



President's Communique

Dr. Ken Kitts

January 14, 2026

Colleagues: Happy New Year! Please see below for updates on topics of interest as we begin to move deeper into the 2026 spring semester.

Legislative Session: Yesterday marked the start of the 2026 legislative session in Alabama. Governor Kay Ivey delivered her final State of the State address last night, which is normally followed soon thereafter by the release of her executive budget recommendations for the coming fiscal year. We'll be paying close attention to what she recommends for UNA, of course, and then will continue to engage with key officials as the Education Trust Fund budget moves first to the Alabama House of Representatives and then to the Senate for consideration. Because this is an election year, the legislative process will move more quickly than usual. We should know details on the state portion of our budget for FY 27 by the end of April. The general election for all state and federal offices on the ballot in 2026 will take place on November 3.

Lion Habitat: Much work occurred at the lion enclosure over the holiday break. Crews tore down most of the old fencing, filled in the small pond in the middle of the habitat as a safety measure, and added sod to make the area more accessible for pedestrians. This is all in keeping with plans previously announced to open that area and create "temporary green space" for our campus community to enjoy. For the near term, we do not anticipate any significant additional modifications to the site as we are committed to minimizing costs, which were paid by private donations already in hand. The idea is still to repurpose the area on a temporary basis while we give Vice President Kevin Haslam and his team in Advancement time to work with our largest donors to see if a lead gift or gifts might be forthcoming to restart the conversation about bringing new live lions to campus – and in a manner consistent with the recommendations of the Special Committee on Live Lions. The total cost to make that happen would be in the \$5-7 million range. A lead gift would typically be expected to cover at least 60% of that amount in order to support the launch of a project-specific fundraising campaign.

Light the Fountain: It's hard to believe that it's been ten years since Light the Fountain began. Over time, what started as a modest campus gathering and celebration of the return of warmer weather has grown into a major event that now stands as UNA's most recognized tradition. For 2026, we're going to mark this milestone anniversary with an expanded range of festivities that will include a drone show, fireworks, games, music, giveaways, and (drum roll, please) ten food trucks. We are grateful to Chick-fil-A for its sponsorship that has allowed us to grow this event. Please mark your calendars for March 12 and join us as we welcome our beautiful fountain back to life with the *Best College Block Party in Alabama*.



Weather Guidance: Speaking of the anticipated return of warmer temperatures, spring represents the most active time for severe weather in our area. The updated weather guidance we distributed in December 2024 continues to serve us well. It aligns with National Weather Service terminology on threat levels and gives us a range of options with which to prepare when storms are in the forecast. Please take time to review these options on the University's website (search "Weather Guidance") and remember also that the new Lion Alert App provides all members of our campus community with easy access to NWS alerts and warnings.

Athletics and Academics: I recently came across an old document in my office which showed that the average GPA of all student-athletes at UNA was a 2.54 in 1997. Last year, that average GPA for our student-athletes hit an all-time high of 3.26. That's a very significant improvement in academic performance! As some of you might remember, one of the reasons for our decision to pursue Division I status back in 2016-17 was the Academic Progress Rate (APR) metric and related academic expectations that are much more embedded at that higher classification level. Taken on the whole, this outcome is a tremendous commentary on the priorities of our colleagues in Lion Athletics as well as on the faculty and staff who work with these students on a daily basis to help them achieve success on and off the field.

Fundraising: Progress toward the goal of \$100 million for the “Shine On, Gold” comprehensive campaign has been excellent thanks to the generosity of our alumni and friends. We are nearing the \$96 million mark in gifts and pledges received to date. Of special note, campaign expenses – i.e., the money spent to raise money – are coming in at just over 8% of funds received. This figure compares favorably with expense ratios for comparable initiatives of this size in higher education. For those of you who have not yet had the opportunity to experience the joy of giving by participating in the campaign, I invite you to join Dena and me in doing so. Every donor who gives a gift of \$100 or more will be noted on the Donor Recognition Wall at the conclusion of the campaign. As we prepare to celebrate the success of the campaign, our focus will be on thanking those who have given in support of UNA, deploying resources efficiently and in keeping with donor wishes, and maintaining the excellent fundraising momentum we have established.

UNA Branding: As many of you know, Lee Taylor and the staff of the Office of Enrollment Marketing and Digital Communications initiated a branding study last year to look at the University’s graphical representations of identity and mission. After consulting with over 150 faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community stakeholders, this exercise is drawing to a close. There will be opportunities later this semester to learn more about the results of the study and how it will be used to sharpen our message and enhance the way we present UNA to a larger audience.

SACSCOC: Dr. Stephen Pruitt began work last fall as the new president and CEO of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. He has made it clear that he is committed to making the Association’s processes and policies more user-friendly for member schools. We welcome this new emphasis from our regional accrediting body. With our own Dr. Lorie Johnson in the lead, we are partnering with the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE) to host Dr. Pruitt at UNA later this semester for a statewide meeting of campus presidents, provosts, and SACS liaisons.

The Value of a College Degree, Part II: The thoughts that follow continue a topic from my November communique in which I noted the growing chorus of national voices that are openly questioning the value of what we do in higher education. In this second installment, I want to highlight that, however wide of the mark some of these claims might be, they are nonetheless altering the perception of higher education in the court of public opinion. Recent data from the Gallup Poll illustrates the point. That organization polls periodically on the question: “How important is a college education today?” In 2010, 75% of respondents said it was “very important.” By 2019, that figure had dropped to 51%, and in last year’s poll the number reporting that a college education is very important had dropped to just 35% -- an all-time low as these responses go and less than half the number who voiced confidence in colleges fifteen years ago. This dramatic drop in support should get the attention of anyone who works in our sector. Such a crisis of public confidence, coming as it does on top of the well-chronicled decrease in the number of high school graduates, can only result in more enrollment and financial pressures for higher education. I suspect that the reasons for this poll result are varied: a job market that’s been unusually hot, changes in the economy and the advent of AI, and slowness on the part of some colleges -- not UNA! -- to read the room and adapt to changes in the marketplace. But with these factors duly noted, I return to where we started this discussion, which is the steady drumbeat of pundits, influencers, and talking heads who never miss an opportunity to accentuate the negative when it comes to higher education and argue with great conviction that today’s students (but, strangely, not their own children) would be far better off foregoing college and heading straight into the workforce. Most of these attacks are grossly unfair and lacking in merit. Yet, as the old saying goes, perception can become reality -- especially when claims like this go unchecked. The good news is that there’s good news in this otherwise dismal equation. At UNA and many other universities like us, we have a great story to tell about student outcomes, the marketability and success of our graduates, and the affordability of college. Simply put, the facts are on our side! I’ll have more to say about this in a third and final installment on this topic in my next communique.

Important Dates:

- January 19 University Closed for Martin Luther King Jr. Day
- February 20 University Closed for Winter Break
- February 26 End of First 8-Week Session Classes
- February 27 Mid-Term
- March 4 Start of Second 8-Week Session Classes
- March 12 Light the Fountain
- March 23-27 Spring Break

Dena and I thank you for all you do for the University of North Alabama. Stay warm, Lions!