



## President's Communiqué

Dr. Ken Kitts

November 10, 2021

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**Colleagues: Please see below for important updates and information.**

**Census Date:** The final numbers are in for Fall 2021, and they confirm UNA as the fastest growing university in Alabama. Final headcount was 8,832 compared with 8,361 last year for an increase of almost 6%. Following national trends, most of our new growth is in the online and graduate sectors, but even with that it is worth noting that our freshman cohort of 1,016 was up 9% over last year. We are also back to pre-pandemic numbers in our residential population with approximately 1,700 students living on campus this fall. These are great numbers in their own right, but they become all the more impressive when you compare UNA's performance to that of our peers. Of the 14 public universities in Alabama, 9 reported enrollment decreases between Fall 2020 and Fall 2021. Even as we celebrate this wonderful outcome, let's commit to continue to work together to sustain this great momentum in our enrollment efforts.

**Project 208:** This has been an unusually busy fall in terms of governmental outreach. The two special sessions in Montgomery brought legislators back to the Capitol to discuss prison reform and redistricting (see below). Also, there is a sense of urgency in the air this year as the regular session will begin earlier than usual due to 2022 being an election year. Alabama does not stagger terms as is common in other states, so all key executive and legislative branch offices will be up for grabs next November – Governor, Lieutenant Governor, other constitutional officers, plus all 140 seats in the House and Senate. We took advantage of the second special session by hosting a dinner in Montgomery on November 2 for members of our local delegation and the two committees most involved with higher education budgets. I'm pleased to report that the presentation and subsequent discussion on our funding issues went very well. The lawmakers like what UNA is doing in terms of growth, our focus on Alabama students, our low administrative overhead, and our promotion of workforce initiatives in the cause of state economic development.

**Redistricting:** Last week, Governor Kay Ivey signed the final bills to confirm the newly drawn state and federal district lines for Alabama. Our campus representation will change next year as a result of that process. At the federal level, the UNA campus will move out of the 5th congressional district to join the 4th congressional district represented by alumnus Robert Aderholt. In the Alabama Senate, our campus will move out of the 6th district and into the 1st district represented by alumnus Tim Melson. And in the Alabama House of Representatives, our campus will move out of the 1st district and into the 3rd district. That district will feature an open seat (no incumbent) election in 2022. To date, the only candidate to announce for the 3rd district House seat is Tusculumbia Mayor and alumnus Kerry Underwood. Even as these changes occur, we will continue to work broadly with all representatives from our area to advance UNA's interests and enhance educational opportunities for citizens in our service area.

**Athletics:** The past few years have seen historic changes in collegiate athletics due to student-athlete empowerment initiatives, such as the transfer portal and new policy allowing athletes to earn money from name, image, and likeness (NIL) contracts. On top of that comes a new round of conference realignments and an upcoming NCAA Constitutional Convention setting the stage for further transformation. We are following all of these developments closely, but for now I will simply state that I continue to like our overall position as relates to athletics. We are on track to complete our transition to Division I during this academic year, in keeping with the four year schedule announced back in 2018. As relates to our athletic conference, the ASUN is well-positioned to evolve into a football conference next year. The benefit for us is that such a move would allow us to bring all 14 of our sports under one conference umbrella. Moreover, the ASUN brand remains strong. We have added several football-playing members in the last year and have several other high-quality institutions inquiring about joining should ASUN expansion efforts continue.

**COVID:** We are encouraged by the recent downturn in the number of COVID cases being reported across our state. Alabama's positivity rate and hospitalization rate both sit at levels not seen since early summer, before the Delta variant surge began. The number of cases on campus has trended downward from the high mark of 53 weekly cases recorded on August 28. By early October that number was down to 18, and the latest report from University Health Services shows us with only 5 cases on campus. Based on a recommendation from our COVID-19 Recovery Task Force, and consistent with actions that have occurred on other campuses, we will move from "masks required" to "masks recommended" for indoor venues beginning on December 9. Of course, we will continue to monitor trends with the number of cases on campus and in our region, and we will adjust our approach as conditions warrant.

**CRTF:** As a corollary to the paragraph above on COVID response, I have notified the Shared Governance Executive Committee of the sunset (closure of operations) of the COVID-19 Recovery Task Force at the end of this semester. This decision comes with the concurrence of Dr. Kimberly Greenway, chair of the CRTF, and flows from two sources: 1) acknowledgment that pandemic-related health conditions in our area have improved significantly; and 2) consideration for the time of the task force members who have given so generously of their expertise over the last year and a half. To say that the CRTF has served this campus well is an understatement. The Task Force's recommendations have been consistently thoughtful, well-reasoned, and constructive. Please join me in thanking the members for making this very special and unique contribution to our University!

As we approach the holiday season, it is clear we have much to be thankful for at UNA. Nationally, the updated number of job losses in higher education over the last two years has climbed to 661,000, or about 14% of the total faculty and staff positions that existed prior to the pandemic. Meanwhile, at UNA, we have had no layoffs, no furloughs, and no job losses as a result of this national crisis. Moreover, we have continued to grow our enrollment while other universities have experienced sharp declines. Academically, our reputation has expanded as has our portfolio of degree and non-degree offerings. We now serve a more diverse range of students than ever before, and in the process, we are helping to uplift our local communities and region. Colleagues, these are all collective successes, and Dena and I hope you share in the pride of these accomplishments. More so than ever before, it's OUR TIME TO ROAR as an institution -- and we're doing just that. Thank you for all you do for the University of North Alabama, and best wishes to all for a wonderful Thanksgiving.