12-inch ruler sticking up from the bag with heavily lined

markings for 3, 6, 9, and 12 inches. Needless to say, this incident made a lasting impression on him. He was shocked that an instructor would take teaching technique to such an extreme. Rennick is very humble and is sincerely amazed at the momentum some of the trends have gained in the marching percussion activity.

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

- Band rehearses MWF 3:00–5:00 P.M., F 7:00–10:00 P.M., Sat. 8:00 A.M.–12:00 P.M.
- 1 show
- 270 band members, 15% music majors, 29,000 undergraduate students

Factor #3 – Rehearsal Time

Ready and eager to begin the final week of my journey, I discovered my first day in Tucson was Veteran's Day, canceling classes at the University of Arizona. I decided to take advantage of my day off and play golf with my dad and former professor, Gary Cook, planning to resume my research the following day. When I arrived at the first rehearsal, I was told that the UA Drumline had called a two-hour sectional on Veteran's Day to help prepare for their upcoming performance. That was all I needed to know about the Arizona drumline's work ethic and practice habits. I thought to myself, "How many other college drumlines would call a sectional on a day that classes were canceled?"

Director Jay Rees impresses upon his band that, "If you want to be really good, you have to have sectionals all the time. I mean, can you think of a time when there's nothing else to work on?"

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

This article touches on just a few of the strategies, philosophies, and secrets of success from band directors, percussion educators, and student leaders at the top of the college marching band activity. For a complete account of my sabbatical research, my new book, *Marching Bands and Drumlines: Secrets of Success from the Best of the Best*, was published by Meredith Music Publications in April. Topics include setting goals, establishing expectations, teaching life lessons, studying leadership styles, instilling motivation, developing practice habits, building musicianship, evaluating recruiting and retention, and a word for the educator. Permission was granted by Meredith Music Publications to use excerpts from the book in this article.

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