

Annual Address by President Kitts
Norton Auditorium
August 22, 2017

Good afternoon, everyone. Whether you've been here most of the summer or are just now returning to campus, it's good to have you back.

The slide show retrospective you just enjoyed was put together by Ms. Lori Eastep in the Office of the President. Thank you, Lori! Even as we contemplate what is ahead of us this year, it is important to take stock of where we've been and to celebrate individual and group achievements.

Speaking of individual achievements, one of our colleague's contributions have been so recent that they did not make the slide show. Dr. Mel Blake teaches physics and astronomy here and serves as director of the UNA Planetarium. In the run-up to yesterday's eclipse, he gave countless interviews and made many community presentations. Dr. Blake, thank you for being such a wonderful ambassador for the University of North Alabama.

Of course, there is a certain amount of professional jealousy on my part as I watched the whole world stop and focus on Mel's area of expertise. I'm still waiting on mass attention to focus on the politics of blue-ribbon commissions so that I will be the one whose phone is ringing off the hook. So far that hasn't happened.

Dena is with me today, and we want you to know that we are purple with pride and grateful for the hard work that went into making 2016-17 a year to remember at UNA. From watching the first students enter our new engineering technology program to learning that our nursing program has taken top state honors on the NCLEX, it was a great year.

I would like to comment on a few of these highlights. For starters, we should all be heartened by the strength of our enrollment effort at a time when so many of our sister institutions are struggling. Last year the records fell with an overall enrollment of 7,492 - a tally that included a record freshman class, a record number of graduate students, and record number of students living on campus.

Going into this fall, we knew that another large increase would be unlikely for two reasons. First, we had an unusually large graduating class this past year – about

200 larger than normal, which is great for our graduates but tough on enrollment -- and second, we made a strategic decision to reduce the number and amount of the academic scholarships we award to freshmen in order to protect our budget.

As recently as last month, I thought the combined weight of those two factors would result in final enrollment this fall of about 7250 -- still good and well ahead of where we were three years ago, but a slight decrease nonetheless due to those two factors. However, we are tracking enrollment data each day, and I can tell you that we are outperforming that expectation. As of this morning, we are level with last year's enrollment, which is remarkable given the hole we had to fill. I report this to you with the caveat that classes have not yet started and we have weeks to go between now and census on September 15, but the indicators are encouraging.

A second highlight involves the progress that we have been making on our comprehensive campaign. Just over a year ago, I challenged our Advancement Office and donors to set our sights higher and to move the original campaign goal from \$25 million to \$35 million dollars. That was in the spring of 2016 and Vice President Debbie Shaw and I agreed then that it would likely take three years to reach the new target. Those of you who know anything about fundraising know that the last dollars in any campaign are the toughest to raise.

Here, too, the news is good. Presently we are already closing in on the \$32 million mark and, with a little luck, should reach the new goal sooner than we expected. Total fundraising is up, as are the number of donors giving to UNA.

Many of you deserve credit for contributing to this success. Last year I stood before you at this kickoff event and stressed the importance of faculty and staff giving as it sends a terrific message to our friends and alumni. You responded: combined giving from faculty and staff rose from a rate of 30% in 2015 to 49% last year. That is an amazing increase, and the new rate of giving places us near the top of our peer schools in this category. Now, I must note that the figure of 49% is tantalizingly close to half. I encourage those of you who are giving to continue to do so and those of you who have not to consider joining this cause. Again, the amount does not matter as much as the act of giving and the impact on our rate of participation. It's all about sending a message to our donors.

A personal highlight for me this past year was being able to accompany Dr. Chunsheng Zhang to China to represent our university. Now I'm not going to lie –

we had fun while we were there, and although I had been to China before, I had never visited Beijing or the Great Wall, both of which lived up to their billing. But Dr. Zhang and I also worked hard during this trip. We participated in an international exchange program sponsored by AASCU and I spoke to over 200 representatives of Chinese and American universities involved in that program.

Dr. Zhang and I visited UNA alumni from our China MBA program, we met with existing partner schools to solidify relationships, and we met with government officials and educational representatives to discuss new possibilities.

The potential of these international partnerships was driven home during a meeting we had with a high-ranking education official from Shandong province. He was very interested in what UNA has to offer and questioned us repeatedly about our capacity to work with students from his province. We told him we have some headroom capacity here and could double the size of our international program without too much strain on our infrastructure. Then he asked what would happen if he sent us 500 students, or 1000, or more. You see, his province is home to 100 million people – about 20 times the size of the state of Alabama.

I don't know what I'm asking you to make of that story, other than to report that the growing voice and impact of countries such as China, India, and Brazil is redefining the way we think about our place in the world and how we prepare our students to function in this world. I went to China with a conviction that our international efforts are important; I returned from China with a conviction that they are essential, and I ask you to join me in supporting Dr. Zhang and others involved in expanding our global footprint.

One final comment on the year in review. Dena and I could not have been more proud of our student Mollie Shaefer for overcoming dyslexia and bringing home the first Fulbright Scholarship in the history of UNA. What a great story! The Fulbright is a national honor, and Mollie joins several UNA faculty members who have also been Fulbright recipients. These Fulbright winners taking their place alongside the Grammy and Emmy winners we have produced, the two Pulitzer prizes that have gone to UNA alumni, and the four governors (three from Alabama and one from Texas) that we can claim in our history. The thought occurred to me, how many other universities our size can boast of such a record of success?

These are but a few of the highlights for me from 2016-17. Shifting gears now: What lies ahead? Where do we need to focus our attention in the upcoming year.

We are going to start by doubling down on our efforts to secure additional public funding. It is too mission critical to do otherwise. At UNA, we live in a state that underfunds public higher education, so part of our lament is common to all the public universities in Alabama. But unique to UNA, we have what I call the “208 Problem.” That refers to the fact that we are 208 miles away from Montgomery – further away from the center of political power than any campus in the state.

Over the decades, that 208 miles has translated into a political distance that is as real as the geographic distance. Out of sight, out of mind has been an unfortunate reality for generations of UNA leaders, and today we find ourselves once again near the bottom when it comes to that critical per-student funding comparison.

As you can see, this grievance has a long history. President Bob Guillot was particularly outspoken on this issue, but President E.B. Norton complained about the inequity as far back as the early 1960s, and more recently, President Robert Potts and President Bill Cale went on record expressing similar concerns. Each of these leaders tried very hard to secure equitable funding for UNA, but sadly – after decades of trying – we are still last on the list.

I have challenged my staff to make this a centerpiece of our effort this year. We have to think outside the box and try some new approaches to get our voices heard in Montgomery. Moreover, we have to quit equating public support with state support. State support is important, but we are a public institution and we pump \$316 million per year into the Shoals economy. There are local sources of funding available that can help us, and we are quietly but aggressively working those channels for support.

Facilities will be another focus of our efforts in 2017. We will have a new nursing building underway by the time we gather next year. In terms of new construction, upper division housing remains a priority. Studies show that residential living boosts retention through the programming and academic support we can offer students who live here. Moreover, revenue from dining services and housing falls under the heading of auxiliary revenue and is a bright spot for UNA and many other universities. We have a beautiful and safe campus,

and our students want to live here – so it is incumbent on us to make sure we have enough modern student housing to accommodate student demand.

But our facilities focus will not be limited to new construction. We have older buildings on this campus that are in serious disrepair. The Music Building, to cite one example, does not reflect well on UNA and is not consistent with the outstanding work being done inside by our faculty, staff, and students. I recently met with Governor Ivey as part of a small local delegation, and I used my time with her to show her photographs of that building and to ask for her assistance with the funding needed for renovations. This will not happen overnight, and probably not even this year, but we are laying the groundwork for a discussion that is long overdue about the help needed to modernize our facilities.

In Athletics, this is the year in which we will be making final preparations for our entry into the Division I ranks on July 1, 2018. This one does not give me as much heartburn as you might think, because we have spent so much time planning and fund-raising for this effort that we are very well-prepared. Even so, we need to take every opportunity to remind the public of the timeline for this transition, to make sure everyone understands how the financial model works for D-1.

The best advice I can give you is to periodically review the FAQ we put together last December. Encourage others to review it as well. It is an excellent document with good information about our transition to D-I.

And let's remember the most important point of all: Division I is an *institutional* transition and not one that revolves solely around athletics. Our academic profile will increase as a result of this change. Our fundraising capacity will expand (it already has), and our name recognition to target audiences of prospective students will increase beginning next year as we begin to play teams from large ASUN media markets such as Atlanta, Nashville, and Jacksonville. Stay tuned. This is going to be a ride, and it will be a fun one at that.

As another focus for the upcoming year, I want to comment on something that my team and I have tried to work on since I came to UNA, and that is transparency. It is important to me that you feel informed about campus developments. Toward that end, I have initiated two traditions that I fully intend to continue. One is the campus communique that I send out campus-wide three to four times each academic year. The communiques summarize major developments, and between those releases, we can and do provide updates on

specific issues as needed. In addition, I look forward to working with shared governance leaders to plan our third annual faculty/staff forum for early spring semester. We will continue to adjust the format of that event to make it as accessible and informative as possible.

In keeping with this theme of transparency, we worked with the Board of Trustees this past year to revise their bylaws in order to strengthen the Board's committee system. Because of those changes, the Board now has four major standing committees that cover different functions of university operations and campus life. Each one of these committees will meet quarterly in advance of the regular meeting.

This is a national best practice, and the idea here is that the Board will get to know you better and learn of your plans and aspirations through a more effective division of labor. As a case in point, members of the Academic Affairs Committee attended yesterday's luncheon for new faculty. These are important developments for connecting different parts of our campus together and for helping our Board understand our people and processes.

Speaking of processes, I would be remiss if I left this topic without commenting on recent legal actions involving the University of North Alabama. The "Jane Doe" lawsuit has been especially challenging for us. We were surprised -- shocked is a better description -- by the allegations in the lawsuit and the headlines they created.

Our initial statement represented a strong response to the allegations and the media coverage. Some liked the directness of that message, while others expressed concerns that the language used was harsh and misdirected.

To anyone who may have been offended by that language, I apologize. It is important for me to ensure that our messages unify rather than polarize. With that understanding in mind, we released a revised statement that did a better job of explaining our position. Abraham Lincoln once said: "I do not think much of a man who is not wiser today than he was yesterday" -- and I am significantly older and wiser than I was just a week ago.

Ladies and gentlemen, because of the size and complexity of our university, I cannot stand before you today and promise that mistakes and misconduct by

individuals associated with UNA will not occur. No university president can promise that.

What I can promise you is that, when misconduct occurs, we will protect our students, take appropriate personnel actions, and notify the appropriate authorities. We have always done that, and we always will.

On the other hand, when I believe that allegations against us are wrong or ill informed, I will fight with vigor to defend UNA's honor and good name. I can do no more and you should expect no less of me.

Permit me to close these remarks by talking a bit about the senior-level administrators who make up our Executive Council at the University. Within the last year, we have added Ron Patterson, Evan Thornton, and Ross Alexander to the ranks. I am very proud of all of my colleagues on the EC. These are individuals of great character and integrity, and it is important to me that you get to know them – especially when they are new to EC or new to the University. We have a social planned immediately following this gathering, and I have asked Ron, Evan, and Ross to be available so that as many of you as possible can introduce yourselves and welcome these individuals to our campus.

Each year the EC gets away for a day long retreat before the academic year begins. This year we started that day over at the LaGrange College site in Colbert County. For those of you who have not been there, it is worth the twenty-minute drive from our campus. The location is beautiful and, from that mountaintop, you can see across the river all the way over into Florence. Sadly, none of the original buildings remain, but what does remain is the history of a remarkable institution that is an important part of our lineage. We are the oldest state-chartered university in the state of Alabama because a handful of individuals came together in 1830 with an understanding that education changes lives. That college represented hope for a better life and the aspirations of a people.

Much has changed in the last 187 years. Most notably, the college moved across the river to Florence, and it went through nine name changes from LaGrange College to Florence Wesleyan all the way up to the re-designation as the University of North Alabama in 1974.

What has not changed is what the French call our *raison d'être* -- our reason for being. We still represent hope and the aspirations of a people. We still represent

the ticket to a better life – a better income for our graduates, yes, but far more important is a life filled with ideas and cultural awareness and appreciation of the arts and an understanding of the human condition. And because of your talents and hard work, we still make good on these promises every single day.

So, thank you for all you do for the University of North Alabama. Dena and I wish each of you a productive and enjoyable year. Roar Lions!