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Rachel Ann Lindsay for CASE

## Sour Notes

*When fight songs and alma maters spark controversy*

By *Dan Hanson*

It's a cool fall day in "The Big House" on the campus of the University of Michigan. College football's largest stadium can barely contain the 110,000 screaming fans as the Wolverines battle cross-state rival Michigan State University. In the second quarter, U-M tight end Martell Webb hauls in a pass from quarterback Denard Robinson for a touchdown, and the U-M band launches into a blistering rendition of "The Victors."

Fight songs such as "The Victors" and "Notre Dame Victory March" have become part of the American music lexicon. Along with their sister songs, alma maters, they stir memories of carefree college days, elicit feelings of pride, and sometimes—especially fight songs—poke fun at athletic foes. They are the embodiment of tradition at U.S. colleges and universities.

However, not all fight songs and alma maters are in perfect harmony with students, alumni, or the public. In recent years, some fight songs have devolved into fighting words, and alma maters have become lightning rods for controversy, demanding the time and attention of college and university alumni relations and public relations directors.

### From Dixie with love

"These are not the kinds of crises people plan for," says Jim Ebel, chief marketing officer at The University of Mississippi. Just months after Ebel arrived at Ole Miss in July 2009, the university found itself at the center of a controversy over one of the university's spirit songs, "From Dixie with Love," a combination of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Dixie."

In recent years, many in the student section at athletic events had been chanting "the South will rise again" during a portion of the song. The phrase, which has roots in the segregationist South, was a budding tradition, and in an October 2009 letter to the university community, Ole Miss Chancellor Dan Jones appealed to the community to cease chanting the phrase, or he would "ask the band to discontinue the music that triggers it."

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However, the chanting continued and, as the controversy grew, the university received hate mail and angry calls from some alumni and students who viewed the song—if not the chant—as a cherished tradition and were not happy with the threat to discontinue playing it. The national news media also picked up the story, and the Ku Klux Klan even held a small rally (four members) on the Ole Miss campus in support of the song.

In the end, some clever rescoring of the song has kept "From Dixie with Love" a fan favorite at games but doesn't provide fans with an opportunity to chant the unintended lyrics.

Though no one plans for a controversy over a fight song or alma mater, Ebel says having a crisis communications plan is essential for such circumstances. "It helps leadership throughout the campus look at the issue from the eyes of how the media might interpret it," Ebel explains. "We look at who the target audience is and come up with four or five key talking points so that everybody stays on the same page."

"The talking points really helped," says Tim Walsh, executive director of alumni affairs at Ole Miss, "because some of the exchanges got heated. It was something I could always refer to and keep myself on message and not get distracted."

However, the most important factor in the university's response to this matter was the willingness of Chancellor Jones to meet with alumni and student groups and listen to their concerns—and complaints—personally, Walsh says.

"Our chancellor took the time to have conference calls with the officers of our alumni association. He also spoke to our full board of directors. He spent an entire morning with our board about this issue, and they really appreciated his openness, honesty, and being accessible to them," Walsh says.

## **Hail, Pomona, hail**

There are no offensive lyrics or culturally insensitive chants associated with the Pomona College alma mater. However, the history of the song caused a stir at this small, liberal arts college in Claremont, Calif., where, according to the institution's website, "ivy and palm trees coexist under habitually sunny skies."

It was no secret that the alma mater, "Hail, Pomona, Hail," was written as the final number of a blackface minstrel show performed at the college in 1910. However, when fliers were posted anonymously on campus during Family Weekend in February 2008 announcing the song's origins to a new generation of students, reaction was strong, according to Cynthia Peters, director of media relations for Pomona College.

"The information was published in the *Pomona College Magazine* in 2002 and available online, but for many people—especially students—this was new information," Peters explains. "The on-campus community generally wanted the alma mater suspended."

As a liberal arts college dedicated to discussing issues in an open forum, Pomona's leaders decided to turn the controversy into a learning opportunity for the campus community. A panel, which included college President David W. Oxtoby, two professors, a member of the alumni board, and the student body president, convened during Alumni Weekend in May 2008 to discuss the issue.

Shortly afterward, Oxtoby wrote a letter to alumni announcing that the alma mater would be suspended from official college events pending an investigation into the song's history by the newly formed Committee on College Songs. The letter also called on alumni to share their thoughts on the issue with the committee.

According to Nancy Treser-Osgood, director of alumni relations for Pomona, the college received more than 800 pieces of correspondence from alumni, including more than 400 to the committee, 200 to various advancement departments, and nearly 200 to the president's office.

"We really opened the door for anyone and everyone to be part of the conversation," Treser-Osgood says. "No one ever said to me, 'I'm upset because you didn't give me a chance to weigh in.'"

After spending almost six months gathering and reviewing feedback from all constituencies and examining the lyrics, the Committee on College Songs delivered its report to President Oxtoby, recommending that the song be decertified as the alma mater but allowed at alumni events. The

president decided on a different compromise and affirmed "Hail, Pomona, Hail" as the alma mater, "based on a conviction that traditions—like people—should be judged on their merits, not on the basis of their historical associations." However, because of the concerns of the student community, the song would not be sung at convocation or commencement.

"I think that some people will continue to cling to this issue for a long time," Treser-Osgood says, "but we can still sing it at alumni weekend. With the exception of the choral groups, I don't think any students miss it at commencement or convocation."

## Hear the roar

At Widener University in Pennsylvania, controversy and angry alumni predated the creation of a fight song and alma mater; the hope was that these songs could help heal some alumni wounds by honoring the institution's past.

In 1972, at the tail end of the Vietnam War, the board of what was then PMC Colleges—a combination of Pennsylvania Military College and its civilian counterpart Penn Morton College—made the difficult decision to disband the corps of cadets of the military college and become a civilian institution under the name *Widener*.

Today, nearly four decades later, many Pennsylvania Military College graduates refuse to set foot on the suburban Philadelphia campus or take part in alumni events despite numerous efforts by the university to honor their traditions and recognize their contributions to the institution's history.

Widener President James T. Harris III approached Cedric Adderley, an accomplished composer and American Council on Education Fellow at the university, about penning a fight song for Widener, stipulating that the song should pay tribute to the institution's history as Pennsylvania Military College.

"We wanted a spirited fight song that would represent the university today as well as honor those who cherish their memories as Pennsylvania Military College cadets," says Harris.

The song Adderley composed, "Hear the Roar!" both sings the praises of the Widener Pride and pays tribute to the "mighty men of PMC."

"Alumni were happy to hear the new fight song; they really loved the spirit of the song and how it honors the university's past as PMC on up to the present," says Tina Phillips, director of alumni engagement for Widener. "The students, faculty, and staff really seem to enjoy it too; it's reflective, spirited, and engaging."

## The final verse

As with most campus community crises, alumni and students complain because they care. In one of the more than 800 e-mails, calls, and letters that Pomona College received from alumni, students, faculty, and staff about the alma mater, alumnus Robert Michael '66 summed up the thoughts of many of his fellow alumni: "I love Pomona. If I didn't, I wouldn't react so strongly to a song."

Treser-Osgood, herself a Pomona College alumna, had to keep reminding herself of that. She recalled one alumnus who yelled at her on the phone for more than 30 minutes. She advises others in her position not to take it personally.

"You need to be able to keep your focus and realize that the anger is not directed at you. You need to make sure that you're able to keep an unbiased view through the process and believe in and articulate the final decision even though you may not agree with it."

Walsh of Ole Miss was a bit more philosophical about the role that such traditions play at a university. "I hope that in the future [disgruntled alumni] will realize that Ole Miss is people; it's not songs or mascots. That's really what makes any university—it's the people."

## About the Author

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Dan Hanson is the director of public relations at Widener University in Pennsylvania.

## Comments

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