



President's Communiqué

Dr. Ken Kitts

February 9, 2021

Colleagues: Please see below for important information and updates.

Governmental Relations: Our outreach to lawmakers has been in high gear recently with the beginning of the 2021 legislative session. Last month we hosted lunch meetings both here and in Huntsville to continue to push Project 208, our quest for funding equity for UNA, with vigor. We used that opportunity to remind key lawmakers of our growing academic profile, record enrollment, and outstanding record of service to region and state. In addition to most members of our local delegation, attendees at the luncheons included the Speaker of the House, the House Majority Leader, and the chair and vice chair of the Senate Finance and Taxation Education Committee. This legislative outreach is being enhanced by ongoing and extensive engagement with executive branch officials as well. See below for details.

Executive Budget: State Finance Director Kelly Butler released the Governor's Executive Budget last week. The issuance of that important document kicks off three months of intensive deliberations that will determine the state portion of our budget for FY 22. I am pleased to report that we placed first among Alabama's fourteen public universities in the Executive Budget with a total increase of 16% (\$5.5 million in new funding proposed for UNA) over our allocation for FY 21. The increase includes a significant line item for workforce development initiatives. Other institutional increases at our sister universities ranged from 6.1% to 9.6%, with an average figure of 7.6% across all campuses. The fact that we fared so well is a direct reflection of the many good things going on here and of our concerted effort to highlight our accomplishments and insist on fair funding for the University of North Alabama. Now comes the big caveat: Governor Ivey's budget is a recommendation, albeit an important one, and the focus of the budgetary process now moves to the Alabama Senate and House of Representatives. *Much can happen between now and the end of the legislative session in May. If you feel strongly about equal funding for UNA, now is the time to engage with your elected state representatives to ensure that the Governor's recommended increase for our campus remains intact through the remainder of the deliberations.*

Budget Priorities for AY 2021-2022: By way of refresher, enrollment-related revenue (student tuition, fees, and auxiliary income) and state appropriated dollars account for 99% of the annual operating budget for UNA. We have reason to be cautiously optimistic about the possibility of receiving new state-appropriated dollars next year (see above), and early enrollment and retention indicators for Fall 2021 are very positive (see below). If these trends continue to hold and we have new dollars to allocate for FY 22, the priorities of this administration will be as follows: (1) implementing the cost-of-living salary adjustment for faculty and staff that was deferred last year due to the pandemic; (2) initiating the gradual and strategic refilling of positions that were left open this year to help balance the budget; and (3) keeping UNA's tuition rate among the lowest in Alabama so that we can continue to serve as an affordable and high value option for college-bound students in our state and region.

Enrollment: UNA continues on track to set a new record for spring enrollment. We are one month away from census date and are already ahead of last spring in both credit hour production and headcount. We expect the second 8-week term, which begins on March 1, to further enhance the numbers for the current semester. For Fall 2021, we are seeing an increase over this same point in time last year with applications and acceptances for both freshmen and transfer students. These indicators, coupled with the recent uptick in our retention rate, give us confidence that we will meet and exceed last fall's record census figure of 8,361 students.

Network Security: As has been widely reported, there have been several high-profile ransomware attacks on the computer networks of business and public entities in Alabama over the last several years. The organizations targeted include a north Alabama school district, an Alabama hospital system, and the City of Florence. The increasing frequency and seriousness of these attacks dictate that we take steps to ensure our own network is protected against these types of intrusions. With that goal in mind, we have solicited advice on next steps from campus experts in Information Technology, Educational Technology Services, and the Department of Computer Science and Information Systems. This has resulted in a recommendation to engage an external consultant who can come in and evaluate our system, identify vulnerabilities, and make recommendations to help us guard against attacks. As part of this process, Provost Alexander and VP Thornton will see to it that any recommendations that would involve changes in our computer use policy are referred to the shared governance system for review and additional study.

COVID Response and Vaccinations: The number of confirmed coronavirus cases on our campus continues to fall with yesterday's report listing only 19 cases at UNA. In addition, almost all the key tracking metrics used by the Alabama Department of Public Health show that the post-holiday surge that affected our state has now abated. Both Lauderdale and Colbert Counties are in the "low risk" inventory of counties as maintained by ADPH. While this is good news, we will continue with all precautions in place for UNA, as there remains uncertainty regarding the vaccination timeline and the impact of the new variants of the virus that have been reported. Speaking of the vaccine, Dr. Greenway and her colleagues across the state deserve our thanks for taking steps to ensure that ADPH included higher education faculty and staff in the definition of "frontline essential workers" for the Phase 1b stage of distribution of the vaccine. (That decision was not automatic, as several other states have assigned lower priority to university employees.) Alabama is now into Phase 1b of the distribution process, and we believe that our most at-risk colleagues, as identified by the COVID-19 Recovery Task Force, will have the opportunity to receive the vaccine soon courtesy of our partnership with area hospitals. Please stay tuned for additional guidance on this topic through Dr. Greenway's periodic updates.

As I close this communique, I would note that the pandemic continues to exact a fearful toll on colleges and universities. Recent reports indicate that total financial losses for our sector of the economy are approximately \$183 billion, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics now reports 650,000 higher education job losses in the past year due to the pandemic. These are sobering numbers, and our hearts go out to our colleagues across the state and country who have lost jobs or income. At the same time, this makes me proud of what we – all of us, working together – have been able to do at UNA. We have had no furloughs or layoffs, we have had no budget cuts, we have posted record enrollment, and we have continued to serve our students, region, and state very well. That's an impressive performance! Dena and I thank you for all you have done and are doing to continue to move our University ahead during these unprecedented times. Roar Lions!