

Annual Address by President Kitts
August 18, 2020

Good afternoon, colleagues. This is the first time we've ever had to hold this annual meeting in a virtual format. I'm grateful that we have the technology to do so, but I must tell you that Dena and I miss seeing you in person.

Many people had a hand in bringing together today's program. Among them are Renee Vandiver, Regina Sherrill, Olivia Bradford, Provost Alexander, Catherine White and the staff of Human Resources, and Michelle Eubanks and the staff in University Communications and Marketing. Special thanks to these individuals and to all others who assisted.

I would also like to congratulate the service award recipients for 2019-2020. Normally, those recipients are recognized in person at our end-of-year luncheon, but we missed that opportunity this past spring. Seventy-nine of our colleagues reached an employment milestone ranging from 5 years to 35 years of service. And when you add it up, those 79 individuals have accounted for 915 cumulative years of service to the University of North Alabama. That's an amazing total, and I know you join me in congratulating this group.

On the other end of the spectrum are the faculty and staff who have joined us during the past year or who are just now coming on board. To our new colleagues, I'm sorry we are unable to welcome you in person, but please know that we are delighted to have you with us.

Now I'd like to comment briefly about the state of our University. Permit me to begin with the observation that 2020 has been one strange year.

At UNA, our season of challenges actually began at the end of 2019 when our iconic fountain in Harrison Plaza collapsed just before Christmas. Then, in March, the coronavirus pandemic landed on our doorstep in a big way, forcing major changes in our operating schedule. There's an old saying that bad news comes in threes, and for our campus a third shock occurred in June when we

had to say goodbye to Una, the beloved lioness that had called our campus home for most of her 17 years.

But even as we reflect on the disruptions of the past nine months, it's important to note what hasn't changed.

Our university is still standing, and it's still going strong. We graduated a record number of students in the spring, and we set a new enrollment record for summer school. Moreover, to date we've been able to avoid the deep budget cuts, program eliminations, layoffs, and other unpleasanties that have occurred at so many of our sister schools, including some right here in Alabama. We've stayed the course on important initiatives, including the rollout of our first doctoral programs and the fulfillment of key goals in our new Strategic Diversity and Inclusion Plan.

So how do we explain this good fortune? Are we just lucky?

No, colleagues, this isn't luck. Our stability amid the chaos around us is a direct reflection of the hard work that has positioned this university for success. Consider these data points: Over the past five years, we have grown enrollment by 18 percent and moved beyond the 8,000 mark for the first time in our history. Our state funding, while still inadequate compared to our peers, has increased 31 percent courtesy of Project 208, and our endowment has increased by 31 percent as well, a testament to the confidence that our alumni and friends have in this institution.

We've opened new programs and built new buildings. We've engaged with our region as never before, and we have pushed our University into national conversations by emerging as a leader in Fulbright Awards, international programming, and initiatives in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The net effect of these efforts – your efforts – is that it has created powerful momentum that has served this institution well in these challenging times. The word is out about the good things going on here, and student interest in UNA continues to grow.

Our most recent reports show us trending up in headcount and up in credit hour production over last fall's record class. If you've been reading the news about what's going on elsewhere, you will know that's nothing short of amazing, and I thank all of you for your part in generating these great outcomes. It's a team effort.

Tomorrow morning classes will take place on our campus for the first time in 160 days, and they will launch under some of the most unusual conditions in our history. Are things going to be a little different this fall? Of course. But as a campus community we are smart, tough, and resilient. We're going to see this thing through, and we're going to do the job that this University was put here to do. And if we continue to work together, we'll set more records, serve our students well, and do our part to avoid financial disruptions.

As you go about navigating the changes that have been thrust upon us by the pandemic, know that Dena and I are doing the same thing. We've been working and living on this campus every day since the pandemic hit. We're trying to plan events this fall that meet our campus guidelines but also keep us connected to you, our students, and our alumni and friends. That's important. And on Thursday morning, I'll be heading up to the Commons to greet my students and teach a traditional, face-to-face class that meets twice a week.

As issues arise, which they surely will, my pledge is that we will continue to be thoughtful, inclusive, and deliberative in our decision making. We have used the shared governance system to listen to you, and we will continue to do so, just as we will continue to consult with experts on and off campus to stay abreast of developments and best practices.

I'll wrap up these remarks with the observation that our forebears handed us the gift of this wonderful, beautiful, and historic institution, now in its 190th year. That's a precious gift, and it's one that we must nurture and protect. With your help, we can do that, and UNA will continue to prosper. Years from now, my guess is that some future generation will look back at all we had going on in 2020 and laud us for seeing this University through a tough time.

Thank you for all you do for UNA. Dena and I appreciate you, and we hope to see you soon.