FALL 2026

UAH gazine

A PUBLICATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IN HUNTSVILLE



MORE THAN A MASCOT

Charger Blue gets a fresh look and a bigger role across campus and in the UAH community

ACADEMICS

EXPANDED INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY STUDIES PROGRAM PREPARES THE NEXT GENERATION OF NATIONAL SECURITY PROFESSIONALS

RESEARCH

UAH HOSTS SQC COLLOQUIUM TO ADVANCE SOUTHEASTERN QUANTUM TECHNOLOGIES

CAMPUS

UAH STUDENT-ATHLETES SET INSTITUTIONAL RECORD FOR D2 ADA ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

UAH AT A GLANCE
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A NEW BLUE

Charger Blue has been part of the UAH experience for nearly four decades. Now, with a fresh look and a new collection of illustrations, he's ready to bring even more Charger spirit to campus and the community.

02 University Announcements

03 A message from UAH President Donald J. Leo

04 New faces, familiar traditions: A new semester begins at UAH

06 Charger Blue evolves as UAH expands mascot's role across campus and community

08 Dr. Hyochol Brian Ahn, the new College of Nursing dean, appreciates cross-discipline collaboration, community ties

09 Meet Dr. Srinath Ekkad, new Dean of the UAH College of Engineering

10 Three doctoral students earn NSF research fellowships

11 UAH expands Intelligence and Security Studies programs

12 UAH alum Mike Wicks donates $1.5M to Jones Engineering Building

13 Dr. Amit and Dr. Aruna Arora donate $100,000 gift to Honors College; Astrion's $75,000 gift supports new anechoic chamber

14 Mental Health First Aid teaches faculty, staff how to help in crisis situations

15 Career Connections: UAH students earn statewide honors, highlighting the university's commitment to career-connected education and employer partnerships

16 UAH-led Alabama Shield 2026 puts drone technology in realistic disaster scenarios; UAH hosts colloquium to advance Southeastern quantum technologies

17 Student teams soar to top finishes in 2026 CanSat Competition

18 UAH researchers discover a new species of cavefish near campus; an innovative plasma technology could transform laundry and sanitation on future space missions

19 UAH alumnus Kristian Miasek takes an unforgettable F-5 flight over the Space Coast

20 UAH student-athletes set institutional record for D2 ADA Academic Achievement Awards

21 UAH Athletics honors Julie Woltjen, retired administrator and coach

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UAHMagazine

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UNIVERSITY **ANNOUNCEMENTS**



Dr. Gary Zank received the 2026 Committee on Space Research (COSPAR) Space Science Award, and a minor planet was named in his honor. Zank, director of the Center for Space Plasma and Aeronomic Research (CSPAR), received the award at the 46th COSPAR Scientific Assembly in Florence, Italy, which brought together researchers to share advances across space science, including heliophysics, astrophysics, planetary science and space weather.



Professor Emeritus Ramón Cerro was inducted into the Latin American Academy of Science, one of the most distinguished scientific academies in Latin America and the Caribbean. Cerro's induction reflects decades of scholarly achievement, international collaboration and leadership in chemical engineering research and education.



UAH added 29 new faculty members at the start the fall 2026 semester: seven, College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences; two, College of Education, Sport, and Human Sciences; seven, College of Engineering; seven, College of Nursing; five, College of Science, plus one jointly in Engineering and Science. Dr. David Puleo, provost and executive vice president for academic affairs, offered these words of welcome: "Through your teaching, you will shape the trajectories of our students' lives; through your research, scholarship and creative work, you will advance knowledge and strengthen the community and world we share."



UAH welcomed its first Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence, **Professor Giovanni Morales Medina** of the Universidad Industrial de Santander (UIS) in Bucaramanga, Colombia. Morales Medina joins the Department of Chemical and Materials Engineering through the Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence program, bringing an international perspective and expertise in chemical engineering to the UAH community.



Dr. John Bennewitz received a $599,927 National Science Foundation (NSF) Faculty Early Career Development (CAREER) Award to investigate how ammonia-based additives can improve the combustion performance of renewable fuels. The research will examine ways to increase the efficiency of renewable fuels while advancing understanding of combustion processes.



A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

It has been an exciting first semester as president of The University of Alabama in Huntsville. I have enjoyed getting to know our student body, engaging with our faculty and staff, and listening to everyone about what makes UAH special. I am impressed by the quality of our academic programs, the dedication of our people and the important work happening across our campus.

I had the honor of addressing our campus community last month to discuss our upcoming priorities. The theme of my first presidential address, Building Our Future Together, reflects both UAH's nearly six decades of progress and the work ahead. As I shared, "building" has been part of UAH's identity since the beginning. We have built programs in education and research, while preparing the workforce not only in engineering and science, but also in healthcare, business, education, the humanities and the arts. Now, our focus is on preparing our institution for the changes happening in our communities and those that will come in the years ahead.

That means further strengthening our academic enterprise and enhancing operational excellence. It also means making UAH a hub for education and research that is indispensable to the success of the Greater Huntsville and North Alabama region, while elevating our stature across Alabama and beyond the state.

We are already seeing encouraging signs of progress. This fall, UAH welcomed 1,276 new freshmen, marking the third consecutive year of freshman class growth. Enrollment among new freshmen from Alabama increased 10%, while new freshman enrollment from Madison County increased 15%. New graduate enrollment also increased for the first time in four years. These gains reflect the strength of our academic programs and the work of faculty and staff who help attract talented students to UAH.

Our location in Huntsville positions us to support the success of this region so that Alabama prospers and our nation thrives. Our students and graduates are highly sought after in the Greater Huntsville area and beyond, and our academic programs and research help address the needs of our region and nation.

As I mentioned last month, none of what we want to accomplish can be done alone. We must collaborate across our institution and with our local communities, regional partners and state leaders to fulfill our mission as a public research university. As we approach UAH's 60th anniversary in 2029, I look forward to working together to prepare UAH for the next 60 years and beyond.

Go Chargers!

Donald J. Leo, Ph.D. ■



NEW FACES, FAMILIAR TRADITIONS

A new semester begins at UAH

The start of a new academic year brought a familiar energy to UAH as thousands of students returned to campus, new Chargers found their footing and the university welcomed its largest incoming freshman class in recent years.

NINE DAYS TO GET CONNECTED

Week of Welcome (WOW), held Aug. 14-22, helped set the tone for the semester with nine days of traditions, campus events and opportunities to connect. Approximately 2,000 students arrived during Residence Hall Move-In Days, followed by more than 280 programs hosted by academic colleges, departments and student organizations.

"Week of Welcome is about connecting every student to the people, programs and spaces that make UAH feel like home," said Megan Wilkinson, director of Student Life. "Whether they're moving into a residence hall for the first time or returning for another year, we want students to leave the week feeling connected, confident and excited about the community they're joining."

The week's 18 signature Tradition Events included Chargers After Dark: Casino Night, Rock the Rec, Leaving Your Mark, Co-op Kickoff and Service Saturday. The Charger Blue BBQ brought students together for food, music and giveaways, followed by a fireworks display. The Association for Campus Entertainment also hosted a new outdoor concert on The Slab featuring Carver Commodore.

A GROWING CHARGER COMMUNITY

The energy surrounding the start of the semester was matched by the students joining the UAH community this fall. The university welcomed 1,276 new freshmen from 38 states, marking the third consecutive year of first-year class growth. The incoming class also posted an average ACT score of 27 and average GPA of 4.0, representing the strongest academic profile in recent UAH history.







▶ A fresh look at Greek life: The Go Greek! Block Party gave students a chance to learn more about fraternity and sorority life during WOW, kicking off a renewed focus on Greek Life at UAH. Bid Day and Greek Week followed in September, bringing new and returning students together around Greek traditions and community.

UAH's growth among Alabama students was particularly notable. New freshman enrollment from Alabama increased 10% over last year, while new freshmen from Madison County increased 15%. Overall, new first-year undergraduate enrollment rose 4.6%, while new graduate enrollment increased 2.4%, marking the first increase in new graduate enrollment in four years.

Together, the new class and the activity surrounding the start of the semester point to a campus community that continues to grow — not only in numbers, but in the opportunities, connections and experiences that define life as a Charger. ■

A NEW BLUE

CHARGER BLUE EVOLVES AS UAH EXPANDS MASCOT'S ROLE ACROSS CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY

Charger Blue has been a familiar face at UAH for nearly four decades, cheering on Charger Athletics, entertaining students and making appearances at events across campus. Now, as UAH continues to evolve its branding architecture, Charger Blue is stepping into an expanded role as a more visible goodwill ambassador for the university.

As the next phase of UAH's recent branding initiative, the university is introducing a new collection of Charger Blue mascot illustrations that will give the character a more versatile presence across university communications, events, merchandise and campus experiences.

"This is the next step in bringing our brand to life in more ways and in more places," said Kristina Hendrix, vice president for strategic communications at UAH. "Charger Blue is one of the most recognizable and beloved parts of the UAH experience, and giving him a more versatile visual identity allows us to bring that personality into more of our campus and community interactions."

The mascot evolution also includes a refreshed Charger Blue costume, which recently made its debut during UAH's Week of Welcome (WOW) activities. While the updated costume maintains the familiar look students, alumni and fans recognize, Charger Blue has been more visible than ever during WOW, appearing at events across campus and sporting an expanded wardrobe.

"The evolution of Charger Blue builds on the work we started with our new athletic logo," said Hendrix, noting the suite of "spirit marks" introduced alongside the new UAH Athletics branding. "Together, they give us a more modern, consistent look and help keep the focus where it belongs – on UAH."

Throughout the fall semester, Charger Blue will be visible across campus and in the community, making appearances at university events and connecting with students, alumni, fans and friends of UAH. He had a particularly big presence during Family & Friends Weekend in September. Students and their families were able to meet Charger Blue, snap a photo together and take home give-aways featuring the new illustrations.

"Our campus community has grown, and our brand identity is evolving with it to reflect where UAH is today and where we're headed," said Hendrix. "Charger Blue is an important part of that identity, and this next step gives us more opportunities to bring him to life across campus and in our community." ■

CHARGER BLUE THROUGH THE YEARS

For generations of Chargers, Charger Blue has been part of the UAH experience: from the stands and sidelines at athletic events to campus celebrations and special events. His look may have changed over the years, but his role as a source of school spirit has remained.



1970s: BEFORE THERE WAS BLUE

Though Charger Blue was officially named in 1986, he was not the first horse on campus. Brian Godsy, a UAH alumnus (BSE '81, MSE '85), recalls his days donning a mascot costume in the late 1970s. "It was a horse – it had a white body with blue highlights," he recalls. "The head was made of papier-mâché, and the suit was very hot." He remembers traveling with the basketball team and cheering with the cheerleaders across the Southeast. "I really had a great time and got to see a lot of different campuses."

2026: THE NEW BLUE

Charger Blue poses with a student during Week of Welcome in August 2026.



2024: HIGH FIVES, CHARGER STYLE

Charger Blue greets students ahead of the Charger Blue BBQ during Week of Welcome in August 2024.



2008: LEADING THE CHARGE

Dr. David Williams walks with Charger Blue and the UAH cheerleaders during the Charger Walk event in 2008.



1998: BLUE ON THE MOVE

Charger Blue poses with a UAH license plate in 1998.



1992: LIGHTING UP HOMECOMING

Charger Blue interacts with fans at the 1992 Homecoming bonfire.



1987: MEET CHARGER BLUE

Newly christened “Charger Blue” interacts with fans at the 1987 Homecoming hockey game against Ohio University.



1980s: SPREADING THE CHARGER SPIRIT

"The Charger" interacts with fans and community members during a holiday parade in this undated photo.





PARTNERS IN A HEALTHIER FUTURE

New College of Nursing dean appreciates cross-discipline collaboration, community ties



▲ Dr. Hyochol Brian Ahn, the new dean of the College of Nursing, stands outside the Nursing Building. Ahn began his deanship on July 1, 2026. He is also executive director of the UAH-Huntsville Hospital Healthcare System Nursing Leadership Collaborative.

Dr. Hyochol Brian Ahn, the new dean of the UAH College of Nursing, knows that strong partnerships yield innovative results. The college's productive collaborations within the university and out in the community represent a major reason why he wanted to join UAH.

Ahn, who began his career as an engineer, was working in biomedical engineering to develop a better neuroimaging protocol when he realized he needed to know more about human health to achieve his goals. He went on to earn multiple nursing degrees and certifications.

His healthcare vision harmonizes with the longstanding collaboration between UAH Nursing and the College of Engineering's Systems Management and Production (SMAP) Center to develop and manufacture realistic training models to help students practice essential skills for treating patients.

"My dream is to build a nursing engineering program at UAH. There are some universities that have biomedical engineering, but there is no nursing engineering. Nursing engineering focuses on those kinds of technology for our nurses and nurse practitioners for decision making."

Ahn facilitates a vital community partnership as executive director of the UAH-Huntsville Hospital Healthcare System Nursing Leadership Collaborative. This link between academic nursing at UAH and clinical operations at HH Health gives students essential practice caring for real patients and provides the hospital with an employment pipeline for qualified nurses.

"Our mission is to build nursing workforces to serve our population locally, regionally and nationally. Our curriculum should reflect how to solve the hospital workforce problems and how to build top-level nurse practitioner programs to be the front-line workers for our population's health."

Research is another top priority for Ahn, who is also director of a new Brain Digital Technology Innovation Laboratory for developing brain stimulation therapy, especially for persons with dementia. The work builds on his previous National Institutes of Health/National Institute of Nursing Research grant that employed transcranial direct current stimulation and mindfulness-based meditation to manage pain in older adults with knee osteoarthritis. He is presently involved in a Department of Defense grant for treating pain and post-traumatic stress disorder in veterans.

It's an excellent opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration.

"We need computer scientists to develop the paradigm and then analyze the brain signal, and we need electrical and computer engineers to develop better brain electrical stimulation devices. The overall goal is to reduce the healthcare cost, so that economic analysis with the business team is important. We can develop these clinical education models with our education experts to better deliver clinical education to our patients." ■

At home in the Rocket City

Meet Dr. Srinath Ekkad, new dean of the UAH College of Engineering

In a city where engineering challenges are measured in missions, satellites, autonomous systems and the next generation of technologies, Dr. Srinath Ekkad believes UAH has fundamental advantages few universities can match. As the newly appointed dean of UAH's College of Engineering, Ekkad sees an opportunity to build on those advantages.

"I want UAH engineering to be recognized as a premier engineering school for educating engineers and also solving technological challenges, but in a different way than other schools," Ekkad says. "Because of where we are."

That location is central to his vision. UAH boasts partnerships with Redstone Arsenal, NASA Marshall Space Flight Center and Cummings Research Park, with the flagship college accounting for more than 3,000 undergraduate and graduate students, or about 35% of the university's total enrollment. Ekkad also assumes the stewardship of the college just as UAH prepares to unveil the more than 70,000-square-foot Raymond B. Jones Engineering Building, slated for classes in spring 2027.

"No other university has this kind of ecosystem around it," Ekkad notes. "Imagine being an undergraduate student and having the opportunity to work on a NASA-related project or a defense technology project or an autonomous system or a propulsion system or even cybersecurity."



▲ Dr. Srinath Ekkad, dean UAH College of Engineering, standing in front of the Raymond B. Jones Engineering Building on the UAH campus.

That experience can begin while students are still pursuing their degrees, studying engineering concepts in the classroom while gaining professional experience with government or industry partners.

"Students learn things in the classroom, but it's all defined problems. We know the solution already," he says. "In real engineering, we don't know the answer. We're going to look for it. That requires a different kind of thinking. In the real world, the boss says, 'Find me a solution.' I call that engineering confidence."

Ultimately, Ekkad's vision extends beyond research, rankings or enrollment. Success is also about creating an environment where people want to do their best work.

"Making people happy," he says. "Happy people do better work. I want students, faculty and staff to look forward to coming to work, collaborating with one another and to feel invested in what they are building together." ■

RESEARCH WITH PURPOSE

Three doctoral students earn NSF research fellowships

Three graduate students won research fellowships through the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) Graduate Fellowship Program (EGFP).

Savaria Parrish, Pragya Natarajan and Stephanie Manasterski are among the first fellows supported through UAH's EGFP program, an award of $2.39 million that seeks to support up to 15 doctoral fellows in six signature STEM areas: astronomy and astrophysics; heliophysics and low-temperature plasmas; atmospheric sciences; mechanics of materials and structures for aerospace systems; engineering design and systems engineering; and computing and artificial intelligence. The award runs through June 2028.

The fellowship is designed for graduate students who received an Honorable Mention from the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program within the previous three years. EGFP fellows receive three years of support through a $37,000 annual stipend and a $16,000 annual cost-of-education allowance, and fellows have up to five years to use the support.

Savaria Parrish, who earned a bachelor's degree in geosciences from Virginia Tech with minors in physics and astronomy, will work on extreme-precision radial velocity observations. Parrish has received a number of awards, including the American Astronomical Society (AAS) Chambliss Student Award, as well as Virginia Tech's Aspire! Award and Outstanding Undergraduate Service Award, and she is an American Physical Society (APS) Team Up Together Scholar.

Pragya Natarajan, an EGFP fellow joining the Department of Space Science, will focus on the Marshall Grazing Incidence X-ray Spectrometer (MaGIXS) sounding rocket experiment and its Soft X-ray telescope, combining advanced instrumentation, simulations, calibration and flight-data analysis. Her research will bridge the gap between space science and advanced X-ray instrumentation, focusing specifically on the Soft X-ray telescope for the MaGIXS sounding rocket experiment.

Stephanie Manasterski, a graduate student in mechanical and aerospace engineering, is slated to investigate technology with potential applications in fusion propulsion and future deep-space missions. She will be conducting research using a 60-kilojoule pulsed power machine to study how pulsed magnetic nozzles can control and direct high-energy fusion plasma. This technology is a critical piece of the puzzle for fusion propulsion, which holds the potential to drastically shorten transit times for deep-space missions. ■







▲ From top to bottom, Savaria Parrish, Pragya Natarajan and Stephanie Manasterski, the first three UAH graduate students to receive fellowships in the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) Graduate Fellowship Program (EGFP).



Ferrell Horn, director of UAH's Office of Intelligence and Security Studies and a clinical assistant professor in the UAH Department of Sociology.

PREPARING TOMORROW'S NATIONAL SECURITY LEADERS

UAH expands Intelligence and Security Studies programs

Artificial intelligence. Cybersecurity. Quantum computing. The technologies transforming the world are also reshaping national security, generating an urgent demand for professionals who can understand science and technology while also comprehending the human decisions that determine how those technologies affect U.S. national security.

UAH's graduate certificate in Intelligence and Security Studies is built around exactly that idea. The interdisciplinary program introduces students to the theories, concepts and strategic goals that underpin U.S. national security.

The College of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (CAHS) is laying the groundwork for future master's degree programs designed specifically for the needs of North Alabama's rapidly evolving security workforce. CAHS is working toward a Master of Arts in Intelligence and Security Studies as well as a more technologically focused Master of Science in Space Security and Policy. Both programs will offer courses across UAH colleges to capitalize on the wealth of expertise that exists at the university.

Leading that effort is Ferrell Horn, director of UAH's Office of Intelligence and Security Studies in the Department of Sociology. Before joining UAH, Horn spent more than two decades working across the U.S. intelligence community on some of the nation's most complex security challenges.

"The benefit of being here at UAH and in Huntsville is that we are right in the middle of the technology/security/policy nexus," Horn explains.

Few places in the country sit at the crossroads of technology and national security quite like Huntsville. Home to Redstone Arsenal, NASA, the Missile Defense Agency, defense contractors and countless technology firms, the city offers students a front-row seat to the industries and organizations increasingly driving national security policy.

The program emphasizes practical preparation, helping students develop critical thinking, professionalism, analytic writing and briefing skills. That interdisciplinary approach is already attracting students from a variety of backgrounds, including atmospheric and environmental sciences, physics and other technical fields. Beyond the classroom, students have already taken advantage of opportunities with local organizations including the FBI, Redstone Arsenal and law enforcement. ■



Fueling innovation to tackle tough problems

UAH alum Mike Wicks donates $1.5M to Jones Engineering Building

Engineering entrepreneur Mike Wicks, a 1993 graduate of the UAH College of Engineering, stands outside the new Raymond B. Jones Engineering Building on the UAH campus on Sept. 3, 2026. Wicks donated $1.5 million to the building project to name its multi-purpose room the Wicks Family Innovation Hall.

The UAH College of Engineering made a professional and personal impact on Mike Wicks, who received his master's in mechanical engineering here in 1993. Now, he's fueling his alma mater's growth with a $1.5 million donation to the new Raymond B. Jones Engineering Building to name the multi-purpose room the Wicks Family Innovation Hall.

"UAH is such a treasure and an asset in this community," Wicks said. "It has so many tentacles that reach into the community and enrich everybody's lives. UAH made a profound difference in my education and my career, and it just seemed like a natural thing to give back."

The multi-purpose room is the building's largest room, and it will be the most utilized. It can serve as a classroom or be subdivided into two smaller rooms. It can also be transformed into spaces for meetings and events.

The building's name is another reason Wicks wanted to contribute. It honors the memory of Ray Jones, longtime business and community leader and past chairman of the UAH Foundation – and for Wicks, a Huntsville native, an old family friend.

"Mike Wicks' generosity reflects the lasting impact UAH can have on the lives and careers of its graduates," said Dr. Donald J. Leo, UAH president. "His investment in the new Jones Engineering Building will create a space where students and faculty can learn, collaborate and develop solutions to complex challenges. Gifts like this strengthen our College of Engineering and help ensure UAH continues preparing graduates who make a difference in our region and beyond."

Wicks came to UAH after starting his career with the U.S. Army Missile Command.

"The education here at UAH is fantastic, but on top of that, you get professors who have real-world experience," he said. "Some of them are coming from their aerospace and defense jobs to teach at night. They bring real-world examples and ways to apply them into what we're learning in the classroom."

Wicks also appreciates UAH's human connections.

"Most of my classmates were working at aerospace and defense industries. They became some of my lifelong friends and colleagues. The network that you build among the professors and the students is just as valuable as the education."

For nearly 45 years, first as an Army civilian and then as a private contractor for the Department of Defense, Wicks combined his education, network and experience to provide innovative engineering and technical services. He founded several successful engineering and technical service firms, including Summit Research Corp. and Integration Innovation Inc. (i3), boosting Huntsville's workforce reputation while solving military engineering challenges. Along the way, he earned a reputation for philanthropic commitment through the i3 Cares Foundation and the Wicks Family Foundation, formed with his wife, Christine.

With this gift to UAH Engineering, Wicks will help ensure a strong pipeline of good engineers to keep solving tough problems. ■

TRANSFORMATIONAL IMPACT

Aroras' $100,000 gift to Honors College empowers student achievement



▲ Students, faculty and staff of the Honors College at UAH anticipate another exciting year of collaboration across academic disciplines as they enter fall semester 2026 with the support of a $100,000 gift from Dr. Amit and Dr. Aruna Arora. Gathered in the colonnade of Frank Franz Hall on Aug. 10, 2026, are, front row, left to right, UAH Provost Dr. David Puleo; student William Stephenson; Gina Battle, Honors College senior coordinator; student Logan Wood; student Madison Lemily; Honors College Assistant Dean Jennifer Staton; student Dowson Aguilar; and Eirian Waldron, Honors College advisor. In the back row to the right of the column are, left to right, UAH President Dr. Donald Leo, Honors College Dean Dr. Eric Smith, Vice President for Research and Economic Development Dr. Robert Lindquist, and David Cook, Honors College director of undergraduate research.

The UAH Honors College gives students across all academic disciplines opportunities to take intellectual risks in a collaborative, supportive environment. A $100,000 gift from Dr. Amit and Dr. Aruna Arora will strengthen these experiences.

"The Aroras' generosity demonstrates their belief in the transformative power of higher education and in the potential of our students," says Honors Dean Dr. Eric Smith. "This will have a lasting, meaningful impact on the experiences we create for our students, and we are deeply grateful for their investment in our Honors community."

The gift supports the student-led Amit and Aruna Arora Honors Student Conference, funding a distinguished keynote speaker and seminar-style engagement with students. The conference is part of the college's Common Text Experience. ■

RESEARCH IN ACTION

Astrion's $75,000 gift supports new UAH anechoic chamber

The College of Science received a $75,000 gift from Huntsville-based aerospace and defense company Astrion to support an anechoic chamber where students will test antennas, sensors and radio frequency (RF) systems used in modern defense and aerospace applications.

The hands-on facility will give students experience in testing environments similar to those used by defense contractors and government agencies.

"The growing partnership with Astrion fully aligns with our strategic priorities of serving our community and connecting our students with partners," says College of Science Dean Dr. Rainer Steinwandt. "I am very grateful to Tom Vice and his team for the scientific opportunities that this gift creates for our students and faculty."

An RF anechoic chamber uses specialized materials to absorb radio waves, eliminating reflections so researchers can test electronics, sensors and radar systems under controlled conditions. ■



▲ Tom Vice, chairman and CEO of Astrion, second from right, presents a $75,000 check to Dr. Rainer Steinwandt, dean of the College of Science at Astrion's corporate office in Huntsville. Also pictured are Mimmo DeMartino, far left, and Dave Brost, far right.

Courtesy Connor White/Jeff White Photography



Supporters of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training at UAH include, left to right, Kari Morris, research engineer and scientist in the Rotorcraft Systems Engineering & Simulation Center; Emily Eichhorn, director of counseling services at the Counseling Center; and Dr. Alisa Henrie, clinical assistant professor of engineering technology and department chair for the Engineering Technology Bachelor of Science degree program. Morris and Henrie are two of approximately 100 faculty and staff members who have completed the training, which is offered by the UAH Academic Success Advocacy Program through the Heads Up Prevention program at WellStone.

TRAINING FOR TOUGH TIMES

Mental Health First Aid teaches faculty, staff how to help in crisis situations

You notice a change in a student. Maybe acting out, maybe too quiet. Is it just a bad day or something more serious? If you're a Mental Health First Aider, you have the training to assess the situation and determine the best way to help.

"This is a first aid class, like somebody on the scene of a physical medical incident," says Kari Morris, one of approximately 100 UAH faculty and staff members who have completed Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training. She's a research engineer and scientist in the Rotorcraft Systems Engineering & Simulation Center.

"If you're not a trained doctor, you don't diagnose and perform surgery on this person. That was a big point to the class. You learn the signs to recognize that this is a mental health first aid situation. You do those kinds of things that you would do in any sort of health emergency, things that a non-professional can do that are safe and hopefully will benefit the patient. Then you call for the pros, or you give that person the resources they need to call for help."

UAH's Academic Success Advocacy Program (ASAP) has offered MHFA training through the Heads Up Prevention program at WellStone since spring 2023. It gives faculty and staff the knowledge and confidence to provide basic assistance when someone is struggling.

"At national conferences there has been a lot of discussion of the growing need for awareness and assistance. I've felt a little overwhelmed about what we can do to assist," says Dr. Alisa Henrie, a clinical assistant professor of engineering technology and department chair for the Engineering Technology Bachelor of Science degree program. "Being able to have these conversations with people who have the training to guide us and to make a plan helps reduce the anxiety about the what-ifs."

The campus counseling pros are grateful for the extra support from Mental Health First Aiders.

"I'm really glad ASAP brought this to the campus," says Emily Eichhorn, director of counseling services at the UAH Counseling Center. "I think it makes the comfort level around mental health issues so much better on this campus." ■

A HISTORIC SWEEP

Two UAH students made history as the first students from the same institution to be named Alabama Association of Colleges and Employers (AACE) Intern of the Year and Co-op of the Year in the same year.

Brian Niswonger, a senior majoring in kinesiology, was named Intern of the Year, while Joshua Kolby, a 2026 aerospace engineering graduate, was named Co-op of the Year. The students were selected from nominees representing two-year and four-year institutions across Alabama for work completed during the 2025–2026 academic year.

"Having two UAH students named Intern of the Year and Co-op of the Year in the same year, competing against nominees from institutions across Alabama, speaks directly to the quality of experiential learning our students bring to employer partners in kinesiology and aerospace engineering," said Dr. David Puleo, provost and executive vice president for academic affairs. "It's the kind of outcome that validates our continued investment in career-connected education." ■



▲ From left: UAH mascot Charger Blue; Brian Niswonger, a senior majoring in kinesiology; Joshua Kolby, a 2026 aerospace engineering graduate; UAH President Dr. Donald Leo; and Dr. David Puleo, provost and executive vice president for academic affairs.

CONNECTING STUDENTS WITH OPPORTUNITY

The AACE recognition came as UAH welcomed more than 120 employers to its Fall Career Fair on Sept. 2. Approximately 1,000 students and alumni attended to connect with employers recruiting for full-time jobs, internships and co-op opportunities.

UAH hosts career fairs twice each year, giving students regular opportunities to build professional connections and explore career opportunities.

"For students entering an increasingly competitive job market, internships and co-ops can make a meaningful difference," said Candace Phillips, director of UAH Career Services. "These experiences give students the opportunity to apply classroom knowledge to real-world challenges, gain hands-on experience and demonstrate their skills to potential employers."

More than 70% of UAH graduates remain in Alabama, bringing their skills and expertise to the state's workforce. ■



REAL-WORLD READINESS

UAH-led Alabama Shield 2026 puts drone technology in realistic disaster scenarios

When disaster strikes, every minute matters, and the right information can mean the difference between uncertainty and action. To meet these challenges, UAH hosted Alabama Shield 2026, the first exercise of its kind in Alabama. The statewide disaster response exercise was led by the UAH Rotorcraft Systems Engineering & Simulation Center (RSESC) at the Huntsville unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and Counter-UAS Test Range.

The event provided participants with hands-on experience using UAS in realistic disaster-response scenarios, including search and rescue, damage assessment, HAZMAT reconnaissance, infrastructure inspection, mission planning and airspace deconfliction.

"Alabama Shield 2026 was a success, particularly for a first-year exercise," says Justin Kumor, principal research engineer with the UAH RSESC. "The event brought together a broad mix of partners, including federal agencies, state emergency management organizations, local public safety organizations, first responders, academia, industry partners and UAS subject matter experts."

Participants logged approximately 20 live flight hours during the exercise, providing opportunities to develop real-world operational skills with unmanned systems and used UAS to address a range of challenges they might encounter during an actual emergency, including a tornado-based disaster scenario. ■

QUANTUM TAKES SHAPE

UAH hosts colloquium to advance Southeastern quantum technologies

Quantum technology is poised to reshape how we tackle some of the world's most complex problems. This summer, 250 leaders from academia, industry and government gathered at UAH for the inaugural Quantum Colloquium of the Southeastern Quantum Collaborative (SQC).

The colloquium marked a significant milestone for the SQC, a regional consortium led through the UAH College of Science and created to accelerate the advancement and practical application of quantum information science and technology across the Southeast.

The event brought together researchers, technology companies, defense organizations, national laboratories and government stakeholders to explore moving quantum innovation from the laboratory to real-world applications. Three panels addressed key elements of the emerging quantum ecosystem.

Discussions explored regional workforce development and specialized curricula, advances in quantum hardware, algorithmic optimization and scalable quantum architectures, as well as dual-use quantum technologies, post-quantum cybersecurity and national security priorities. ■



Payload Payoff

Student teams soar to top finishes in 2026 CanSat Competition

Future UAH engineers earned two top-four finishes and placed all three UAH teams among the world's best at the 2026 Annual CanSat Competition. The annual payload showcase gives students the opportunity for hands-on engineering experience that prepares participants to tackle genuine aerospace challenges. Team Vortex placed second overall and first among U.S. universities, while Team MetalHawk finished fourth internationally and second in the United States. Team Skywarp also delivered a strong performance, placing 13th internationally and fourth among U.S. teams.

Hosted by the American Astronautical Society, CanSat tasks university students with designing, building and testing a sophisticated payload that fits within a small container roughly one foot long and 5.5 inches wide. This year's mission required teams to develop a 1-kilogram payload. After launch, the payload separated from its container, autonomously deployed a paraglider, navigated toward a designated landing zone and released an egg from about two meters above the ground with the goal of keeping it intact. Throughout the flight, onboard sensors transmitted real-time data to a student-designed ground station as well.

The competition mirrors the engineering process used by NASA and the aerospace industry, requiring students to complete a preliminary design review, critical design review, environmental testing, a flight readiness review and a post-flight review over an eight-month design cycle. In addition to designing their flight hardware, all three UAH teams developed custom ground stations for a bonus engineering challenge to display and record telemetry transmitted during flight.

▲ UAH teams Vortex, MetalHawk and Skywarp competed in the 2026 CanSat Competition hosted by the American Astronautical Society in Monterey, Va.

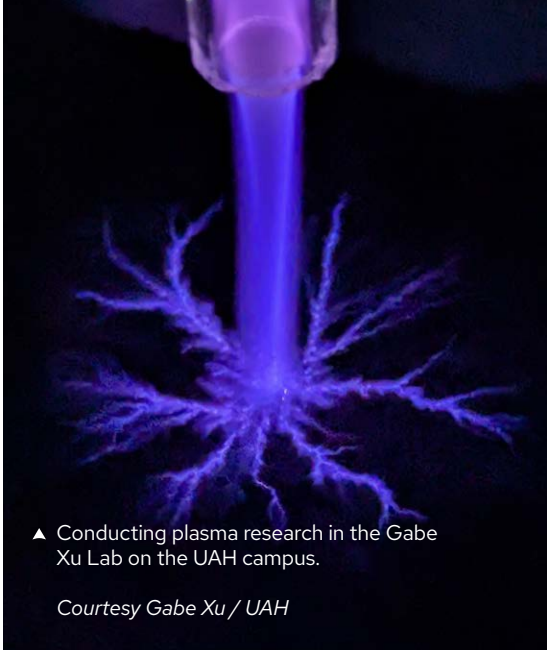
Courtesy Lily Sirianni

"I had a great experience with CanSat, and it was a great introduction to UAH and allowed me to really find the group that I fit in with," says Andrew Levrett, a mechanical team member on Team Vortex. "I gained a ton of applicable knowledge and skills which I will take with me to future projects and eventually the engineering industry, as well as a greater understanding of what the engineering process is and validation and assurance that I have made the right decision in my major and university."■



◀ Newly discovered Demon Cavefish swimming in a pool in Bobcat Cave beneath Redstone Arsenal.

Courtesy Matthew L. Niemiller / UAH



▲ Conducting plasma research in the Gabe Xu Lab on the UAH campus.

Courtesy Gabe Xu / UAH

Exploring the Extraordinary

UAH researchers discover new 'Demon Cavefish'

A study led by Dr. Matthew L. Niemiller, director of the Cave Bio Lab at UAH, uncovered a new genus of blind cavefish hiding in one of the most studied cave systems in the southeastern United States. The find is reshaping scientists' understanding of evolution, biodiversity and conservation in subterranean ecosystems.

The newly described Demon Cavefish (Demogorgonichthys arcanus) is completely eyeless, colorless and faintly electric blue in life. The discovery, published in Scientific Reports, reveals that one of Alabama's most intensively studied cave systems can still hold extraordinary biological secrets.

"This is one of the last places we'd have bet on it," Niemiller says. "Finding an entirely unknown, new genus of freshwater fish in eastern North America today is a little like finding a new kind of big cat. The group is so well known, we thought the big surprises were behind us. To have one turn up in a cave we've watched for three decades is a real reminder to stay curious. It was genuinely surprising."

One of the biggest revelations proved to be the location, Bobcat Cave, situated only about eight miles from the UAH campus beneath the U.S. Army's Redstone Arsenal. ■

"Plasma gun" could transform space laundry and sanitation for future missions

Imagining a college dorm room as an enclosed environment for weeks on end instantly points to the need for an effective means of sanitizing surfaces and clothes on space missions, particularly as longer missions become a reality.

Dr. Gabe Xu, a professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering, is developing a plasma-based "laundry gun" that blasts cold plasma into fabrics to reduce harmful bacteria during long-duration spaceflight, lessening the need for water-intensive laundry, while maintaining cleaner living quarters, spacesuits and equipment.

The technology promises to help astronauts stay healthier during missions to the moon and Mars by sanitizing clothing, bedding and other fabrics without water or traditional cleaning chemicals.

"The plasma is made of positively charged ions and energetic free electrons," Xu notes. "The electrons in particular collide with other gas molecules such as H2O and O2 to create reactive oxygen species such as O3 and OH. These species are biologically active, meaning cells can absorb them and then affect cell components."

Instead of relying on detergents or disinfectants, the lab prototype generates plasma from helium, air and water vapor. The charged particles that are produced create reactive oxygen "species" that destroy bacteria by damaging their cell membranes, leading to cell death. ■

From UAH to NASA

A Charger's Unforgettable Flight

Seeing a NASA rocket up close is a memorable experience. For UAH alumnus Kristian Miasek (B.S. Engineering, '20), it happened from the cockpit of an F-5 fighter jet.

A test engineer at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, Kristian was selected in February 2026 for a special recognition opportunity honoring exceptional NASA employees. He was one of just two MSFC employees selected at the time and the only UAH graduate to receive the honor.

The experience took him to Kennedy Space Center, where he met NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman and members of his senior leadership team before taking an F-5 into the skies above the Space Coast. The flight included views of the Artemis II rocket on the launch pad, simulated dogfighting over the ocean and the opportunity for Kristian to control the aircraft.

"Being selected for this opportunity was truly humbling and an incredible honor," Kristian says. "You don't get the chance to fly in an F-5 fighter jet every day."

For Kristian, the experience also offered a chance to reflect on the journey that began at UAH.

"Seeing Kennedy Space Center from above and flying over the Artemis II rocket on the launch pad made this experience especially meaningful," he says. "It was an unforgettable reminder of the incredible work being done across NASA and the role we all play in advancing the mission."

"My time at UAH gave me a strong foundation and experiences that helped prepare me for the opportunities that followed," he says. "I feel incredibly fortunate to do something I'm passionate about every day and to contribute to the future of human space exploration." ■



UAH alumni Kristian and Dr. Melissa Miasek stand in front of the F-5 fighter jet Kristian flew during a special NASA recognition experience earlier this year. The couple met as UAH freshmen in spring 2017 and both graduated in December 2020. Since then, their careers have taken them in different but complementary directions. Kristian is a test engineer at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center. Melissa earned her bachelor's degree in nursing from UAH, and later returned and graduated from the Joint UAH-UA Ph.D. program in spring 2026. She is now a tenure-track assistant professor in the UAH College of Nursing. UAH has remained a shared thread throughout their story — from where they met and began their careers to where Melissa now teaches and conducts research.

"UAH has played a central role in both of our lives," says Melissa. "Many members of my family have either studied or taught within UAH's engineering programs, and I am incredibly proud to see that legacy continue through my husband's achievements. His story is one of resilience, opportunity and excellence, and a powerful example of what UAH graduates can accomplish."



UAH student-athletes set institutional record for D2 ADA Academic Achievement Awards

A record 105 UAH student-athletes were recognized this year for their academic achievements, marking the highest number of UAH recipients in the 19-year history of the Division II Athletics Directors Association (D2 ADA) Academic Achievement Awards.

The annual program recognizes the academic accomplishments of student-athletes competing in NCAA Division II championship-sponsored sports. To qualify, student-athletes must have a cumulative grade point average of 3.5 or higher on a 4.0 scale, completed at least two years (four semesters) of college-level work and been an active member of an intercollegiate team during their last academic year. The institution's athletics director also must be a current dues-paying member of the D2 ADA.

The 105 UAH honorees represent the continued academic success of Chargers student-athletes across the department. In spring 2026, UAH student-athletes posted a collective 3.39 grade point average across all NCAA championship-sponsored sports.

"It's a testament to the work and effort our student-athletes at The University of Alabama in Huntsville put forth," said Dr. Cade Smith, director of athletics at UAH. "They are dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in the classroom while balancing the rigors of their athletic endeavors.

"We are proud of the achievements our student-athletes reach in the classroom as much as we are of their accomplishments in athletics."

Across Division II, more than 21,000 student-athletes from 179 institutions were recognized for the 2025-26 academic year. Six additional Gulf South Conference institutions also received recognition, with 722 student-athletes earning awards across the conference.

Since the program began 19 years ago, more than 211,000 student-athletes have been recognized for their academic achievements.

"In Year 19, this program continues its dedication to celebrating the exceptional student-athletes who define excellence across our Division II landscape," said Jenn Bell, associate vice president and director of athletics at Converse University and current D2 ADA President. "We're proud to recognize more than 21,000 deserving student-athletes from 179 institutions, reflecting the tremendous dedication within our division – not only in athletics, but in the classroom as well.

"This year's submissions, from both individuals and schools, serve as a testament to the Division II way. Thanks to the administrators who nominated these outstanding individuals, and much deserved congratulations to all this year's recipients." ■



Julie Woltjen, center, cuts the ceremonial ribbon while flanked by alumnae Whitney Swinney, left, and Lynn Troy.

Leading through competition and in life

UAH Athletics honors retired administrator, coach for dedication to Chargers

For 38 years, Julie Woltjen served as a model of leadership through many roles in the UAH Athletics Department. The new Julie Woltjen Leadership Suite in Spragins Hall honors her standards of excellence and her devotion to the Chargers.

At the Sept. 25 dedication ceremony, Woltjen noted the moral, ethical and leadership lessons gained during practice and competition.

"The qualities students learn from participating in college athletics are so important to the individual and our society as a whole, and it's always been one of the most important things to me. I bet there are going to be some Chargers who are leading a mission to the moon or they're in aviation or doing something in marketing, and the leadership qualities that they have will benefit all aspects of the community."

Woltjen joined UAH in 1986 as the department's first assistant director of athletics for marketing and sports information – and one of the first female sports information directors in the whole state.

Her "firsts" continued as her career progressed: She was UAH's first senior woman administrator and the first woman to coach a UAH men's team. She coached the UAH men's and women's tennis teams for 10 of her 20 years as the department's compliance director. She took several teams to NCAA championship competition and mentored student-athletes and teams who earned national academic and leadership recognition.

Woltjen retired as UAH's associate athletic director for compliance and senior woman administrator prior to the 2024-2025 academic year.

Several members of Woltjen's family attended the dedication, including husband Mark and daughters Shelby and Lauren, who shared fond memories of growing up around Charger Athletics, which became an extension of their family.

In addition to the Woltjen family, two UAH alumnae helped make the Julie Woltjen Leadership Suite a reality: Lynn Troy (Bachelor of Science, electrical engineering, 1992), president of Troy 7, Inc., and a member of the UAH Foundation Board of Trustees, and Whitney Swinney (Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, 2010), inventory acquisition market lead for GFiber in the South Region, which encompasses Huntsville, Nashville and Miami. ■

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SAVE THE DATE

Holiday Jazz

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

The UAH Department of Music, Theatre and Film will kick off the season with Holiday Jazz, a festive evening of food, drinks and festive performances.

Thursday, Dec. 3
6:00 p.m.
UAH Student Services Building

Tickets are available now!

www.uah.edu/events