



President's Communique

Dr. Ken Kitts

December 2, 2024

Colleagues: Please see below for important information and updates as we enter the final weeks of the fall semester.

Fall Commencement: The first two ceremonies for our fall commencement program will take place on Friday, December 13, and will feature undergraduate and graduate students from the Anderson College of Nursing and Health Professions and the College of Education and Human Sciences. The speaker for the Friday ceremonies will be alumna Dr. Sharon Holley ('91), who serves as director of the nurse-midwife program at UAB. There will be three ceremonies on Saturday, December 14, which will recognize undergraduate and graduate students from the College of Arts, Sciences, and Engineering, and the Sanders College of Business and Technology. The speaker for the Saturday ceremonies will be Representative Kerry Underwood ('90) whose State House District 3 includes the UNA campus as well as other parts of Lauderdale and Colbert Counties.

Alabama Supreme Court: I am pleased to share news that the Alabama Supreme Court has accepted our invitation to host a special oral argument session at UNA during the first week of April, 2025. This historic visit will be the first of its kind for our University community. I would like to thank Trustee Gary Smith, General Counsel Amber Fite-Morgan, and Regina Sherrill for their contributions in opening the lines of communication that led to this acceptance. Ms. Fite-Morgan will provide additional details on this event well in advance so that interested faculty, staff, and students can plan to attend. On a special and related note, current Associate Justice Sarah Stewart recently won election to the Court's top post and will be formally installed as the new Chief Justice in January. Justice Stewart is no stranger to UNA, having served as our commencement speaker in May, 2022.

Budget: We appreciate the excellent turnout for the recent budget information session that was organized by leaders of the Faculty and Staff Senates. As promised, VP Evan Thornton followed that event with a morning coffee session on November 25 to provide an additional opportunity to share information and answer questions. We are now in the first stages of the budgetary process for the FY 26 fiscal year. To date, we have already met with officials from the Alabama Commission on Higher Education and with State Finance Director Bill Poole to discuss our budgetary status and needs. The 2025 legislative session begins on February 4. Between now and then, we will be in contact with our local lawmakers, legislative leaders, and the chairs of the committees that control funding for higher education. This marks the beginning of our eighth year of the Project/Progress 208 effort to secure equity in funding for UNA. During this time, and as discussed at the budget information session, we have narrowed the gap that separates us from our next-closest peer school by \$10 million in annual state appropriations. However, a gap still remains with that peer and with other Alabama institutions of similar size, scope, and mission – and thus we will continue to prioritize the fight for fairness in funding for UNA.

New Weather Guidance: We have updated the administrative guidance used to make decisions on the operational status of campus during adverse weather events. The new guidance, which is available on the UNA website, more closely aligns campus decisions with the predictive risk categories published by the National Weather Service. Under the new guidance, campus condition "orange" replaces the old Hy-Flex designation when the severe weather threat level is moderate to high. Campus condition "red" is reserved for those times when severe threats are imminent and/or normal campus operations are suspended due to power outages or the presence of dangerous walkways and roads.

Work of Two Special Committees: The Special Committee on Live Lions (SCLL) continues its work in consulting with animal care experts, compiling stakeholder input, and ensuring consideration of all options on the question of lion replacement. I recently met with committee co-chairs Dr. Lisa Blankinship and VP Kevin Haslam to discuss the status of the inquiry and to provide administrative feedback on questions from the SCLL membership. I plan to meet with the full committee early in the spring semester to receive preliminary findings and determine next steps. Separately, the Work Group to Enhance Music and Fine Arts was empaneled in November with the charge to advise University officials on the best plan for addressing the aging facilities that house our programs in those academic areas. This ten-member panel is chaired by Dr. Meghan Merciers, Associate Dean for the School of the Arts. Both the Work Group and the SCLL were established in consultation with faculty and staff leaders and with the consent of the Shared Governance Executive Committee.

Enrollment and Performance Outcomes: The census for the Fall 2024 semester showed an increase over the previous year and a final (and record) headcount of 10,620 students. Embedded within that overall number, there were significant increases in the undergraduate population and with credit hour production, which exceeded 104,000 hours for the fall semester. These are excellent outcomes that are consistent with the plan we have articulated for an era of measured but steady growth at UNA. This new approach allows us to limit scholarship expenses and ensure that enrollment aligns with campus staffing levels and our support infrastructure. Beyond enrollment tallies, the most impressive news for this fall comes in key performance metrics. The University's retention rate reached an all-time high at 79.7% (up 7.4% over the past decade) and our six-year graduation rate rose to 57.4% (up 18.5% over the past decade). Both figures represent new high water marks for our campus and compare very favorably with the rates posted by our peers in the sector of regional comprehensive universities. More importantly, they carry a wonderful commentary about the student experience at UNA. We should all be very proud of these two new markers of excellence as we continue to pursue *the gold standard* at UNA.

Santa Party: The annual Santa Party will be held from 3-5pm on Wednesday of this week at the President's Home. While this event revolves around the children of UNA faculty and staff, as well as the students at Kilby Laboratory School, Dena and I want to extend a special invitation for *any* young-at-heart members of the UNA family to stop by for a cup of hot chocolate and some holiday cheer. It's always a fun event! If you are planning to attend and haven't already done so, please let Elgie Garner (egarner2@una.edu) know of your plans so we can prepare accordingly.

Dena and I extend our very best wishes to you and hope that you and your families have a safe and enjoyable holiday season. Thank you for all you do for the University of North Alabama!

Important Dates:

- **December 4** Santa Party at the President's Home
- December 4 Last Day of Classes for Fall Semester
- December 6-11 Final Exams
- December 13-14 Winter Commencement Ceremonies
- Dec 20 – Jan 2 University Closed for Christmas Holidays
- January 3 University Offices Open
- January 8 Spring Semester Classes Begin