



President's Communiqué

Dr. Ken Kitts

September 13, 2023

Colleagues: I hope this note finds you well as we move deeper into the 2023-2024 academic year. Please see below for important updates on our campus community.

Dr. Wendell Gunn / 60th Anniversary: This past Monday, we held a special ceremony in Harrison Plaza to honor Dr. Wendell Gunn on the 60th anniversary of his matriculation at Florence State College and, relatedly, to commemorate the desegregation of our campus. It was a day that captured the UNA spirit in full bloom. Minnette Ellis and her team did a great job organizing the event. My own remarks were followed by those of Board of Trustees President Pro Tempore Will Trapp, recent graduate E. J. Powell, and of course, Dr. Gunn himself. Dr. Eric Kirkman and the vocal ensemble "Ascending Voices" provided music for the occasion. I have taken the liberty of attaching a copy of my remarks to the email that contains this communiqué. While I don't attach any particular importance to my own words, it is important that you know my thoughts and hear my heart on what Wendell's entry meant, and continues to mean, for the development of our University.

Construction Updates: As promised, the repair work on Harrison Plaza was completed over the summer months and appears to have resolved the drainage issues that had been prevalent at that location. Work on the new Computing and Mathematics Building remains on schedule with anticipated completion in the late spring of 2024. The final phase of that project will include a renovation of the Memorial Amphitheater as well as work on the hillside and pathways that connect that venue to the new building. Fencing went up recently around LaGrange Hall so that work crews can begin demolition work on that facility. Our Facilities team has done a good job of working with Housing and Residence Life to communicate with students about alternative walking routes from the residence halls to the academic core of campus while that work takes place. Our plan for the old LaGrange Hall site involves construction of a new residence hall with approximately 200 beds on the western end of that tract (facing Pine Street), and a terraced outdoor gathering area behind it. Facilities is also exploring opportunities to add parking capacity at several sites around campus.

Enrollment: With five weeks to go until census date, our current headcount is 10,114 which compares to 9,836 for this same point last year. We expect to build on that increase and end up with overall enrollment for this fall of at least 10,600 students – another record for UNA! We are once again noting balanced growth among the various sectors of students, and credit hour production also is up over two percent compared to last year. These are outcomes of which we should all be very proud. I mentioned in my annual address last month that we have now grown to the point that we might want to consider a strategic slowing of our rate of increase for the next few years. This would allow our budget and facilities to catch up with the growth in our student population, and it would also give us a chance to focus on supporting our existing and new academic programs. Stay tuned for details as this discussion continues between administrators, faculty and staff leaders, and the Board of Trustees.

UNA Foundation: The UNA Foundation Board of Directors met on August 11. As part of the agenda, the Directors elected new officers to replace those whose terms expire on September 30. The incoming chair of the UNAF Board is Dr. Stephanie Teichmiller ('84), a Decatur-based dentist who also teaches in the UAB School of Dentistry. The incoming vice-chair of the Board is Col. Juan Santiago ('01), who works as Director of the Reagan Ballistic Missile Test Site, U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command. The incoming treasurer of the Board is Mr. Mike Washburn ('82), who has had a long career in banking and currently serves as President of Corporate Banking for Colony Bank in Atlanta. Please join me in welcoming these alumni to their respective positions and in thanking outgoing Board Chair Jason Thomas ('95) and outgoing Treasurer Cathy Miller ('83) for their outstanding service in support of the Foundation and the University it supports.

Board of Trustees: At its meeting last week, the UNA Board of Trustees approved the administrative recommendation for a 4% cost-of-living increase that takes effect with the beginning of the new fiscal year on October 1, 2023. This salary adjustment will apply to all full-time and part-time regular faculty and staff employed at UNA as of September 1, 2023. The 4% increase is the highest at UNA in almost two decades and brings our cumulative COLA total over the last seven years to 12.5%, which compares favorably to other universities in our state. I ask you to join me in thanking the trustees for this action. It signals the Board's acknowledgment of the great work going on across our campus, but it also comes amid ongoing budgetary challenges for our University. Our role in making all of this work is to continue to exercise restraint in spending. For example, we will need to proceed with care this year in filling vacant positions or creating new ones, even as we renew our push for funding equity in Montgomery. In another development of interest, the trustees also approved new Paid Birth Recovery Leave and Paid Parental Leave programs that were originally proposed by leaders in our Shared Governance system. The staff in our Office of Human Resources will distribute information soon on this important new benefit.

Congressional Districts: We continue to monitor developments in the ongoing political and legal dispute over the drawing of congressional districts in Alabama. To recap where we've been, UNA and all of the City of Florence were in the Fifth Congressional District until 2020. That district extended east to include all of Huntsville but did not include Colbert County nor other areas to our south. When reapportionment occurred in the wake of the 2020 census, the district lines were redrawn. In the new configuration, Lauderdale County was split with the western half of the county – an area that includes central Florence and the UNA campus – joining Colbert and other counties to our south in the Fourth Congressional District (represented by long-time Congressman Robert Aderholt). The remainder of Lauderdale County stayed in the Fifth District. It is this post-2020 map that is being challenged in federal court. If the judiciary make a final determination that the lines must be redrawn again, most of the changes will occur in the southern part of the state. However, we are close to a district boundary and so cannot discount the possibility that a change in the status quo could affect UNA's district assignment and representation in Washington, DC.

Progress 208: With the 2024 legislative session still four months away, this is a good time to review our progress on Project 208. We began that initiative in 2017 to call attention to the fact the UNA has, for most of the past century, received millions less in state support than have universities of comparable size. Our best estimate is that this annual shortfall has resulted in a cumulative deficit of at least \$100 million over the last fifteen years – i.e., funding that should have come our way but did not. It is difficult to overstate how badly the loss of these dollars has hurt UNA over the years. The good news is that our efforts since 2017 are showing promise. In the last six years, our annual state allocation has gone up 73%, which is the highest percentage in the state and much more than the average increase among other universities of 48%. Had we received that average increase, our budget would be \$7 million less per year than is currently the case. *To be clear, we still have a long way to go to pull alongside our peer schools in equitable funding.* But the message here is one of hope. As a campus community, we have shown the ability to identify a mission critical problem and to improve our standing by working together.

Pine Street: The first step toward enhancing pedestrian safety on the Pine Street corridor will occur soon when the City of Florence begins to install fencing on both sides of the bridge that extends over Circular Drive. We are optimistic that the bridge work will be followed by other safety enhancements, including traffic calming measures on the portion of Pine Street that runs through campus between Irvine Avenue and Cumberland Street. This project underscores the good things that can happen when UNA and the City work together on a common goal.

Important Upcoming Dates:

- September 29-30 Homecoming
- October 4 Last Day of Classes and Final Exams for First 8-Week Session
- October 6 First Day of Classes for Second 8-Week Session
- October 13-15 University Closed for Fall Break
- October 30 Registration Begins for Spring 2024

Dena and I thank you for all you are doing to move our University ahead in this new academic year. We wish you all the best. Roar Lions!