

Annual Address by President Kitts
August 15, 2023

Thank you, Provost Kinney, and good afternoon, everyone. I appreciate you coming out today. It's a beautiful day out there with the sun shining and the humidity giving us a break. Dena and I look forward to enjoying ice cream with you as soon as this event is over. Speaking of my wife – she's here today supporting me, but in two weeks, our roles will be reversed when I get to sit in the audience and cheer her on as the keynote speaker for this year's Shoals Woman of the Year luncheon. As you know, this isn't the first honor to come Dena's way recently based on her work as First Lady and as an ambassador for UNA. I confess to being one proud husband.

Please permit me a few other acknowledgments. In the Office of the President, Ms. Elgie Garner has taken lead in planning this event along with Catherine White and others. Elgie has been in this role for just over a year now and has done a phenomenal job assisting me, processing requests from on and off campus, and helping Dena coordinate events and activities. Thank you, Elgie and Catherine, for all you have done to bring us together today. We're also continuing the tradition of inviting officers of the UNA Board of Trustees to attend our annual meeting, and this afternoon we are pleased to welcome Trustee Nancy Sanford in her role as Board vice chair.

So, as we gather this afternoon on the eve of a new academic year, it's fair to ask: *What is the state of our University?* In a word, it's good. In fact, it's very good. Let's take a few minutes to talk about what's going on here to support that assertion.

We'll begin with enrollment as this is the time of the year that everyone wants to know whether we're growing and how many students we'll have this fall. To be clear, we won't have a final tally for several months as census date doesn't roll around until October. But at this point the numbers are coming into focus, and they are pointing in a direction of which we should all be proud.

Last year we broke an enrollment record and ended up with just over 10,000 students for the first time in our history. This year we can predict with confidence that we will exceed that total, that we will be up in both headcount and credit hour production, and that by the time census arrives we should be boasting of final enrollment of 10,500 students or more. As a corollary, the number of residents living on campus and in campus-affiliated housing will also be in record territory at some 2,300 students. Kudos to the staff in both Housing and Residence Life and Facilities for working miracles to accommodate this unprecedented demand.

Our enrollment growth has been the strongest in the state over the last five years. It feels good to be over 10,000, and moving from the group of smaller Alabama universities into the top half of institutions in the state has been important. It gives us a different set of peers. Moreover, we have engineered this growth in ways that don't threaten our historic identity as a university that delivers a highly personalized experience for students.

With our "smart growth" strategy fully deployed, and with student demand strong, we're entering a new phase of enrollment at UNA. My opinion is that this is a great time to manage our rate of growth and try to stay in the 10,000-12,000 range for a few years. Doing so will allow us to focus on other parts of the enterprise including academic programming, student support, and facility improvement. It will also allow us to balance the attention between enrollment growth and the equally impressive – but sometimes overlooked – increase in our academic profile and reputation.

Consider, for example, the emergence of the Cole Honors College as a major force on our campus. The College is home to almost 15% of our undergraduate population. Consider also that in 2021, we launched our first two doctoral programs, and in May we graduated the first PhD recipient in the history of the institution. Along the way, two doctoral programs become three, and we have plans to add a fourth.

Our students and alumni continue to shine. We recently added two more student Fulbrights to our list of award winners, and a recent graduate brought home her second Pulitzer Prize. Meanwhile, our Department of Entertainment Industry continues to feature Professor John Paul White in its faculty lineup. John Paul graduated here in 1999 and has earned *four* Grammy Awards in the course of his brilliant career.

I could go on, but you get the point. PhDs, Grammys, Pulitzers, Fulbrights, Honors Graduates -- it's no wonder our academic reputation is soaring and that last year we recorded our first-ever Top 10 ranking by *U.S. News and World Report*.

None of this is coincidental. The success of our students and alumni is a direct reflection on the people in this room. You teach well, you advise well, and you coach well. You also make sure that our students have a safe, clean campus and the support system they need to flourish. Dena and I see you turn small interactions with students into teachable moments that all become part of the UNA experience.

The physical improvements on our campus are also impressive. Work on the Computing and Mathematics Building is coming along nicely and is on schedule. That project will include a renovation of Founders Hill and the Memorial Amphitheater. As a result of significant federal support courtesy of Congressman Robert Aderholt, we are close to having the funding we need to begin work on a new Engineering Building that will support our emphasis on workforce development. Another issue of importance to our campus is pedestrian safety, and I am pleased to report that the Florence City Council is expected to vote today to begin work on the safety enhancements on the Pine Street Bridge.

The members of our Advancement team have given us additional bragging points. We've had back-to-back record years in annual giving, our endowment continues to climb beyond the \$50 million mark, and the outpouring of support from athletic donors for our planned multi-purpose stadium has exceeded all expectations. We're not talking publicly yet about the total amount raised for that project since our engagement with donors remains ongoing, but suffice it to say, you will be amazed when we are able to share more details. We've done exactly what you asked us to do, which is drive that project with private dollars and in a way that does not interfere with other campus priorities.

On the topic of campus priorities, the IPEDS database maintained by the U.S. Department of Education offers an interesting comparative look at where we put our dollars relative to other institutions. According to the most recent data, UNA remains first among Alabama's public universities in the percentage of budget allocated to instruction. As president, I'm proud of that data point. We know who we are, and what we are here to do.

A final comment on markers of excellence, and this is a very new development that you're all hearing about for the first time. The retention rate is a nationally standardized measure of how many first-time, full-time freshmen choose to return to their college as sophomores. It's a great measure of student

satisfaction. The average for institutions such as ours is around 70%. We've always outperformed our peers and typically have been in the mid-70s on this metric. In 2020 we reached a high-water mark of 77.3%.

This year's number is not yet final. However, it is trending up significantly and tracking toward a new record of almost 79%. That's off the charts as regional universities go, and it is a wonderful commentary on each of you. From faculty to the grounds crew, and from athletics to counselors and housing officials, I want you to understand this increase as validation of your efforts. Our colleagues in Admissions, Graduate Studies, Online Education, and International Affairs – they all do a brilliant job of getting the students here – but you *keep them here* by delivering on the UNA promise in a big way.

Speaking of promises, we continue to live up to our commitment to welcome students, faculty, and staff from all backgrounds. I'm proud that the mosaic of this campus is as rich and varied as any in the state, and I want to thank all those who lead and contribute to this important endeavor. We should also take this opportunity to salute those who came before us and helped open doors that previously had been closed.

With that in mind, next month is the 60th anniversary of Wendell Gunn's entry into our student ranks and the resulting desegregation of UNA. Back in 1963, Wendell's first day as a Florence State student was September 11. Next month, on that same date, we're going to host a special ceremony to commemorate that milestone anniversary, celebrate Dr. Gunn, and give our students an opportunity to interact with him.

Switching gears, I'd like to offer an update on our budget. In the 2023 legislative session, we finished second among all state universities in terms of the percentage increase in our appropriation. That translates into almost \$4 million in new annual funding for UNA, plus another \$17 million in one-time funds for maintenance and capital costs. These new dollars are enormously helpful. We are grateful to state officials and key members of our local delegation for making that happen.

At the same time, the overall increases in educational funding this year were smaller than anyone anticipated. The \$4 million increase for us is less than the amount needed to get us off the bottom of the list in funding. Accordingly, our budget for the upcoming fiscal year will be tight. We'll have to be careful with vacant positions and careful with creating new personnel lines. My top budgetary priority is to deliver a cost-of-living adjustment in the new fiscal year that begins on October 1.

Please remember that the final approval of the budget for FY 24 won't occur until the Board meeting in September. However, I can tell you that the trustees have signaled early support for our proposal. Barring anything unforeseen, we hope to have good news to share with you on September 8.

One final comment on our budget: I have on my desk an interesting report on comparative state funding for Alabama's universities from 2017, which is the year we launched Project 208, to the present. Over this six-year period, the other thirteen public universities in the state recorded increases in funding that range from a low of 37% to a high of 71%. UNA leads the pack with an overall increase of 73%. That's great, but consider that if we had not been making this push, and had we been funded at the average level over that time period, our budget for this year and every year would be \$7 million less than is currently the case. That's the Project 208 difference.

I want to begin to wrap these remarks around two well-known sayings. One is that beautiful verse: “For everything there is a season....” I offer that up with the sense that our university is entering a different season of life now.

When I arrived here, we needed to grow. That was our primary focus, and we grew. Impressively so. We’ll never overlook the importance of healthy enrollment, but now we have the opportunity to broaden our focus and strive for a level of excellence that will define us as a qualitatively different school. One that stands out from the pack. We can be a great alternative for students who want a university with outstanding academics, great campus life, and Division I Athletics, but don’t want big school anonymity. We can be the choice for students who want the look and feel of a prestigious private college without the price tag that comes with that. We can be different. We can be UNA.

It’s a season of change for the University’s leadership as well. Two members of my team left recently to become presidents in their own right – which I view as another great commentary on UNA’s reputation – and with those departures comes change to the ranks of the Executive Council. I am very grateful to the veteran members of my team: Evan Thornton, Kevin Haslam, KC White, Josh Looney, Amber Fite-Morgan, and Jay Cochran. They serve this University extraordinarily well. At the same time, we are excited to welcome Minnette Ellis and Katie Kinney to our ranks in their respective interim capacities. These are consummate professionals who have hit the ground running and done an amazing job of getting up to speed on issues in their area.

The other saying with which I’ll close comes courtesy of a talk I heard right here in Florence some years ago. The speaker was a man who lives every day with a medical condition that, by all rights, should already have killed him. He lives with the reality that it could do so at any time. But through some combination of family, faith, and old-fashioned grit, he refuses to lay down and wait for that inevitable conclusion. He’s a positive force, and he savors life in a way that is instructive for the rest of us.

There was one part of his remarks that day that really stuck with me. He spoke movingly of how his diagnosis and new appreciation for life had taught him to turn his “Got To’s” into “Get To’s.” He now finds meaning and privilege in life’s ordinary tasks. For him, “I’ve got to visit Mom” became “I get to visit Mom.” Or, “I’ve got to help my son with his homework” became “I get to help my son with his homework.” It’s a great perspective, and I think there’s a takeaway there for all of us as we sit here eighteen hours away from the start of the new year.

So tomorrow morning, I will wake up at 4:15am, drink my coffee, get dressed for work, and then I will welcome over 10,000 bright and enthusiastic students who have chosen to make UNA their college home. Not because I have to, but because I get to. For another day, I will get to lead a school with the richest and longest history in the state. For another day, Dena and I will get to work with you, the most amazing group of people we’ve encountered in a professional journey that has covered many years and crossed many miles.

And together with you, we will all get to launch a new academic year at this wonderful, beautiful, and dynamic University – and in the process we’ll write a new chapter in a story here that is 194 years old and counting. That’s an incredible honor, and it’s something for all of us to ROAR about!

Thank you for being here. Dena and I appreciate you, and we hope you have an amazing year.