



President's Communiqué

Dr. Ken Kitts

September 17, 2025

Colleagues: I hope the new academic year is off to a great start for you. As we complete the fourth week of fall classes, I want to share the updates below on important developments at UNA.

Live Lions: At the annual meeting of faculty and staff held in August, I announced the recommendation brought forth by the Special Committee on Live Lions. The essence of that recommendation, which I have accepted, is that we continue the live lion tradition at UNA, but that we do so only in continued alignment with the federally-recognized standards set forth by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Maintaining that alignment will entail raising approximately \$5-7 million in order to expand the habitat to meet new AZA standards and to support the hiring of a trained, full-time lion caretaker – all of which needs to be in place before new lions can be acquired. A fundraising effort of that size will require a sizeable lead gift. While we determine donor interest in helping with this project, you can expect to see some work underway at the habitat to remove the old fencing as we create temporary green space there for everyone to enjoy. Otherwise, we will continue to hold that area in reserve for the next couple of years in hopes of being able to eventually expand the habitat and realize the vision established through the good work of the Special Committee.

Board of Trustees: The members of the UNA Board of Trustees gathered on campus last week for their quarterly meeting. We officially welcomed new trustee Ann Berry of Bowie, Maryland, to the group. Trustee Berry is a 1978 graduate of UNA who served from 2021-2025 as Secretary of the United States Senate. Among other action items, the trustees voted unanimous approval for the budget we presented for FY26. That document includes a 3% cost-of-living salary adjustment for all full-time and part-time regular faculty and staff employed as of September 1, 2025. COLAs are difficult to fund as we have to come up with those dollars ourselves (by comparison, raises for local school teachers are funded by the state) and balance that expense with other priorities. I am pleased that we have been able to maintain the tradition of offering a COLA every other year to help offset inflationary pressures and keep our salaries competitive. This schedule compares favorably with our peers in Alabama. Along with my EC colleagues, I stand with the Board of Trustees in offering this increase with our collective thanks for the outstanding work going on across campus.

Town-Gown: Local elections were held across our service area on August 26. In the Quad Cities, four new mayors were elected including former police chief and UNA alumnus Ron Tyler in our hometown of Florence. The election results also mean that four of the six members of Florence City Council will be new with alumni-incumbents Kaytrina Simmons (District 1) and Jackie Hendrix (District 2) continuing to serve for another term. Even as we thank the outgoing Mayor and Council members who have supported UNA, we will engage with the newly elected officials to welcome them to office and to make sure they understand the importance of the town-gown relationship for both parties. We are in the process of updating UNA's economic impact study as one component, albeit a very important one, of the story of how UNA benefits Florence and the larger Shoals region. The term for the new office holders will begin on Monday, November 3.

2026 Elections: Even as the municipal elections draw to a close, we are already turning attention to the next round of elections in November 2026. That cycle is especially important in Alabama as we will elect a new Governor, Lieutenant Governor, other executive branch constitutional officers, and all 140 members of the state Senate and state House of Representatives. In addition, November of 2026 is the date for the federal mid-term election in which all seats in the U.S. House of Representatives will be elected in addition to one-third of U.S. Senate seats (including an open seat race in Alabama). While these elections might seem far off, they're really not. Party primaries for the general election will be held in May, and the qualifying deadline to participate in those primaries is January 23 – just four months away. As with the municipal elections, the outcomes of these races are important events for determining the slate of lawmakers with whom we'll be working over the next four years to ensure fair treatment for UNA in the budgetary process and to advance other policy issues of interest to our campus community.

Shine On, Gold Campaign: The ambitious fundraising campaign on which we embarked three years ago is moving along very well. Total gifts and pledges to date recently eclipsed the \$91 million mark. This moves us ever closer to our campaign goal of \$100 million, with two-thirds of that funding earmarked for academic program enhancement and student scholarships. At this rate of increase, we can start planning to celebrate the successful close of the “Shine On, Gold” comprehensive campaign in 2026. I am proud to report that campaign giving by the Executive Council, Board of Trustees, and UNA Foundation Board of Directors is at 100% -- and I encourage you as colleagues to consider making a gift to a priority of your choosing. As VP Kevin Haslam reminds us, every gift matters as does every giver!

ROTC: College ROTC programs across the country have been affected by budget cuts as our military attempts to balance the resources devoted to officer training with other critical missions. Some campuses have lost their ROTC programs entirely. Fortunately, nothing like that has happened or is in the planning at UNA. That having been said, we have felt the effects of the budget-related reorganization directed by Cadet Command in other ways. Effective this fall, Lion Battalion is transitioning from being an independent ROTC unit to one that is, administratively, an extension of the host unit at Alabama A&M University. In notifying us of this decision, the Army states that this action is “limited and focused on merging ROTC administrative and support tasks while continuing supervision and resident instruction on your campus.” This means that Lion Battalion will retain its unique heraldry and identity. Moreover, UNA will be allocated a Major, a Captain, and a Sergeant First Class in the new staffing structure. Even as we work through these changes, we remain in close contact with the Department of the Army and our congressional delegation to ensure that we are exploring all options to protect and enhance ROTC as an integral part of our academic profile and campus community.

WICHE Report Comments, Part III: In my last communique of the spring semester, I promised one final installment on this topic to explain the reasons for my optimism about UNA’s future despite the very real enrollment challenges facing colleges in Alabama and across the country. My optimism is rooted in three facts. First, we have been more intentional than our peers about diversifying our admissions effort. Our recruitment portfolio features a robust mix of students representing the undergraduate and graduate sectors, domestic and international students, and traditional and online learners. This reduces our exposure to downturns in any one grouping. Second, we are fortunate to be located in a growth area where the number of high school graduates is in comparatively good shape. Limestone County sits just to our east and is the fastest growing county in Alabama. Moreover, the Huntsville and Nashville markets are among the fastest growing metro areas in the nation, and both are within a 100-mile radius of our campus. Third, and most important, we have outstanding people at UNA! From faculty to staff to administration, there is a culture of caring and a pride of place here that is unique. Prospective students and family members sense that when they walk on our campus. There is truth to the statement that, once we get prospects to visit UNA, we have a good chance of landing them as students. All of this is not to say that the next few years will be easy when it comes to maintaining enrollment – it won’t -- but I like our chances of making it through this period of the national “enrollment cliff” in good shape.

Enrollment Update: It’s only fitting that I follow the passage above with the good news that our enrollment continues to trend upward this fall as we head toward census date next month. We have been consistently tracking ahead of last year’s record enrollment in our point-to-point comparisons with Fall 2024. We believe that trend will continue as registrations arrive from late reporting cohorts and as we add new students with the start of the second 8-week session of classes. Our projection is for final enrollment this semester of around 10,800 total students with a commensurate increase in credit hour production.

Important Dates:

- October 3 University Closed for Fall Break
- October 9 Semester Midterm
- October 9 End of First 8-Week Session
- October 13 Second 8-Week Session Begins
- October 13-18 Homecoming Week (Parade and Homecoming Game on Oct. 18)
- October 27 Registration Begins for Spring and Summer 2026

Dena and I look forward to seeing you at homecoming and at other events around campus this fall. We appreciate all you do for the University of North Alabama!