

**Annual Address by President Kitts
August 15, 2023**

Thank you, Provost Kinney, and good afternoon, everyone. I appreciate you coming out today. It's a beautiful day out there with the sun shining and the humidity giving us a break. Dena and I look forward to enjoying ice cream with you as soon as this event is over. Speaking of my wife – she's here today supporting me, but in two weeks, our roles will be reversed when I get to sit in the audience and cheer her on as the keynote speaker for this year's Shoals Woman of the Year luncheon. As you know, this isn't the first honor to come Dena's way recently based on her work as First Lady and as an ambassador for UNA. I confess to being one proud husband.

Please permit me a few other acknowledgments. In the Office of the President, Ms. Elgie Garner has taken lead in planning this event along with Catherine White and others. Elgie has been in this role for just over a year now and has done a phenomenal job assisting me, processing requests from on and off campus, and helping Dena coordinate events and activities. Thank you, Elgie and Catherine, for all you have done to bring us together today. We're also continuing the tradition of inviting officers of the UNA Board of Trustees to attend our annual meeting, and this afternoon we are pleased to welcome Trustee Nancy Sanford in her role as Board vice chair.

So, as we gather this afternoon on the eve of a new academic year, it's fair to ask: *What is the state of our University?* In a word, it's good. In fact, it's very good. Let's take a few minutes to talk about what's going on here and support that

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residents living on campus and
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Consider, for example, the emergence of the Cole Honors College as a major force on our campus. The College is home to almost 15% of our undergraduate population. Consider also that in 2021, we launched our first two doctoral programs, and in May we graduated the first PhD recipient in the history of the institution. Along the way, two doctoral programs become three, and we have plans to add a fourth.

Our students and alumni continue to shine. We recently added two more student Fulbrights to our list of award winners, and a recent graduate brought home her second Pulitzer Prize. Meanwhile, our Department of Entertainment Industry continues to feature Professor John Paul White in its faculty lineup. John Paul graduated here in 1999 and has earned *four* Grammy Awards in the course of his brilliant career.

I could go on, but you get the point. PhDs, Grammys, Pulitzers, Fulbrights, Honors Graduates -- it's no wonder our academic reputation is soaring and that last year we recorded our first-ever Top 10 ranking by *U.S. News and World Report*.

None of this is coincidental. The success of our students and alumni is a direct reflection on the people in this room. You teach well, you advise well, and you coach well. You also make sure that our students have a safe, clean campus and the support system they need to flourish. Dena and I see you turn small interactions with students into teachable moments that all become part of the UNA experience.

The physical improvements on our campus are also impressive. Work on the Computing and Mathematics Building is coming along nicely and is on schedule. That project will include a renovation of Founders Hill and the Memorial Amphitheater. As a result of significant federal support courtesy of Congressman Robert Aderholt, we are close to having the funding we need to begin work on a new Engineering Building that will support our emphasis on workforce development. Another issue of importance to our campus is pedestrian safety, and I am pleased to report that the Florence City Council is expected to vote today to begin work on the safety enhancements on the Pine Street Bridge.

satisfaction. The average for institutions such as ours is around 70%. We've always outperformed our peers and typically have been in the mid-70s on this metric. In 2020 we reached a high-water mark of 77.3%.

This year's number is not yet final. However, it is trending up significantly and tracking toward a new record of almost 79%. That's off the charts as regional universities go, and it is a wonderful commentary on each of you. From faculty to the grounds crew, and from athletics to counselors and housing officials, I want you to understand this increase as validation of your efforts. Our colleagues in Admissions, Graduate Studies, Online Education, and International Affairs – they all do a brilliant job of getting the students here – but you *keep them here* by delivering on the UNA promise in a big way.

Speaking of promises, we continue to live up to our commitment to welcome students, faculty, and staff from all backgrounds. I'm proud that the mosaic of this campus is as rich and varied as any in the state, and I want to thank all those who lead and contribute to this important endeavor. We should also take this opportunity to salute those who came before us and helped open doors that previously had been closed.

With that in mind, next month is the 60th anniversary of Wendell Gunn's entry into our student ranks and the resulting desegregation of UNA. Back in 1963, Wendell's first day as a Florence State student was September 11. Next month, on that same date, we're going to host a special ceremony to commemorate that milestone anniversary, celebrate Dr. Gunn, and give our students an opportunity to interact with him.

Switching gears, I'd like to offer an update on our budget. In the 2023 legislative session, we finished second among all state universities in terms of the percentage increase in our appropriation. That translates into almost \$4 million in new annual funding for UNA, plus another \$17 million in one-time funds for maintenance and capital costs. These new dollars are enormously helpful. We are grateful to state officials and key members of our local delegation for making that happen.

At the same time, the overall increases in educational funding this year were smaller than anyone anticipated. The \$4 million increase for us is less than the amount needed to get us off the bottom of the list in funding. Accordingly, our budget for the upcoming fiscal year will be tight. We'll have to be careful with vacant positions and careful with creating new personnel lines. My top budgetary priority is to deliver a cost-of-living adjustment in the new fiscal year that begins on October 1.

Please remember that the final approval of the budget for FY 24 won't occur until the Board meeting in September. However, I can tell you that the trustees have signaled early support for our proposal. Barring anything unforeseen, we hope to have good news to share with you on September 8.

One final comment on our budget: I have on my desk an interesting report on comparative state funding for Alabama's universities from 2017, which is the year we launched Project 208, to the present. Over this six-year period, the other thirteen public universities in the state recorded increases in funding that range from a low of 37% to a high of 71%. UNA leads the pack w

