

The Myth Behind the Mask: Blue Crew Secret Spirit Society at The University of Toledo - Recollections of a Founder

Donovan Thomas Nichols¹⁰

Abstract

This article traces the history of the origins and evolution of Blue Crew, a secret spirit society at The University of Toledo (UToledo), through the recollections of one of the organization's co-founders. Secret societies have existed on U.S. college campuses since 1750; however, Blue Crew's unique characteristics and dedication to enhancing school spirit set it apart from other institutions' secret societies. Founded in 2000, Blue Crew consists of 10 student members whose identities are hidden behind masks, wigs, and overalls. This secret society is devoted to building community and improving the campus culture by promoting university traditions. This article provides a rare glimpse at the organization's beginnings and its positive influence on campus. The co-founder's firsthand account pairs with archival resources to detail the creation, development, and unique characteristics of Blue Crew, including its purpose, name origins, hidden identities, distinct uniforms, "demasking" process, and challenges experienced throughout the years. Today, Blue Crew is a thriving society with over 130 total initiated members, an alumni association, and an endowment fund that financially supports its members and activities.

Keywords: Blue Crew, secret society, school spirit, campus traditions, The University of Toledo

While The University of Toledo (UToledo) features many time-honored traditions, one of its student organizations captures the attention with its mysterious aura and irresistible appeal. Blue Crew is a secret spirit society that was founded in 2000 to enhance school spirit and excitement at UToledo. Over its first quarter century of existence, this student organization of anonymous

¹⁰ Donovan T. Nichols is a Ph.D. student in the Higher Education Program in the Department of Educational Studies at The University of Toledo. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to donovan.nichols@utoledo.edu

Figure 1

Blue Crew's Co-Founder Donovan Nichols as "Hollywood"



Note: "Hollywood" dressed for the Blue Crew alumni game at the UToledo basketball game on November 25, 2014. Photograph provided by Donovan Nichols.

members has evolved into a well-known entity on campus with a thriving alumni association. The Blue Crew masked student-members can be seen at numerous events and activities, always bringing energy and firing up the crowd. Through its members' dedication and activities, Blue Crew has gradually bloomed into a fun campus tradition that is revered by students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors, and community members, collectively known as "Toledo Rockets." My connection with Blue Crew began in my freshman year of college as a founding member of the organization. For four years, I served as an active member of Blue Crew under the assumed nickname "Hollywood" (Figure 1). This article details the history of Blue Crew by utilizing stories found in institutional documents, archival sources, and, above all, my personal recollections as a co-founder of Blue Crew secret society.

Blue Crew is a 10-member secret spirit society consisting of students at The University of Toledo who are dedicated to instituting, reviving, and maintaining UToledo traditions (The University of Toledo, 2016). The purpose of this student organization is to "build a strong sense of community within the entire University that branches from a select circle of individuals who display exceptional UT spirit" (Nichols & Rodriguez, 2000). Blue Crew strives to "represent the Rockets of today, Alumni of the past, and Spirit of the future" (Nichols & Rodriguez, 2000). The organization embodies extraordinary school

spirit at events and activities on campus and throughout the world. Furthermore, Blue Crew aims to stimulate involvement in UToledo's traditions and promote opportunities for students to enjoy their college experience.

Mysterious aspects of Blue Crew have intrigued non-members for years, such as its members' hidden identities, unknown on-campus office location, and secret rituals. While there will always be certain aspects of the organization that will remain secret, some information about the veiled group has been revealed to the public over the years. This article reviews demasked facts and shares stories on the creation of Blue Crew, the reason behind their hidden identities and distinct uniforms, the ways in which Blue Crew became a tradition, the challenges the organization overcame, the establishment of the Blue Crew Alumni Association, and the positive influence Blue Crew has had on UToledo. Established at the turn of the millennium, Blue Crew is a unique student organization that was created to meet a specific need at UToledo, to boost school spirit. The mystery of the group has played a significant role in its success as well as its challenges. The secrecy has allowed its members to bond over a common experience; however, it has sometimes unintentionally caused non-members to feel excluded. Ultimately, Blue Crew believes the benefits of their secrecy outweigh the cost of exclusion. This article shares the story of Blue Crew.

Secret Societies in Higher Education

Secret societies have been a part of the collegiate experience in the United States for over 270 years. The oldest-known secret society was founded in 1750 at the College of William and Mary as the F.H.C. Society, also known as the Flat Hat Club (William & Mary, 2024; The Flat Hat, n.d.). According to William & Mary (2014), a famous member of the Flat Hat Club was Thomas Jefferson. While the F.H.C. Society temporarily disbanded during the American Revolution, a new secret society, called Phi Beta Kappa, was founded in 1776 at the College of William & Mary (Nowicki, 2014; The Flat Hat, n.d.). Phi Beta Kappa originated as a secret debating society "to give members the freedom to discuss any topic they chose, no matter how controversial" (The Phi Beta Kappa Society, n.d., para. 3). Recognized as the first collegiate fraternity, Phi Beta Kappa became the model for other Greek letter fraternities and sororities. The reputation as the most famous and most powerful collegiate secret society,

however, has gone to Skull and Bones, founded at Yale University in 1832 (Leung, 2003; Nowicki, 2014). Due to their mystery and reputation, the Bonesmen, as they are known, served as the premise for a movie called “The Skulls” (Leung, 2003; Nowicki, 2014). According to a CBS News 60 Minutes story (Leung, 2003), this notorious secret society’s members have included some of the most powerful individuals of the 20th and 21st century such as presidents of the United States, Supreme Court justices, high-ranking politicians, spies, and titans of industries. Knowledge of the organizations’ power and privilege beyond college that has been shrouded in mystery has caused much distrust of secret societies among non-members (Leung, 2003).

While non-members may know that secret societies exist, only the society members know the true nature and inner workings of their mysterious organizations. Even though some aspects of a secret society’s information may be public, there is still much that is kept secret. According to Daraul (1962), “not all secret societies are entirely secret” (p. 9). Many of their members may be known, their objectives may be stated publicly, or their teachings may be available to all. Simultaneously, these societies shroud select information and knowledge in mystery to non-members and only share these secrets internally. Secret societies tend to contain exclusivity of membership; they use signs, passwords, and codes; they have an objective; and their members share experiences of the rituals and belief of the society (Daraul, 1962). Due to the mystery of these organizations, non-members may be skeptical or hold negative feelings towards secret societies. Daraul expresses that it is “undesirable activities” and “their very air of mystery” which gives secret societies a reputation of being “strange,” “abnormal,” and “anti-social” (p. 10). Although the secrecy of these organizations may cause a negative reputation with non-members, these societies remain secret because of the positive bond that insider knowledge creates among their members. The connection that members feel with each other and the organization aid in a secret society’s sustained existence on campus. An organization’s longevity may help turn a secret society into a campus tradition.

Traditions at higher education institutions connect one generation of students to the next creating in the process a stronger university culture. According to Merriam-Webster (2024), tradition is “the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one

generation to another without written instruction” (def. 2). Different campus traditions include symbols, cultural meanings, myths, ceremonies, and rituals; many of them serve as “cultural makers on college campuses” (Manning, 2000, p. 1). Some examples of campus traditions are fight songs, cheers, homecoming, annual events, mascots, and painting a spirit rock. Support for positive campus traditions helps an institution create positive change within its culture, as well as transform the ways in which individuals view the school. In this light, the primary philosophy behind the establishment of Blue Crew was to influence a positive cultural change on UToledo’s campus by enriching its traditions and increasing school spirit.

The Creation of Blue Crew

My involvement with Blue Crew started in my freshman year at The University of Toledo. Jason Rodriguez and I established Blue Crew out of our desire to help UToledo become a more spirited and vibrant campus. In 2000, as freshmen in the Leadership UT program, we “recognized the lack of a strong presence of school pride on campus” (Sanders, 2018). Therefore, we sought to change UToledo’s culture by creating an entity on campus that would celebrate and honor UToledo traditions while boosting school morale.

To understand how to create a more spirited institution, Rodriguez and I researched current and past campus traditions. Our search pointed us to “a former group in 1995 known as the Rocket Fanatics led by Gregg Dodd” (Sanders, 2018). Rocket Fanatics was a group of spirited students who showed their campus pride by being enthusiastic and cheering at events such as football games. This spirited group was thriving while Dodd was a student; however, after he graduated the student organization eventually dispersed. Utilizing this knowledge, Rodriguez and I vowed to create a new organization that would continue to thrive well past our college days. As a result, we created a secret society that would hide the members’ identities, which in turn would allow the next generation of students to seamlessly continue the organization after the current members graduate.

Our search of secret societies and student organizations throughout the nation and on our campus also gave us ideas on how to create a group that would be different than any other organization in existence. As the major

difference, our society would combine a sense of secrecy (i.e., hidden identities) with a public presence (e.g., speaking with people, attending events, and cheering loudly). The purpose of creating a hidden yet public presence was to overcome the natural exclusivity of a secret organization. Unlike other secret societies that may use secrecy to be purposely exclusionary, Blue Crew would utilize secrecy as a cue to its members to remain humble and remember that the organization and presence of school spirit would remain more important than any individual recognition. In addition, Blue Crew was designed to regularly interact with people to break down barriers and remain inclusive even though secret societies are naturally exclusionary. Allowing Blue Crew members to speak was essential to the purpose of the organization because it would enable the members to pass along spirit, history, and traditions orally through conversations with others.

Indeed, today, Blue Crew members not only attend events such as pep rallies and bonfires, but they also visit classes to teach UToledo chants, songs, and traditions (Figure 2) and randomly walk around campus to interact with students, faculty, and staff. And Blue Crew's hidden yet public presence is unique from other secret societies and student organizations in that other groups are typically either secret or vocal, but not both. For instance, students

Figure 2

Blue Crew and a University of Toledo Class, 2017



Note: Blue Crew teaching chants and traditions to a class of UToledo first-year students. Photograph by Donovan Nichols.

who serve as college mascots typically have their identities hidden but are not allowed to talk while in costume. On the other hand, members in spirit groups such as Rocket Fanatics and cheerleaders do not hide their personal identities and are encouraged to talk and cheer while in public. Additionally, student groups such as fraternities, sororities, and Blue Key at UToledo are deemed to be secret societies because they conduct secret rituals; however, they openly display their membership through avenues such as wearing clothing with the organization's logo. Similar to Blue Crew, Blue Key's purpose is to honor campus history and

traditions (The University of Toledo, n.d.). However, unlike Blue Crew, the organization's members are publicly known, and they do not run around at sporting events to get the crowd excited about the game. Some secret societies such as Skull and Bones hide in the shadows and attempt to be secret and non-vocal by keeping their membership little known and refusing to speak publicly about the organization (Leung, 2003). While various secret societies and organizations have similarities to Blue Crew, no one organization contains the same multitude of characteristics as Blue Crew.

The organization that most resembles Blue Crew's structure and vision is located at Bowling Green State University – an institution that is ironically The University of Toledo's biggest sports rival. According to Bowling Green State University (BGSU; n.d.), a secret society called SICSIC was founded in 1946 to promote school spirit. Similar to Blue Crew, SICSIC members wear masks to hide their identities and promote campus traditions; however, unlike Blue Crew, SICSIC members do not talk nor vocally cheer at sporting events. In addition, SICSIC's membership is limited to six students, including two sophomores, two juniors, and two seniors (BGSU, n.d.) whereas Blue Crew has 10 members and students can join the organization during any year of their college career when a current member graduates and leaves the organization (Nichols & Rodriguez, 2000). Finally, SICSIC is a secret society that was created by the BGSU president and overseen by university staff, while Blue Crew was created by students and is fully managed by students. In sum, while various secret societies may seem similar to Blue Crew in certain ways, Blue Crew remains unique. It is a secret spirit society with hidden member identities whose purpose is to honor and promote UToledo's history and traditions, cheer loudly at sporting events to excite the crowd, encourage non-members to demonstrate their spirit for the institution, promote UToledo pride beyond campus, and involve all Toledo Rockets through diverse interactions and avenues in order to be inclusive of non-members even though the organization's secret membership is naturally exclusionary.

Origin of the Name "Blue Crew"

Rodriguez and I did not start our plans with a specific name in mind. The name Blue Crew was selected after we considered numerous potential names

including Blue Dudes, Yellow Fellows, Toledo Ten Society, Unity Ten, Rocket Boosters, Toledo Fros, Might Flight, and Phantom Rockets. Originally, Blue Crew was the name of a marketing campaign idea created by student Chad Worthington during his candidacy for UToledo Student Government President in 2000. After Worthington did not win the election, Rodriguez and I gained permission from him to use the name Blue Crew for our new student organization (Nichols, 2018).

Hidden Identities and the Uniform

Members of Blue Crew remain anonymous to the public throughout their entire active membership. They wear blue and yellow wigs, high-top Converse All-Stars shoes, gold masks, and painter's overalls (Latimer, C., 2017). The purpose of their hidden identities is defined in the society's Constitution, which

states, "Blue Crew is masked in order to exemplify the notion that this organization is not a society of the spirited people, but a guild that represents the spirit which lies within each individual Rocket" (Nichols & Rodriguez, 2000). This secret society's members "wear the masks to signify that being part of the Blue Crew isn't about the individual" (ViÅaal, 2013); rather, as a student journalist reported, "It's about the [UToledo] spirit...always being present" (Sanders, 2018). In addition, the mystery of the mask adds to the fun and intrigue of the organization because anyone could be behind the mask.

Figure 3

Blue Crew's Original White Uniforms, 2000



Note: Blue Crew posing with mascots, Rocky the Rocket and Muddy the Mud Hen, at the 2000 Homecoming Parade. White overalls were the first uniform for the organization during the 2000-2001 academic year. Photograph provided by Donovan Nichols.

The original 10 members of Blue Crew wore white uniforms (Figure 3) donated by Big Boy Restaurants. At the time, we gladly accepted the donated overalls even though they were not blue as we had desired. In our infancy, the

group did not have any money to buy uniforms and the uniforms were essential to the organization's secrecy. In our second year of existence, after receiving a university budget, Blue Crew bought new outfits and appeared for the first time in blue overalls on August 30, 2001 (Figure 4). We chose overalls as part of the uniform to signal that the Blue Crew members were always ready to work hard to ignite the pride in every Rocket. However, beyond the overalls uniform, each Blue Crew member is encouraged to design their own outfit and add accessories to express their masked persona.

Nicknames are an important aspect of Blue Crew because they help the members remain anonymous. As Viñal (2013) reported in her NBC video coverage, "Each member is hidden under an assumed identity and name." The nickname of each member is selected based on a trait or story regarding the member (Lewis, Tucker, & Woodcock, 2017). For instance, during one member's initiation at the end of singing the UToledo Fight Song he chanted, "T-O-L-D-E-O" (Linder, 2005). When given the chance to redeem himself, he accidentally spelled Toledo incorrectly a second time, so his nickname became "Deo." Blue Crew members callout to each other in public while in uniform, so nicknames were necessary in order to maintain anonymity. The pseudonyms helped protect the identity of each member until they were unveiled.

Demasking

Members may never say they are in Blue Crew until they have been properly unveiled through a process called "demasking" (Nichols & Rodriguez, 2000). When a member of Blue Crew is graduating and/or has fulfilled their commitment to the organization, they are allowed to demask. A student in Blue Crew must participate in the organization for at least four semesters or graduate

Figure 4

Blue Crew's New Blue Uniforms, 2001



Note: Blue Crew's first appearance wearing blue overalls on August 30, 2001. Photograph provided by Donovan Nichols.

from UToledo to become an alumni member of the organization and unveil themselves (Nichols & Rodriguez, 2000). Demasking is a ritual in which the member takes off their mask during an event to reveal their true identity to the public (Lewis et al., 2017). Blue Crew members have demasked at various campus events such as sporting events, student organization awards nights, Songfest, and RockeTHON (i.e., Dance Marathon). For instance, two members were honorably demasked by head coach Tricia Cullop at a UToledo women's basketball game (ViÅal, 2013) and another member was demasked during the third quarter of a UToledo Homecoming football game. Members themselves decide how they want to unveil their real identity to the world.

Blue Crew Becomes a Tradition

Blue Crew's visibility and active engagement has rendered the society into a well-known campus tradition. Blue Crew members have effectively exposed the organization to Rocket fans at numerous events, through word of mouth, and via news coverage. Blue Crew's first day in uniform happened on August 27, 2000 during a new University event called RocketFest (The University of Toledo Athletics, 2001). We spent that day running around UToledo's campus sharing the Rocket spirit with the Toledo community. However, the secret organization's first major public appearance was on September 2, 2000, during a nationally televised UToledo football game vs Penn State (The University of Toledo Athletics, 2001). Blue Crew members, including myself, rode the UToledo Alumni Association bus from Toledo to Happy Valley dressed as regular students. Then, similar to Superman, the students put on their uniforms in a secret location and reappeared as super fans. Blue Crew was exposed to over 94,000 people in person and millions through the TV as they pumped up the small Toledo section in Beaver Stadium and cheered the Rockets onto a 24-6 victory against the Nittany Lions. Blue Crew made its mark as the crazy spirit group that day during the second greatest victory in UToledo football history (Toledo Blade Company, 2017). On that day, the legend of Blue Crew was born; therefore, we consider September 2, 2000 our Founder's Day.

Blue Crew caught the most attention from other UToledo fanatics by attending every home and away football game as well as every home game for men's and women's basketball. During the first two years of Blue Crew's

existence, 2000 and 2001, The University of Toledo football team won 10 games each year and was ranked within the top 25 in the nation in the AP and USA Today/ESPN polls each year (The University of Toledo Athletics, 2015). The football team's success provided not only UToledo with a lot of national exposure, but also Blue Crew. The masked group of spirited students was seen on TV at least once per game and many times the announcers would mention Blue Crew by name and explain the purpose of the organization.

Numerous UToledo offices and staff members played an important role in Blue Crew's development into a campus tradition, including the Office of Student Activities, the Alumni Association, and the Athletics Department. The Office of Student Activities supported Blue Crew in becoming a registered student organization, gaining a budget, and connecting with other student organizations and offices on campus. The Alumni Association invited Blue Crew to its pre-game tailgates and alumni events, which positively presented the new mysterious organization to UToledo alumni and allowed the spirit group to interact with multiple generations of Toledo Rockets. The UToledo Athletics Department played a vital role in allowing Blue Crew to gain exposure and increase Rocket pride. In the infancy of Blue Crew, Athletics allowed the spirit group to run around the sidelines on the football field and in the stands to rally the fans during games. The masked fanatics helped ignite cheers with four of the five largest crowd attendances in Glass Bowl stadium history (The University of Toledo Athletics, 2015). These opportunities helped Blue Crew gain acceptance by the fans and in turn, the fans began seeing Blue Crew as an influential spirit group. Through Blue Crew's connection with the Athletics Department, the organization grew meaningful relationships with the student athletes and coaches. These mutually supportive relationships brought more excitement and spirit to the athletic teams. In addition, the athletes' and coaches' acceptance and promotion of Blue Crew provided validity to the budding organization.

Blue Crew and the Athletics Department have existed in a symbiotic relationship. For instance, the Athletics Department provided Blue Crew with tickets to the Toledo at Temple football game and a hotel stay in return for the group's help. To support athletics, Blue Crew spent two nights before the first UToledo football game of the 2001 season watching the stadium and ensuring that no vandals ruined the new field turf that was installed in the Glass Bowl.

The Athletics Department's public recognition of Blue Crew supported the organization in becoming a well-known spirit entity in Toledo. On November 6, 2001, "for their support to The University of Toledo Athletic Department and for being loyal fans," Blue Crew was honored as the "12th Man" for the UToledo football game (The University of Toledo Athletics, 2001, p. 137). Athletics announced the honor through the stadium speakers and in the game day program, which contained a full-page write-up that described the organization. Moreover, Athletics posted images of the spirit group in their facilities. On the main wall at the entrance of the Larimer Athletic Complex, which is home to the

Figure 5

Blue Crew Picture on the Wall in the UToledo Larimer Athletic Complex, 2014



Note: Photograph by Donovan Nichols.

UToledo football team and academic center, there is a picture of a Blue Crew member directly above the word "Tradition" (Figure 5). All student athletes and coaches see this image when they walk into the building to workout, study, or attend team meetings. Another image of Blue Crew was placed above a food stand in the northwest corner of the Glass Bowl. These images and others like them helped solidify Blue Crew as a known campus tradition.

The organization gained local and national notoriety rapidly within

its first few years of existence and continues to receive exposure. People have interacted with Blue Crew throughout the nation and internationally as organization members traveled to support the Rockets athletic teams at away games. The spirited group has traveled to games in 26 U.S. states, and Washington D.C. In 2018 and 2021, Blue Crew traveled to the Bahamas to cheer for the football team at the Bahamas Bowl. Blue Crew's dedication to UToledo and its Rockets has earned the organization recognition in local and national media sources. The Blade Toledo Magazine (Smith, 2007), UToledo Football programs, UToledo Admissions Brochure, UT News, Toledo Alumni Magazine (The University of Toledo Alumni Association, 2010), UToledo Athletics YouTube (Toledo Rockets, 2013), NBC 24 News (ViÅaal, 2013), Toledo Matters

Podcast (Lewis et al., 2017), Cleveland.com (Lesmerises, 2009), CollegeFootballTour.com (Bauhs, 2017), and SBNation Hustle Belt (Bailey, 2017), have featured news on the society. Nationally, Sports Illustrated and ESPN (Figure 6) have provided extensive coverage as well.

Starting as an organization that mostly attended football and basketball games, Blue Crew has evolved into a spirited group that people expect to see at all major UToledo events and traditions. Through their service to the UToledo community, energetic presence, and years of appearances at various events and in the media, Blue Crew has become more recognized as a constant representation of UToledo's spirit and pride.

Figure 6

Blue Crew on National Television



Note: This football game was one of many times that Blue Crew was shown on national TV (ESPNU, 2013).

Challenges for Blue Crew Over the Years

While Blue Crew is currently a well-functioning, respected organization, the group has not always been viewed in a positive way. The organization has been through countless trials and tribulations over the years. Negative news articles, scary masks, a lack of membership, and getting through security at away athletic events have been a few of the obstacles in the way of Blue Crew's success. Drive, determination, and the will to never give up has helped the organization persist. Perhaps its greatest strength has been its members, all chosen for their utmost dedication to Blue Crew's cause.

Today, most people at UToledo know and respect Blue Crew as a positive force on campus. As Corey Latimer, student reporter for *The Independent Collegian*, stated in his 2017 article about Blue Crew, "They're the craziest ones at every football game, the loudest ones at the pep rallies, the most spirited of us all... they keep us high-spirited and full of school spirit year-round" (para. 1). However, when the organization first started, not only were some individuals not fans of Blue Crew, but a few people directly displayed

negativity towards the group. During Blue Crew's first appearance on campus in 2000, a student said to the group, "Who paid you guys to dress up, nobody on this campus has spirit" (D. Nichols, recollections, March 30, 2001). During the 2001 Homecoming Parade, one fraternity was extremely rude to the group. Multiple men from the fraternity threw candy at Blue Crew and one of the fraternity members even ran after and tackled a Blue Crew member (D. Nichols, recollections, March 30, 2001). In addition, many people would try to steal the Blue Crew members' masks and wigs (Linder, 2005) and some opposing fans would attempt to throw beer on the members.

Beyond physical violence towards the spirit group, written attacks from a student reporter, Matt Sanctis, were published in UT Toledo's school newspaper, *The Independent Collegian*. In one article Sanctis (2000a) stated, "At the top of the all-time list of annoying people...[is] Blue Crew, the overzealous wannabe cheerleaders for UT's football team...I really hate those people." He continued to call the society's members morons and said they "dance around the Glass Bowl like riddalin-addicted monkeys" (Sanctis, 2000a). Although Blue Crew has a strict rule against drinking prior to dressing or while in uniform, the student reporter's misleading analogy of the spirit group to drunken clowns was harmful to the organization's image. In a second article titled "Blue Crew could easily be replaced by drunken clowns," Sanctis (2000b) wrote, "there are a few people who have a little too much pride in their school...and their motivations become a little fanatical and, therefore scary...a perfect example of this is UT's Blue Crew." Sanctis (2000b) continued, "I feel like drunken clowns would be less frightening to small children and the elderly." Reading these negative news articles from this student journalist made me question if I had made a bad decision in starting the organization.

Sanctis' public dislike for the organization created unexpected misinformation and hardships for the group in its infancy. However, his comment about Blue Crew's masks being scary had some validity. A challenge with Blue Crew's hidden identities is that the masks unintentionally have a negative effect on people who have maskphobia, or an irrational fear of masks (Drlogy, 2024). While some children love Blue Crew (Figure 7), other children are scared of their intimidating masks. For instance, one of Blue Crew's members, "Peek-A-Boo," received his nickname when he, as a new member at his first event, tried to play football with a group of kids. A few of the younger

kids screamed and ran away because they saw him as a scary man in a mask (Lewis et al., 2017). Not only are some children scared, but so are adults at times. Student reporter Sanctis (2000b) himself stated, “I know I’m scared of them.” Even though Blue Crew members are smiling under their disguise, people only see a stoic gold mask, which can be scary (Anderson, 2008). Though the look of Blue Crew’s masks has never changed since the organization’s founding, today less individuals are scared of the group because they recognize Blue Crew as a positive spirit organization.

Maintaining enough members to be a student organization at UToledo has been another issue for Blue Crew. At UToledo, a student organization must have at least 10 members to be officially registered. In addition, the number 10 has a secret meaning to Blue Crew, so the organization does not allow itself to have more than 10 active members. Unfortunately, only allowing 10 members in the organization at any time has created two challenges for Blue Crew. The first challenge is that Blue Crew needs to immediately replace members who leave the organization in order to maintain the minimum 10 members required by UToledo. Due to the limited number of membership spots, the second challenge is that the organization needs to be very selective in choosing new members to ensure they only recruit the most positive and dedicated students. Therefore, the organization must be selective, yet ready to bring in a new member at any time. At one point in Blue Crew history, the organization almost dissolved because of a lack of membership. In May 2005, Blue Crew was down to one member, “Deo.” Several members either graduated or left the organization for other reasons and Blue Crew failed to recruit new students to replace the exiting members. To salvage the organization, Blue Crew alumni supported the lone active member in recruiting a full roster of spirited students. Following this challenging situation, the organization worked on a new recruitment process to ensure outgoing members’ spots were filled upon their

Figure 7

Blue Crew with Co-founder Donovan Nichols and His Son, Sawyer



Note: Photograph provided by Donovan Nichols.

exit from the group. As a result, Blue Crew is always on the lookout for potential new members and keeps a list of qualified students they are ready to initiate if an active member leaves the organization. This new process has been essential to the success and longevity of the organization. New members are found in a variety of ways, including in the stands at sporting events, through other student organizations, in class, and around campus. According to the Blue Crew Constitution, members are carefully selected based on the following qualities:

- Displays outstanding leadership abilities.
- Exemplifies pride in themselves, other students, the UT community, the Toledo community, their surroundings, and above all else The Rockets.
- Maintains good character.
- Reveals self-initiative to exhibit their inner pride without external influence. (Nichols & Rodriguez, 2000, p. 2)

On a few occasions in the past, Blue Crew has selected individuals who did not display the organization's high moral values during their active membership. In those cases, such members have been deactivated through a vote of the other active members (Nichols & Rodriguez, 2000). Blue Crew strives "to furnish Rockets with good moral direction, whether it is an outstanding fan on the field or a Good Samaritan in daily life" (Nichols & Rodriguez, 2000). The members of Blue Crew must be good role models and be able to teach others how to be positive Rocket Fanatics (Nichols & Rodriguez, 2000; Stever, 2003). Deactivation occurred more regularly during the early years of the Blue Crew than in recent years as the organization has become better at recruiting more fitting members.

Another major challenge for Blue Crew has been getting through security and into athletic events outside of Toledo. Following the September 11 tragedy and heightened sensitivity to terrorist threats, security officers at a few stadiums have not let Blue Crew into games. Several stadiums have instituted no mask policies, which has hindered Blue Crew from entering events. While the organization contacts the stadium security prior to every game to gain clearance, Blue Crew is not always allowed into every stadium (Lewis et al., 2017). For instance, members of Blue Crew traveled to Ball State University in 2017 and Fresno State University in 2018 for Toledo football games only to be

turned away by security. The students in Blue Crew still travel to games in which masks are not allowed; however, to not reveal their identities they attend as regular students, not Blue Crew. The organization works with the UToledo Athletics Department to gain access into games; however, sometimes even UToledo Athletics does not have the clout or authority to get Blue Crew into all away teams' stadiums.

Blue Crew Alumni Association

Blue Crew members eventually graduate and “go alumni,” but desire to continue supporting their secret spirit society and The University of Toledo. While Blue Crew alumni are no longer active members of the organization, their undying pride for their alma mater remains strong. Over the years, the organization expanded into more than solely a student organization. In 2005, following the graduation of several of the group’s original members, six of them met for the first time to discuss alumni initiatives for the secret society (D.

Nichols, recollections, September 16, 2005). In 2006, Brian Weinblatt, CJ Murawski, and other alumni members formed a Blue Crew Alumni Association (The University of Toledo Foundation, 2017) to provide opportunities for Blue Crew alumni and their families to interact regularly through social activities and initiatives that financially support the active members and future generations, such as the Blue Crew Alumni Association Homecoming Gala (Figure 8). As Sanders (2018)

reported, “Blue Crew has become such a phenomenon that has produced not only a more positively-fueled campus at UT, but also brought people together” (para. 14). The logo for the Blue Crew Alumni Association (Figure 9) displays the alumni’s reverence for the mask and wig as a representation that the group’s legacy is more important than any individual’s success. There have been over

Figure 8

Blue Crew Active and Alumni Members at the Blue Crew Alumni Homecoming Gala, 2017



Note: Photograph provided by Donovan Nichols.

Figure 9*Blue Crew Alumni Association Logo**Note: Logo provided by Donovan Nichols.*

130 members of Blue Crew in the past 25 years. Following their active years, members who met the requirements acquired alumni status. Alumni members tend to remain actively involved with the group because their fellow Blue Crew members become some of their best friends. Members of Blue Crew spend a lot of time together, especially on road trips to

away athletic events, which helps them develop strong bonds with each other. I made many wonderful life-long friendships through my involvement in Blue Crew. For instance, two of the groomsmen in my wedding are Blue Crew alumni. In some cases, Blue Crew members have met their significant other in the organization, got married, and had children. Blue Crew alumni events have become family functions. Children of Blue Crew members grow up around Blue Crew and UToledo by attending sporting events, Homecoming parades, alumni cookouts, and other organization activities. Blue Crew's expansion from a student organization into an alumni organization as well has brought the families of its alumni together, which further strengthens the Blue Crew bonds.

A major responsibility of the Blue Crew Alumni Association has been to raise money to support the active student members. As University of Toledo Foundation records attest, gifts and pledges to the Blue Crew endowed fund continue to grow annually. The endowment, which will exist in perpetuity, assists active members with travel, tickets, uniforms, and other costs (The University of Toledo Foundation, 2017). Financial support from the endowment means a great deal to the current members. A former Blue Crew President known as "J-Soup" during his active years said, "It's rewarding to see an alumni group so committed and involved...this fund will strengthen our efforts in building UT pride" (The University of Toledo Foundation, 2017, p. 2).

Blue Crew's Positive Influence on UToledo

Blue Crew has created a positive influence at UToledo in countless ways. The secret society has heightened people's awareness of various events and

traditions, inspired individuals to be more spirited, motivated kids to attend UToledo, made people smile and laugh, helped people enjoy their UToledo experience more, brought positive media attention to UToledo, and energized fans at athletic events to influence the outcome of games. Children and adults alike have ventured to join the fun and emulated the school pride of Blue Crew by dressing like the spirit crew (Figure 10). An example of Blue Crew motivating a kid to attend UToledo, occurred when a young child named Scott Schwartz got his picture taken with Blue Crew at a basketball game (Figure 11).

From that day forward, Schwartz desired to attend UToledo and join Blue Crew. Approximately one decade later, Schwartz enrolled at UToledo, joined Blue Crew, became president of the organization, and in turn paid it forward by inspiring the next generation of Rocket fans (Figure 12).

Figure 10

A Child Dressed Like Blue Crew for a Football Game, 2015



Note: Photograph by The University of Toledo Photo Services.

Figure 11

Blue Crew with Scott Schwartz, a Child who Loves The University of Toledo and Blue Crew



Note: The child in this photo can be seen as an adult in Figure 12. Photograph provided by Scott Schwartz.

forward by inspiring the next generation of Rocket fans (Figure 12).

Another tangible example where Blue Crew has positively influenced the Toledo Rockets is during athletic games. On multiple occasions Blue Crew has energized Toledo fans and the team when the Rockets were losing. The spirit group invigorated the crowd, which provided the players and coaches with the encouragement they needed to fight back and win games. During the 2001 MAC Championship game versus Marshall, UToledo was losing by over three

touchdowns and hopes of winning were severely diminished. Not willing to give up on the team, Blue Crew ran through the stands of UToledo's Glass Bowl stadium cheering and adding excitement into the crowd. The school spirit of the organization spread amongst the fans and encouraged the football team to stay positive. The team began to make miraculous plays such as kicker Todd France running for a touchdown on a trick play. In the end, Blue Crew was able to do its part in helping inspire the UToledo football team to

overcome a 23-point deficit to win the championship. The positive influence Blue Crew has had on campus continues to be seen in championship moments and every day spirited interactions amongst Toledo Rockets. Blue Crew remains strong and will continue to dedicate itself to leaving the legacy of "igniting a flame of outstanding school spirit inside all [Toledo] Rockets" (Nichols & Rodriguez, 2000).

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Figure 12

Blue Crew Members Who Demasked at UToledo's Songfest with Co-Founder Donovan Nichols, 2022



Note: Scott Schwartz, the child from Figure 11 is the Blue Crew member on the far right. Photograph provided by Donovan Nichols.

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