



President's Communique

Dr. Ken Kitts

April 10, 2026

Colleagues: Please see below for updates on topics of interest as we enter the final weeks of the Spring 2026 term.

Service Awards Luncheon: The annual Faculty-Staff Luncheon is set for Thursday, April 30, in the GUC Banquet Halls. As per usual, we will use this opportunity to recognize recent retirees and honor those in our ranks who have reached milestones in their service history with UNA. I encourage you to attend this luncheon to enjoy good food and good company as we celebrate friends who have made significant contributions to our University.

Memoir and Documentary: As many of you know, Dr. Wendell Gunn retired from service on the UNA Board of Trustees last year. Fortunately for us, however, this famous alumnus and civil rights icon remains strongly connected to his *alma mater*. Working with Dr. Matt Schoenbachler of our Department of History, Wendell is nearing completion of the long-awaited memoir that will chronicle the story of his remarkable entry into Florence State College in 1963 as well as the events that followed -- inclusive of his storied career in business and government. A companion documentary on Dr. Gunn's story is now in production, led by acclaimed filmmaker and storyteller Norton Dill. Fittingly, Mr. Dill is the nephew of President E.B. Norton, whose time in office (1948-72) coincided with Wendell's arrival on campus. Alabama Public Television has expressed interest in airing the documentary this fall.

Hadrian Plant: A major development in the life of the Shoals community occurred on March 20 with a ribbon cutting at the former railcar manufacturing plant near Cherokee. With local, state, and federal officials present, representatives from Hadrian, a maritime technology company, announced plans to invest over \$2 billion into that mile-long production facility (it's worth the trip if you haven't seen it) to repurpose it for the manufacture of component parts for U.S. Navy submarines. The operation is expected to bring over 1,000 high-paying jobs to the Shoals with the prospect of expanding employment opportunities in the future as suppliers and other businesses seek to locate nearby. I encourage all members of our campus community to follow this development closely. This is our backyard. Accordingly, it is important to me that UNA factors prominently in discussions related to providing the workforce for the Hadrian plant as well as being recognized for the cultural and athletic events that make our region an attractive place to live. We look forward to working with the Shoals Economic Development Authority and other community partners on this project.

Spring Commencement: Due to continuing growth in the size of our graduating classes, we have had to increase the number of ceremonies for spring commencement from five to six. On Friday, May 8, we will host the first three ceremonies for graduates of the Anderson College of Nursing and Health Professions, the Spencer College of Education and Human Sciences, and the Sanders College of Business and Technology. On Saturday, May 9, we will host three additional ceremonies, the first two of which will focus on graduates of the College of Arts, Sciences, and Engineering, and the last one featuring a second round of graduates from the Sanders College. Our speaker on May 8 will be alumna Sherri Stewart, who had a distinguished career at Purdue University and is known nationally for her advocacy for women's sports. Our speaker on May 9 will be Rep. Danny Garrett of Trussville who, as a senior legislative leader, chairs the Ways and Means Education Committee in the Alabama House of Representatives.

State Budget: The Alabama Legislature wrapped up its annual session yesterday inclusive of final decisions on the higher education budget for the fiscal year beginning October 1, 2026. UNA fared well in those deliberations. Our recurring budget for FY27 will increase by 6%, which places us in the top three universities for percentage increase once again. These extra dollars, coupled with a generous allocation of one-time funding, will enable us to meet our needs for the coming year in filling vacant positions, funding promotions as well as merit and equity-based salary adjustments, making headway on deferred maintenance, and beginning to plan for the next cost of living adjustment in 2027. If you're keeping track, this means that over the years since we launched Progress 208, the regular (recurring) portion of our state budget has more than doubled from \$28 million for FY17 to \$61 million for FY27.

Other Bills: In addition to the budget, we have also been monitoring other bills that deal with higher education. HB580, the subject of the Provost’s April 7 message to campus, passed the Senate late yesterday and now is on its way to the Governor’s Office. We are already examining the final language of the legislation (the bill changed several times during the last week) and will consult with internal and external stakeholders to determine next steps and ensure a smooth implementation that aligns with our campus culture, traditions, and values. Another bill, HB565, has already been signed into law as a first step towards bringing performance-based funding to Alabama. We welcome this development, given UNA’s upward trajectory and demonstrated track record of success. It reflects our long-standing request for state funding to be tied to more objective criteria. Under the terms of this enactment, each university will begin work on identifying campus-specific metrics and goals that must be reached within three years in order to qualify for supplemental support from this new pool of funds. Finally, we are engaged with the Alabama Commission on Higher Education with regard to the “Move on When Ready Act,” a bill which became law last year but is only now being rolled out for execution. The act facilitates early entry to college for high school juniors and seniors who meet specified eligibility criteria.

Premier Awards: I am pleased to announce that UNA has its first recipient of the prestigious Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship. Lydia Uptain is a biochemistry and molecular biology major who has won many UNA research awards, presented at conferences, and worked on scholarly articles. “The Goldwater” is the most prestigious STEM award for U.S. undergraduates, and UNA’s entry onto this list stands as a new marker of excellence of which we all should be very proud. Relatedly, we continue our success with student Fulbright Awards. Earlier this week, Dr. Matt Price, Director for Premier Awards and Scholarly Engagement, received notice that student Jali Gann from Secondary Education/Language Arts has been selected for the Student Fulbright Program to Taiwan as an English Teaching Assistant. This brings our total number of student Fulbright recipients to 16, all of which have occurred since 2017.

The Value of a College Degree, Part III: For my third and final installment on this topic, I will return to my previously stated assurance that the facts are on our side when it comes to the debate over the value of a college degree. This assertion may come as a surprise given the many loud voices on the national scene that seem all too eager to write the obituary for American higher education. Some of those voices belong to those who are misinformed. Others are better informed but still choose to create a false narrative in order to further a particular agenda. But, as citizens of the higher education community, we should, and must, insist on a higher standard for making and evaluating claims. After all, the Latin motto of UNA is *Veritas Lux Orbis Terrarum* – translated as “Truth is the Light of the World.” And the truth of the matter is that the sky is not falling. To the contrary, the government’s own data as produced by the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that *educational attainment continues to be the best predictor of individual earnings and career success*. The gap between those with baccalaureate degrees and those without is wide, and it’s getting larger instead of smaller. So, in monetary terms alone, college continues to stand out as a provably wise investment – and that’s before we get into the more important benefits that college brings to an individual in terms of enhancing critical thinking, building leadership capacity, learning to work with others, and broadening one’s world view. To this I would add that completion of a four-year degree sends a great message about the graduate’s ability to take on a long-term project and see it through to completion. That’s no small thing in an age in which attention spans are measured in minutes. Life is a marathon, not a sprint, and by any objective measure college remains an excellent way to prepare for it. Our work here is important.

Important Dates:

- April 27 University Awards Gala
- April 30 Annual Faculty-Staff Luncheon and Service Awards
- May 8-9 Spring Commencement Ceremonies
- May 11 May Intersession Classes Begin
- May 25 University Closed for Memorial Day
- June 2 Summer I and Full Summer Session Classes Begin
- June 19 University Closed for Juneteenth Holiday
- June 30 Summer II Session Classes Begin
- July 3 University Closed for Independence Day Weekend
- July 31 Summer Commencement Ceremonies

See next page for a special new feature.



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

[Note: In keeping with our focus on our long and rich history of the University of North Alabama, I would like to introduce this first “Bicentennial Moment” below as an appendix to my communique. It is my hope to use these periodic messages as a platform to showcase the people, places, and programs that have contributed to the UNA story over the last two centuries.]

Bicentennial Moment: Honoring UNA’s History

How many times do we walk past this bronze statue adjacent to the Memorial Amphitheater at the center of campus? The statue commemorates First Lieutenant Chadwick McFall Barber, who was killed in action in the Republic of South Vietnam on January 8, 1969, while serving with the U.S. Army’s 1st Cavalry Division. As noted on the accompanying plaque, the memorial was donated by members of the McFall family. Chad Barber graduated from Coffee High School in Florence, and then went on to attend Florence State University where he majored in history. He earned his degree in 1967 and commissioned as an officer in the Army through our ROTC program. Lt. Barber was one of eleven members of UNA’s Lion Battalion who died in the Vietnam War.



Chad Barber’s yearbook photo in the *Diorama*.