

Annual Address by President Kitts
Norton Auditorium
August 20, 2019

Good afternoon, everyone. I can't think of a better way to kick off the new academic year than by getting together with friends to celebrate accomplishments from 2018-19 and to look with excitement at what's ahead of us.

I'm proud to be joined today by my wife Dena, the wonderful First Lady of UNA, who I assure you is the very best part of Team Kitts. Most of you know how hard Dena works to support your events, champion our students, and engage with donors, alumni, and friends of the University. She recently pinch hit for me at a major reception in our home when I was called away at the last minute. That's but one example of many I could offer, and I want to exercise a point of personal privilege and thank Dena publicly for what she does for me, and for our family, and for this University.

Now to the business at hand. I would like to thank Olivia Bradford for her excellent work in preparing for this event and putting together the year in review slide show – and thanks go also to all those who helped provide suggestions for the slides. I submit that it's impossible to view that presentation and not feel pride in the direction of this university.

This is my fifth year at UNA. It's a sign of the times in higher education that I'm already sixth out of the fourteen public university presidents in Alabama in terms of seniority. And what makes this year different from any other we've kicked off together is that this year we have a new Strategic Plan and a new Campus Master Plan in place. Both of these documents were built bottom up with input from you. They were received enthusiastically and approved by the Board of Trustees.

Today we are joined by the vice chair of that governing body, Trustee Will Trapp. Will, thank you for being here today, and thank you for the role the board played in validating and ratifying the good work of the faculty and staff in this room.

The new Strategic Plan brings with it a new mission statement for UNA. It reads: "The mission of the University of North Alabama is to be: Innovative. Inclusive. Engaged. Evolving. Global." Don't you love it? Sixteen simple words to help guide our decision making and to remind us of who we are and what we are here to do.

As I reflect on the past year, I can't help but think about the points of pride that are near and dear to my heart. For starters, we are growing when many around us are not. We're still some weeks away from census date for this fall, but as of this morning we are running about 3% ahead of last year in headcount and credit hour production. Our number for this year will go up between now and census, and I think we'll be in the neighborhood of 7,850 students when all is said and done. If we reach that mark, we'll be 1,000 students to the good over the headcount of 6850 that we had back in 2014. An increase of 15% in five years is something to celebrate.

Ron Patterson will share details as our final enrollment picture comes into focus, but at this point I can tell you that we're going to be up in both traditional and online enrollment, up in both undergraduate and graduate enrollment, up in freshmen over last year, up in international students (again), and that records will fall with regard to overall enrollment and with the number of students we have living on campus. These great outcomes don't just happen, and so I extend heartfelt thanks to those of you in Enrollment Management, Admissions, Student Affairs, and Academic Affairs who have been most heavily involved in our recruitment and retention efforts.

As we look ahead to next year, we're going to have to work hard and be creative in order to realize additional growth. The number of high school graduates in Alabama is down, and there is intense competition from both in-state and out-of-state institutions. None of this is insurmountable, but it does mean that we'll have to keep this year's celebration short and immediately start work on the entering class of Fall 2020. Remember that two-thirds of our budget is tied to enrollment, so if we want to have new dollars to work with to support you and your programs, we have to grow.

But having said all that, I want to reaffirm our commitment to grow this University in ways that make sense for UNA. Our target remains *smart growth* that features modest and manageable increases in traditional enrollment while at the same time emphasizing higher growth rates in those sectors that do not tax our campus infrastructure as much – online students, graduate students, and nontraditional students.

Moreover, smart growth is as much about quality as it is about quantity. Enrollment has to be more than a numbers game. Let's talk about our incoming students. Ten years ago, our average composite ACT score rounded off to a 21. Five years ago, that score had increased to a 22, and last fall for the first time it increased to a composite score of 23. That's a slow but steady rise in the level of ability in our incoming students, and to my way of thinking it's an excellent commentary on our ability to remain true to our calling as an institution of access and opportunity while simultaneously encouraging academic excellence.

A second point of pride for me is our commitment to keep academics at the center of all we do. I stood before you two years ago when we announced our transition to Division I athletics and made two promises: (1) that we would cover the additional costs of Division I without harming other parts of the University's budget; and (2) that we would use the greater visibility that comes with Division I status to drive enrollment and to drive academic enhancements.

We've done both of those things. In 2016, our spending on athletics as a Division II institution represented 6% of the total university budget. In 2019 and looking ahead to 2020, our spending on athletics as a Division I institution will continue to represent 6% of our budget. And with regard to enhancements to our academic profile, let's review what has transpired since that press conference in December of 2016.

We have transitioned the UNA Honors Program into an Honors College, announced plans to launch our first two doctoral programs, expanded our range of international programs and partnerships, and increased the number of program-specific accreditations. We moved from never having had a student Fulbright recipient in 2016 to celebrating our first winner in 2017 to having four this past spring. In three years, we have gone from being invisible in that field to being one of the top producing Fulbright institutions in the South region.

As this summary makes clear, we are shedding the "best kept secret" image in a way that is healthy and necessary -- and long overdue.

This brings me to a third point of pride, which is the way we are starting to be noticed in Montgomery. Project 208 remains one of my top priorities. When it comes to state support, we are in a deep hole that has been one hundred years in the making. It will take time to get out of that hole, but we should be encouraged by the progress we're seeing. In the two years since we launched Project 208, UNA has placed in the top three of all Alabama universities in terms of percentage increase in our state appropriation. Our operations and maintenance budget went from \$27.1M in FY18 to \$32.7M for FY20. Our best guess is that about half of that increase is directly attributable to Project 208. That translates into \$2-3M each year that we're getting that we otherwise would not.

These extra dollars are crucial for us. The increase in funding means that we have a better chance of staying on schedule with a cost-of-living salary adjustment every other year, it means that we can support scholarships at a competitive level, and it means that we can make some headway on facility repairs and improvements.

Look around you at this venue, Norton Auditorium, now 50 years old and a building that creates a first impression for so many visitors to our campus. It's still beautiful, but the paint is peeling, the rigging for the lights and curtains is old, the seats are worn, and the acoustic panels are coming off the wall. We upgraded restrooms here in 2015 and replaced the lighting system last year. It's time to finish the job. When we meet here again next August, we will enjoy a newly renovated facility of which we can all be proud.

But for every renovation project we are able to complete, there are many others that get deferred for want of funding. If you add up what it would take to make us whole -- to repair all of our facilities, renovate those that need renovation, and make the changes necessary for ADA compliance, the total price tag begins to approach \$150 million dollars. The number is so large and so overwhelming that it's hard to be more precise than that. And, again, the culprit here is the chronic and severe underfunding of UNA by the state.

Here's an easy data point to remember. Each year we receive \$10 million less than the two schools closest to us in size, one a little larger and one a little smaller. This year we'll get about \$32 million from the state – again, a nice improvement over last year -- but each of these similarly sized peer schools will get about \$42 million each. That's a \$10 million dollar gap each year, and if you project that over a decade you very quickly begin to understand how easy it is to fall behind by \$100 million dollars or more.

So, what are we going to do about this? Well this is year three of Project 208, and the stakes are very high as we look ahead to 2020. It is possible, and even probable, that there will be a bond bill in Montgomery in the spring, which means that the state itself might borrow hundreds of millions of dollars to assist with capital improvements on college campuses.

How will that money be divided? The short answer is that “politics” will decide that question, and the contest for those dollars will not be for the faint of heart. We need this injection of capital more than any other campus, and we're more deserving based not only on our demonstrated need but on the results we are generating. Through your efforts, we are doing everything asked of us by the state, and we're doing it very well. We're growing, we're graduating students, we're meeting regional needs, we're promoting economic development, and we're doing it all with low tuition and fees that make us the best value proposition in the state.

I don't want to give away too many secrets in this public setting, but suffice it to say that we are going to double down on Project 208 for the coming year. I'll be meeting with faculty and staff leaders this fall to update them on these efforts.

Something else related to Project 208 is going to happen in the next twelve months, and I want to put on your radar now. Elections will be held for offices at the local and federal levels of government. By the time we gather here again next August, you will have had the opportunity to vote in primary elections for the U.S. House and Senate, and in the spring and summer of 2020, we'll watch with interest as candidates for local elections – including those in Florence – announce their plans and launch campaigns for the city and county positions that will be decided next August.

My plea to you: don't be a spectator in this process. Engage with these candidates early and often. Ask the questions that are key to the future of UNA. Why do our federal tax dollars seem to find their way back to the larger schools in the state but not to UNA? Why can we do to make sure the Shoals is not overlooked as the counties to our east welcome new plants and the jobs that come with them? What would it take for the University to get local government support on an annual basis in recognition of our role as the single most important economic driver in Florence and the Shoals?

Beyond these political developments, what else is in store for us this year? Well, we're going to finish work on Harrison Hall and move the Anderson College of Nursing and Health Professions into that beautiful new addition to the north end of campus. Dena and I have donned hardhats and crawled around that building twice in recent months, and we can tell you it's going to be stunning.

We're going to make final preparations to launch our first doctoral programs in the Fall of 2020, one in exercise science and the other in business administration. These plans are right on schedule.

We're going to move our business outreach offices into the Collins Building at the old ECM site. That will be a great location from which our award-winning College of Business can project its influence on our region in terms of education and economic development.

We're going to watch with pride as our sports programs carry us to the midway point of the four-year transition required of institutions moving from Division II to Division I. Along the way, we're going to continue to be highly competitive, and we're going to continue to play selected games against nationally recognized programs. These are the money games that have always been part of the financial plan for Division I, and the money there is coming in exactly as we anticipated. These marquee matchups also give UNA a visibility that we've never had before.

Athletic schedules for this fall feature contests against the likes of Ole Miss, South Carolina, Iowa, Iowa State, and Memphis. Our men's basketball program just added another game for November 12. On that date, our UNA Lions will be playing the Indiana University Hoosiers at Assembly Hall in Bloomington. What an incredible experience that will be for our student athletes and for our fans.

Also this year, we'll celebrate our 190th anniversary as the oldest state-chartered institution in Alabama. I love that distinction and always bring it up in my public talks. Like our beloved lions, and Kilby Laboratory School, and our Olmsted-designed campus, our long history at UNA is part of what makes us unique.

I've been thinking about ways to make sure that history is acknowledged and celebrated. Most of you know that we were founded as LaGrange College in 1830 and have evolved through nine name changes to emerge as the UNA of today. Significantly, we not only know the year we were founded, we know the day it all began – Monday, January 11, 1830. On that date, 70 students began classes at LaGrange College on that beautiful hilltop over in Colbert County. In terms of organizational lineage, you can draw a direct line from that point to where we are at today.

I propose that we mark the beginning of our 190th anniversary by establishing January 11 as Founders Day at the University of North Alabama. I've challenged my Executive Council colleagues to help me think through what we want to do to make Founders Day special. This year we might start small - a specialty drink at Starbucks, a social media campaign, or maybe we'll cut a big purple and gold birthday cake. Honestly, I don't care what we do as long as we do *something* to remember those who came before us and to remind everyone in Alabama that the oldest four year university is right here in Florence. And the day is not too far away when we'll want to start thinking about a multi-year buildup to what I hope will be a huge bicentennial party in 2030.

But in the meantime, this is still 2019, and we have classes beginning tomorrow. I have a class of my own to prepare for Thursday morning, so I need to begin to wrap this up. Tomorrow is a big day for us. Almost 8,000 students will be heading our way and counting on us to deliver for them. Counting on us – you, me, the person beside you. Everyone in this room has an important role to play.

One thing I love about this annual gathering is that it is so inclusive. The professor of physics sits next to the grounds keeper who sits next to the dean who sits next to the student conduct officer. And as I look at you, and I think about what's going to happen here tomorrow morning, I'm reminded of General Colin Powell's reflections on leadership.

General Powell loves to tell the story of a documentary he once saw on the many people who come together each day to operate that most iconic of structures, the Empire State Building in New York City. The documentarian started his interviews with the building manager on the top floor. Not surprisingly, that guy had a very good understanding of his role and of the importance of the building for the many visitors who pass through the doors every day. But as the show progressed, General Powell was struck by the last workers who were interviewed. These are his own words:

Finally, they got to this one room, the lowest part of the basement, the back of the building where the trash was taken out. And there was this huge room. And the room was filled with plastic bags -- hundreds and hundreds of plastic trash bags. And there were these six guys standing there in blue work uniforms with work gloves on, and it was clear that their job was to spend their shift, from midnight to whenever, taking these trash bags out of the building, knowing with certainty that when they came back tomorrow evening, the room would be filled with trash bags all over again.

And the camera went up to the guy in charge of the group, and the interviewer said to him, "What's your job?" And the guy looked right back at the camera with a smile on his face and he says, "My job is to make sure that every morning when people come from all over the world to see this building, this historic beautiful building, my job is to make sure it's clean and it's ready for them."

That response resonated with General Powell and gave him a talking point that he's used many times in his speeches and books. He loved the fact that there was a universal understanding of purpose, and a sense of organizational pride, that transcended job titles at the Empire State Building.

My job at UNA is very different from yours, and yours is no less different from that person sitting behind you. But like the team at the Empire State Building, we share a single purpose, and that is to provide an extraordinary experience to the young women and men who have selected us as their college home. What a privilege!

So what will I be doing tomorrow morning? Well, like the guys in the basement at the Empire State Building, I'm going to do my very best to make sure that this beautiful, historic, and important University is ready to welcome and educate another generation of students. And I know you'll do the same, and I thank you for that.

Dena and I appreciate you and hope that you all have a great year. Roar Lions!