

**Annual Address by President Kitts**  
**August 16, 2022**

Good afternoon, everyone. If you're keeping track, it's been 2 years, 11 months, and 27 days since we were last able to hold this annual meeting in person. That's a long time – too long for a University that embraces that notion that we are an organizational family. So when I say that it's good to see you, it's really good to see you!

I'm proud to be joined today by my wife Dena, who I assure you is the best part of Team Kitts. Yes, Dena is here today to support me, and I appreciate that, but she is also here to help me welcome each of you back for the new year and to thank you for all you do for this campus.

My first time out with you for an annual address occurred in August of 2015, at which point I was new on the job with a family that had just moved to the area. Colin was a new student at Kilby that year heading into his fourth grade class at Kilby. That fourth grader is now in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and is over six feet tall. Corbin, our youngest, was just entering kindergarten when we arrived here, and as such the only life he's ever known is that of growing up on a college campus, going to a lot of events with Mom and Dad, and hearing a lion roar next door each morning. He graduated from Kilby last spring and is now in 7<sup>th</sup> grade at Florence Middle School.

Indulge me one final comment about how we measure the passage of time. In preparing these remarks, I found my annual address from that initial appearance in 2015. What I had to say then as a rookie president was okay, but not especially memorable. What did catch my attention is that the final copy of the speech was in 12-point font. I guess I was able to read it okay back then. Today that printout looks to me more like the last line on an eye exam. My notes today are in larger font.

What's in front of us as we gather here this afternoon? Well, we're already dealing with the return of students to campus, and tomorrow marks the beginning of fall semester classes. We'll leave here today and all go back to the work that awaits us. For some that means cleaning buildings or cutting the grass, for others it means teaching classes or supervising labs. Still others will be working from office settings or on practice fields in Alabama heat getting our young people ready for intercollegiate competition. For me, I'll do my normal routine as president today and tomorrow – meetings, emails, and events – and then on Thursday morning will switch hats to become Professor Kitts for students in PS 242.

But regardless of your role in helping us launch this new academic year, I think one thing we can all agree on is that UNA has excellent momentum. And that's a good theme for the day: *momentum*. Now, as qualities go, momentum is easier to feel and sense than to describe. But it's there. I hope you agree that there is a very palpable excitement about where we find ourselves in the fall of 2022.

At UNA, our "today" is very bright and promising because of how we handled "yesterday" – and by that, I mean the Great Interruption, born of the global pandemic that sent shockwaves across higher education in 2020 and 2021. Colleges and universities closed, some temporarily and others for good. Enrollments plummeted. Instruction moved to online platforms with uneven results. The corresponding loss of jobs in the faculty and staff ranks across the country was unprecedented. It moved from 5% to 10% to 15% and beyond as traditional revenue sources dried up.

Meanwhile, what happened here at UNA? This campus was fresh off significant upgrades to its online learning program by the time the pandemic hit. Thus, the pivot to move classes into remote format in the Spring of 2020 was far less disruptive here than elsewhere. We also saw the handwriting on the wall and became the first university in Alabama to declare that all instruction in the Summer of 2020 would continue to be online. Students responded well to that early certainty, and our enrollment that summer – the first term to launch since coronavirus became a household word – exceeded what it had been prior to the pandemic.

Then we looked ahead to the start of the new academic year with the sober realization that this pandemic was going to stay with us much longer than we had originally thought. We came together as a campus community, in the best spirit of shared governance and led by a team of campus experts who served so ably on our COVID-19 Recovery Task Force. Working together, we made the decision to reopen campus in the fall of 2020 and to commit ourselves to giving our students something approximating a normal experience in an environment that was anything but normal.

Our enrollment in the Fall of 2020 was up, and it was up again in the Spring of 2021. As Provost Alexander likes to say, we were growing before the pandemic, we grew during the pandemic, and our growth continues today as coronavirus appears to be entering a more endemic state.

Currently, we are the fastest growing university in Alabama, and more records are certain to fall this year. We won't have final census numbers until late October but can predict that our enrollment will go over 9,000 students for the first time. More importantly, that growth will be broadly based with increases in all major categories of students: undergraduate and graduate, on-campus and online, domestic and international. Our freshman class will be up approximately 10% over last year, and we can also tell you that we will have more students living on campus and in campus-affiliated housing than at any point in our 192-year history.

These numbers are very good and very impressive. But to be clear, this increase in enrollment cannot and should not be an end in itself. It is important only insofar as it helps us extend educational opportunities to more students and to provide the revenue we need to ensure that this institution remains on a firm financial footing.

Qualitative growth, best evidenced by the dramatic expansion of our academic profile, is just as important as the final tally of students. The markers of excellence signaling that qualitative growth are all around us. In recent years we have launched our first two doctoral programs, planned for a third, and expanded graduate degree options to support regional needs, help our communities grow, and increase the quality of life for citizens in our service area.

At the undergraduate level, we have grown the old Honors Program into a healthy and vibrant Honors College that proudly carries the name of our beloved alumni Delores and Weldon Cole. Well over 10% of our undergraduates are now part of the Cole Honors College, and there is more growth yet to come. Other markers of excellence include student success with the Fulbright Awards competition as well as the outstanding scores posted by our graduates on national exams in accounting and nursing. On top of that are the many academic innovations being guided by the Provost and college deans.

Others are taking note of what's going on here. Many of you are familiar with the *U.S. News and World Report* annual ranking of colleges. Much of that methodology is reputational in nature, with all the subjectivity that comes with that, but for what it's worth our reputation among our peers is growing. We broke into the *U.S. News* Top 20 ranking among public regionals in the South for the first time a few years back. Two years ago, we had moved up to #17 on that list, and last year we were at #13.

Another way of thinking about momentum is through my favorite topic, Project 208. We launched that initiative five years ago to address the funding gap that has long separated UNA from our peer schools in Alabama. Since its inception, we have cut UNA's annual funding deficit in half.

In dollar terms, we have grown from an annual state appropriation of \$26 million in 2015 to \$45 million for the new fiscal year that begins on October 1. Again, these are recurring funds, so that improvement of \$19 million per year in state funding translates into almost \$200 million in additional funding over the course of a decade. This is great news, as these dollars allow us to fund your programs, fill positions on a selective basis, and make good on periodic COLAs and other salary enhancements ranging from increases for promotion to staff merit pay.

But to be clear, while our progress on Project 208 means that we are *closing* the gap, a gap still remains that continues to leave us in last place among Alabama universities in per-student funding. And that is unacceptable. Look at what we're doing with sub-par funding and then dare to imagine with me what we could be doing if only we were funded at an average level. Project 208 remains a priority project for me and my team.

Switching gears a bit, let's talk about our move to Division I athletics. The process of moving to D-I has had an unusually long history at UNA. Discussions on this topic began in the 1990s, and the Board of Trustees voted to endorse move to D-I in 2011. However, it took us until 2016 to secure an invitation from an appropriate conference. We began play in the ASUN Conference in 2018 and wrapped up the four-year transition required of all reclassifying institutions on August 3. It's difficult to overstate the amount of hard work that went into that successful outcome. I know you join me in saluting the Transition Committee and the coaches and staff in Athletics for leading the way with this initiative.

I'll take this opportunity to reiterate that the primary importance of D-1 is that it signifies the emergence of our University as a whole, and the fact that it gives us a much larger platform with which to celebrate your successes and promote our brand. As we have done during the transition, we will continue to follow a sound financial plan that makes sense for UNA and Lion Athletics, and we will always respect and maintain the proper balance between academics, athletics, and other parts of the University.

Dr. Jason McNeal, our longtime Advancement consultant, likes to say that success breeds success when it comes to philanthropy. That's proving true for UNA as our alumni and friends have shown their appreciation for your successes by sharing gifts with the University as never before. To put this in some context, our previous best year ever in fundraising was FY 18 (pre-pandemic) when we raised \$12.6 million. With six weeks still remaining in the current fiscal year, our Advancement team has already brought in over \$18 million in gifts. Annual giving is up, as is the number of unique donors to the University. And UNA's total endowment, which was just over \$25 million back in 2015, has now doubled in size and has crested the \$50 million mark for the first time in our history.

I could go on and on, but you get it. From academics to campus life, and from advancement to athletics, there are so many good things going on at UNA. But you've also heard me state that we need to make sure that the world beyond this campus and beyond this community knows what's going on here.

With that in mind, I want to begin wrapping up these remarks by sharing with you a personal anecdote. I was invited recently to a dinner in the Huntsville area that featured about fifty leaders from across the northern tier of the state. Along with a small delegation from the Shoals, Huntsville itself was very well represented, as were communities such as Athens, Scottsboro, Guntersville, Cullman, Madison, and Fort Payne. Most of those in attendance were state lawmakers, federal officials, business owners, mayors, and economic development officials.

As we worked the room and made introductions, what struck me was the reaction when individuals saw my name tag. When they read "UNA," their faces would light up and then they would offer a compliment: *UNA is helping my community so much*; or *My daughter is at UNA and absolutely loving it*; or *I'm really impressed by your growth*. These statements were as genuine as they were spontaneous. The excitement in the room for our University was incredible.

The highlight of the evening was when our waiter, a young high school student, approached our table. He had no idea who I was, but in response to a question from another attendee said that he was a rising high school senior with the dream of attending UNA. He told us that many of his friends go here, love it here, and have convinced him this is the place he needs to be. My only regret is that it happened so quickly that I didn't get a chance to capture the moment on video.

Now let's tie that story back to where I started my remarks this afternoon. Momentum is more conceptual than tangible. But ladies and gentlemen, we've captured it at UNA. It was in the room in Huntsville that night, it was on that young man's face when he talked about his future, it was in the air at graduation a few weeks ago, and it's here in Norton Auditorium this afternoon.

So I'll close with two thoughts. The first is encouragement to keep this good thing going. What we're building here is special, and it's sustainable. But we must never take that for granted. We are thriving because we are working hard and working together. We trust each other, and from the longest tenured Board member down to the newest employee, we focus every day on making the best decisions we can for the 9,000+ young men and women that have honored us by selecting us as their college home. What a privilege it is to serve them!

The final takeaway, and I want you to hear this last in the hope that it will stick, is a very sincere *Thank You!* Dena and I mean that from the bottom of our hearts. The success we're experiencing here is a group effort of the first order, and you each play a role in it. We want you to internalize that and to share in the joy as we celebrate the emergence of this very special university and begin to look ahead to a third century of educational excellence. That's something to ROAR about!

Thank you for your attention today. I hope you have a great year.