

SUMMER 2026

UAH Magazine

A PUBLICATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IN HUNTSVILLE

LEADING WITH IMPACT

President Don Leo shares his vision for building on UAH's strengths and shaping the university's future

ACADEMICS

TWO NEW DEANS ARE CULTIVATING STUDENT SUCCESS, SCHOLARSHIP AND ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

RESEARCH

UAH'S RESC IS ADVANCING THE FUTURE OF UNCREWED SYSTEMS THROUGH RESEARCH, TESTING AND INNOVATION

CAMPUS

UAH SPRING SPORTS STUDENT-ATHLETES SHINE WITH CONFERENCE AND NATIONAL ACADEMIC HONORS

FALL SEMESTER BEGINS AUGUST 19.

SEE YOU SOON, CHARGERS!

Mark Your Calendars
JOIN US FOR WEEK OF WELCOME!
AUGUST 14-22, 2026

The University of Alabama in Huntsville's **Week of Welcome (WOW)** is a campus-wide set of programs and activities designed to welcome new and returning students to the UAH campus.

WOW takes place at the start of the fall semester and is packed with social, educational and informational programs that allow you the opportunity to interact with other UAH students, faculty and staff. It's a great way to make new connections, find your way around campus and receive free spirit items and Charger gear!

Events include:

- ▶ Rock the Rec
- ▶ Chargers After Dark
- ▶ This is Community
- ▶ Charger Blue BBQ
- ▶ Go Greek! Block Party
- ▶ Service Saturday

...and much more!





Leading The Way

UAH sustained its position among the nation's leading research universities for the 13th consecutive year in the National Science Foundation Higher Education Research and Development Survey. Five programs ranked among the top 25 federally funded programs in the United States, reflecting the university's continued strength in federally sponsored research and national priority areas.

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UAH Magazine

UAH Magazine brings together our academic accomplishments, innovative research projects, extracurricular organizations and alumni into one engaging source for all things UAH.

If you would like to receive a hard copy of this issue of UAH Magazine or be added to our mailing list to receive future issues, please contact omc@uah.edu.

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UNIVERSITY ANNOUNCEMENTS



Dr. Hyochol Brian Ahn has been appointed dean of the UAH College of Nursing, effective July 1, 2026. A nationally recognized academic leader, Ahn joins UAH from the University of Arizona, where he also served as dean. In addition to his role as dean, he will serve as executive director of the UAH–Huntsville Hospital Health System Nursing Leadership Collaborative.



Dr. Arne Croell of the Rotorcraft Systems Engineering and Simulation Center received NASA's Exceptional Scientific Achievement Medal for advances in crystal growth processes critical to advanced technologies such as nuclear thermal propulsion. The propulsion technology is several times more efficient than chemical rockets for deep-space missions, including future travel to Mars.



Jonathan Case, a principal research scientist in the Earth System Science Center, was selected as one of two new NASA-affiliated authors for the U.S. Drought Monitor. As part of a rotating team of experts, he will contribute to the nation's weekly drought assessment, helping guide agricultural planning, water resource management and drought response efforts across the country.



Dr. Srinath Ekkad has been appointed dean of the UAH College of Engineering, effective Aug. 5, 2026. A nationally recognized engineering leader and researcher, Ekkad joins UAH from North Carolina State University, where he served as professor and head of the Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering. He will lead the college as it expands its research enterprise, industry partnerships and graduate programs.



The **2026 Business of Space Conference**, hosted by UAH, highlighted a partnership between NASA and Blue Origin that led to the restoration and reuse of historic Apollo-era Test Stand 4670 at Marshall Space Flight Center. The event celebrated the 500th hot-fire test since the reopening of the stand in August 2023, a testament to how collaboration between government and industry can strengthen America's space capabilities and accelerate the growth of the commercial space economy.



The **UAH Distinguished Lecture Series** hosted **K.T. McFarland**, former Deputy National Security Advisor to President Donald Trump, for a discussion on U.S. national security strategy, global economic shifts, China's rise and Iran's nuclear ambitions. McFarland challenged UAH faculty and students to view themselves as participants in meeting future challenges. "It's going to be up to you to make sure we have the technological edge," she said.

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



It has been a privilege to spend my first weeks as president of The University of Alabama in Huntsville getting to know this extraordinary university and the community it serves. Every conversation and campus visit has reinforced what first drew me to UAH: a university where innovation isn't simply a goal – it's part of the culture.

Although my time here has been brief, I've already seen the impact UAH has across North Alabama and beyond. I've visited research facilities where faculty and students are pursuing discoveries that advance science, strengthen national security and improve quality of life – from aerospace and atmospheric science to astrophysics and advanced engineering. I've toured transformational projects, including the Raymond B. Jones Engineering Building and new Track and Field complex, that will serve future generations of Chargers. I've also had the opportunity to meet many of

our community partners, whose investment in this university reflects a shared belief that UAH helps drive the future of Huntsville.

That spirit extends well beyond campus. During a recent visit to Washington, D.C., I attended the Capitol Scholars Farewell Luncheon and had the opportunity to meet with members of Alabama's congressional delegation. Watching our students engage with confidence and professionalism in that environment provided a clear glimpse of the caliber of our students and their exemplary leadership skills.

This fall, we'll welcome a new class of Chargers to campus. Many have already experienced their first taste of campus through orientation, and I hope they left with the same sense of excitement I've felt since arriving. They are joining a university that combines academic and research excellence with real-world

opportunity, supported by faculty and staff who are deeply invested in student success and high-quality scholarship.

One of the things I've appreciated most during these first weeks is hearing from alumni, friends and supporters who care deeply about UAH. Your pride in this institution is evident, and your continued engagement helps strengthen our mission. I look forward to meeting many more of you in the months ahead, learning your stories, and working together to continue delivering on what makes UAH exceptional.

Thank you for the warm welcome you have extended to me. Jeannine and I are grateful to be part of the Charger family, and we are excited about all that lies ahead for UAH and the community we proudly serve.

Go Chargers!

Dr. Don Leo ■

As he begins his presidency at The University of Alabama in Huntsville, Dr. Donald J.

Leo is focused on listening first. Like an engineer approaching a complex system, he describes his early months as a process of observing how things already work together – and where they can work better.

What he's found is a campus grounded in steady work and practical problem-solving, where research and real-world need are closely tied together. For Leo, UAH already reflects that kind of environment.

"I'm really looking forward to learning more about how that work happens here day to day: how ideas move from research to application, and how faculty, students and partners are all part of that process," he said.

An accomplished administrator with more than 30 years in higher education, Leo brings extensive experience in building academic organizations. At the University of Georgia, he served as the first permanent dean of the College of Engineering, recruited to build the college from the ground up. During his 11-year tenure, he oversaw fourfold growth in enrollment and research expenditures, launched new academic departments, expanded partnerships and philanthropy, and spearheaded major renovations of the College's instructional and research space.

More recently, he served as executive vice president and provost at Ohio University, overseeing nearly 300

BUILDING FOR IMPACT

Inside President Don Leo's vision for UAH

academic programs and more than 30,000 students.

In conversations about why he chose UAH, Leo keeps coming back to a simple idea: impact. He sees it not as an abstract goal, but as something you can see in how people work and what they produce. "I've always been drawn to organizations that can have a tremendous impact," he said. "What stands out to me most about UAH is the people – the curiosity, focus and determination that everyone brings to their work every day."

That impression is shaping his early approach: learning the university from the inside out, identifying challenges and understanding where alignment can strengthen what already exists.

"I want to listen to the opportunities we have here on campus," he said. "I want to understand the challenges we

need to work through together, and what will help us move forward."

He is also looking outward to Huntsville and North Alabama, seeking to understand how the university is perceived in a region defined by aerospace, defense and advanced technology – and how it can deepen its role in the region's innovation ecosystem and economic growth.

"One of the things that makes UAH so distinctive is the community that surrounds it," Leo said. "Our partnerships with government, industry and civic leaders are already creating opportunities for students and advancing research that matters. I'm excited to learn from those relationships and explore how we can build on them to serve our region even more effectively."

At UAH, the foundation is already in place. Now it's about building for impact. ■

“

I want to understand the challenges we need to work through together, and what will help us move forward.



SPARKLING LIKE A SAPPHIRE

Inaugural awards gala
celebrates stars in UAH's
extended galaxy

The UAH family features a vibrant network of alumni, partners and supporters who have made a priceless impact on the institution. The inaugural Sapphire Excellence Awards gala on April 2 expressed deep appreciation to select members of this community.

Huntsville Hospital Health System received UAH's highest honor, the Presidential Community Award, presented to an individual or organization whose service has enhanced UAH and strengthened Huntsville, Madison County or the state of Alabama.

UAH extolled two dedicated individuals with Charger Champion Awards:

- **Dr. Kathy Chan**, internationally known jewelry designer, holds a B.A. in arts, a B.A. in modern foreign language and an Honorary Doctor of Philosophy of Humane Letters from UAH.
- **Dr. Francisco Collazo**, a 30-year U.S. Army veteran and founder of the engineering and support services company COLSA Corporation, received an honorary doctorate from UAH in 2003.

The Research Impact Award went to NASA Surya Heliophysics Foundation



▲ UAH presented its first Sapphire Excellence Awards April 2, 2026, in the UAH Student Services Center ballroom. Recipients of the awards, which honor outstanding alumni, partners and supporters, are, front row left to right, Anvi Dalal, Caroline McAnally, Michelda Johnson, Kathy Chan, Prabodh Satyal, Lauren Bowers and Shannon Collins Shaver, and, back row left to right, Shane Davis, Amir Deylami, Brad Hill, Taylor Reed, Matthew Gardner, Gerald Smith and Jeff Samz of Huntsville Hospital Health System.

Model Team, which draws on the expertise of individuals from different institutions, including UAH, to fuel NASA's solar artificial intelligence (AI) model. UAH team members are Dr. Sujit Roy, Vishal Gaur, Rohit Lal, Nikolai Pogorelov, Dinesha V. Hegde and Kshitiz Mandal.

Distinguished Alumni Fellows awards cited the exceptional achievement, philanthropic leadership and meaningful service of these graduates:

- **Shane Davis** – B.S., civil engineering, 1997; director of urban and economic development, City of Huntsville
- **Amir Deylami** – BSBA, 2009; MBA, 2011; associate center director, NASA Ames Research Center
- **Brad Hill** – M.S., electrical engineering, 1990; vice chairman, Board of Directors, Valkyrie Enterprises; founder, Hill Family Foundation
- **Michelda Johnson** – B.S., nursing, 2012; chief executive officer, HAPPI Health
- **Dr. Prabodh Satyal** – M.S., chemistry, 2012; Ph.D., biotechnology, 2015; head of essential oil science, doTerra International; founder, chief scientific officer, Aromatic Plant Research Center

- **Gerald Smith** – Master of Administrative Sciences, 1977; retired executive director, National Space Science and Technology Center, UAH; former president, ATK Thiokol

Graduates of the Last Decade recognized the professional success, community engagement and commitment to UAH of these alumni:

- **Lauren Bowers** – B.A., writing, 2022; regional director, East Tennessee Girl Scouts of Southern Appalachians
- **Anvi Dalal** – B.S., chemical engineering, 2020; global supply manager, Ford Motor Co.
- **Matthew Gardner** – B.A., music, 2017; choir director, Austin High School
- **Caroline Dodd McAnally** – B.S., kinesiology, 2018; M.E., differentiated instruction, 2019; physical education teacher, Hazel Green Elementary School
- **Taylor Reed** – B.S., mechanical engineering, 2016; executive director, Livin' Room; chief operating officer, ShowerUp Huntsville; outreach pastor, Life Church Huntsville
- **Shannon Collins Shaver** – M.S., nursing, 2023; director of nursing, Clearview Cancer Institute ■

WINNING BY DESIGN

UAH rover teams capture six honors at NASA Human Exploration Rover Challenge

Student teams captured six major awards across both the Remote-Controlled (RC) and Human-Powered (HP) divisions at the 2026 NASA Human Exploration Rover Challenge (HERC). Competing against top collegiate teams from around the world, UAH engineering students secured first place overall in the RC division, along with garnering Best Presentation and Best Task Tool honors. In the HP division, the university squad added a third-place overall finish, as well as the Most Improved and the prestigious Crash & Burn awards, underscoring both technical excellence and team resilience.

Hosted annually in Huntsville at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center as part of NASA's workforce development initiatives, HERC is a rigorous nine-month engineering design competition that mirrors real-world aerospace project cycles.



UAH's RC rover completed its mission flawlessly, navigating the terrain and executing tasks successfully from start to finish. The HP rover, however, suffered a catastrophic failure of a frame joint while attempting the bouldering obstacle. Despite the setback, the team recovered and completed additional course elements, ultimately contributing to its recognition with the Crash & Burn honor.

"The RC rover was the first time that UAH has participated in that category," says David Fikes, senior lecturer of mechanical and aerospace engineering and UAH team advisor. "They designed and built the best RC rover of the competition."

The RC team also earned Best Presentation for its effective and professional communication of engineering design decisions, as well as Best Task Tool in recognition of its mission systems.

In the Human-Powered division, UAH's rover scored a third-place overall finish. The vehicle achieved a notably low mass – under 130 pounds – and incorporated carbon fiber composites in its construction, reflecting advanced engineering approaches typically seen in aerospace applications.

"The HP rover was an awesome achievement," Fikes says, noting its design "will set a precedent for future UAH teams in their design for aerospace products." ■



EXPLORING ROUTES TO SUCCESS

New CAHS dean's training, research fuel support for students, faculty

Dr. Jodi Price combines research, data and personal encouragement to support students, faculty and staff in the College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences (CAHS). As new dean of the college, effective Jan. 22, 2026, she's implementing plans to build on the college's significant strengths and attract ever more students to its life-changing programs.

"I think our biggest strength is our passion for helping our students," she says. "We are all dedicated instructors, and we are united in our desire to see students accomplish their educational and career goals."

Some students arrive on campus with a clear career vision. Some don't. And some discover a better fit for their talents and interests once they've explored a few options. In a college with disciplines ranging from history to music performance, painting to sociology and many more, Price places prime importance on assisting students from point A to point B.

Price earned a B.S. in psychology and an M.S. in experimental psychology from The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and then a Ph.D. in



▲ Dean Jodi Price, center, talks with students in her office in Morton Hall on the campus of UAH. A longtime psychology professor, department chair, associate dean and interim, Price was named dean of the College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences on Jan. 22, 2026.

experimental psychology from The Georgia Institute of Technology.

"I am a cognitive psychologist by training, and my research examines how learning and memory change across the lifespan. My focus is to help students be better students and to help older adults have the best cognitive outcomes as they age."

Price's lab examines several factors that contribute to student success:

- How students decide what to study
- How long they should study some material before moving on to study other material
- How they evaluate their understanding of material

- How these decisions change based on time constraints – night before an exam versus two weeks before an exam
- Nature of the exam – multiple choice versus essay

Price is also focused on raising greater awareness in the Huntsville community about the many exciting things happening in CAHS.

"I have challenged our faculty to be more engaged, and I've been focused on building relationships with folks in the community. We are doing phenomenal things, and we are producing excellent students with wonderful skill sets. The more people see and appreciate that, the more people benefit." ■

Dr. Eric Smith believes education can transform lives. It's taken him from student in a small North Alabama high school all the way to full professor in the UAH Department of English. As the new dean of the UAH Honors College, effective May 11, 2026, he aims to offer more students what so many of his teachers gave him over the years: encouragement to dig deeper, take risks and seek higher goals.

"I'm a product of North Alabama. I'm a first-generation college student, a transfer student and, in that way, something of the living embodiment of the kind of transformative potential of higher education. I'm eager to help create those opportunities for other students from North Alabama and elsewhere. I think it's meaningful to have an example in front of you of what's possible."

Smith began to discover and develop his own possibilities as a student at Pisgah High School.

"My father worked for almost 50 years for the Sand Mountain Electric Cooperative, most of his career as a lineman. I was encouraged to apply to an essay contest that was sponsored by the Alabama Rural Electric Association."

That essay won a prize, sent him to Washington, D.C., and started an educational journey filled with encouragement, inspiration and deep work.

While pursuing his M.A. at Mississippi State University, Smith received the Howell H. Gwin and Eugene Butler awards plus an Alumni Fellowship for his Ph.D. at the University of Florida, where he worked with eminent James Joyce scholar Brandon Kershner.

Smith taught at the University of Southern Mississippi and Athens State University before landing at UAH in 2006. In his second year at UAH, he

CALLING ALL THRILL-SEEKERS!

New Honors College dean urges more students to pursue deeper academic discoveries



▲ Dr. Eric Smith, the new dean of the Honors College stands outside Frank Franz Hall, home to the Honors College and freshman Honors Housing, on the UAH campus. Smith, a professor in the Department of English and a 20-year faculty member at UAH, began his new role on May 11, 2026.

joined the Honors Council for the Honors Program, precursor to today's Honors College.

Honors offers students a collaborative and communal setting that fosters genuine discovery, and Smith sees nothing more academically thrilling.

"This is where the highest ideals of the research university are most vibrantly realized. That joy in pure

discovery, intellectual risk-taking and creation, and lateral thinking comes with deep and lasting satisfactions that also can translate to skill sets that endure.

"Honors can serve as a hub where engineers, scientists, artists, humanists, nurses, business students and more can learn from one another and can ask some of the most significant questions of our time. That's the life's blood of Honors." ■

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Scholarships available to eligible students enrolled in qualifying graduate programs. Terms and conditions apply.





INSPIRED TO INSPIRE

UAH's first chemistry
Ph.D. eager to encourage
the next generation

When Leah Johnson received her Ph.D. in chemistry from UAH during commencement ceremonies on May 4, 2026, the event marked a milestone for the student and the university: Johnson is the first graduate of the chemistry doctoral program UAH implemented in fall 2023.

Johnson was pursuing her master's in chemistry at UAH when the doctoral program began. Her primary research professor, Dr. Carmen Scholz, professor of chemistry in the College of Science, urged her to go for the Ph.D.

"She said, 'You are capable of this. You are the caliber of student that needs to strongly consider a Ph.D.' I will never forget that. It stuck with me because I was on the fence. Her encouragement is really what helped me decide that this is something I need to do and that I ended up wanting to do."

In Johnson's dissertation, "Synthesis and Characterization of Poly(γ -L-benzyl-glutamate) by Infrared Adsorption and Diffusion-Ordered NMR Spectroscopy," she examined novel ways of determining the weight of a

◀ Leah Johnson, the first student to earn a doctorate in chemistry at UAH, stands outside the UAH Materials Science Building on April 7, 2026, with her "chemist LEGO" model of the molecule she studied for her dissertation. Johnson received her Ph.D. in chemistry from UAH in May, during commencement ceremonies at the Von Braun Center Propst Arena.

polymer used in advanced drug-delivery systems.

This summer Johnson is sharing her chemistry passion as an adjunct at Snead State Junior College.

"I enjoy teaching chemistry more than doing chemistry. It's not that I don't enjoy working in labs and figuring stuff out in that way, but there's a different type of joy when I'm showing someone how to work a chemistry problem and seeing that light-bulb moment."

Johnson's love of teaching came as naturally as her love of science. Her mother spent more years than she'd like to count as a third-grade teacher in Lawrence County. Her father and brother are physicists, and her brother's also a professor at The University of West Alabama. And Johnson has always loved teaching the youth in her church.

As a student in small, rural Alabama schools, Johnson understands dedicated teachers and promising students.

"Growing up in that environment with some amazing teachers and seeing how education changes the trajectory of lives, I want to give students that opportunity: You are smart and capable and more than you probably realize. You just need someone to tell you that and to give you that start." ■



Building Alabama's engineering talent pipeline

UAH and Northrop Grumman celebrate milestone hiring outcomes through i4 employer engagement partnership

Building on this momentum, UAH and Northrop Grumman celebrated a milestone in their long-standing i4 employer engagement partnership, with more than 60 full-time and internship offers extended to students and recent graduates. Northrop Grumman is currently the leading employer of UAH alumni, and the latest offers increase its UAH alumni workforce by nearly 10 percent.

The milestone reflects UAH's i4 employer engagement model, designed to connect students with industry partners early in their academic careers and support them through graduation and into the workforce.

"This is truly a full-circle moment," said Candace Phillips, senior coordinator of career services at UAH. "Knowing this pipeline was intentionally built to foster long-term relationships between students and employers makes it especially rewarding to now see those efforts come to life with the hiring of 60 UAH students. Seeing those relationships translate into internships and full-time

roles underscores the value of engaging students early and investing in their development over time."

The i4 program is structured around four phases—introduce, inspire, integrate and invest—guiding students from early exposure to internships, co-ops and full-time employment.

"We are proud to partner with UAH and to recruit from a university that produces highly capable, workforce-ready talent," said Lauren Youngblood, campus recruiter at Northrop Grumman, and a UAH alumna. "The i4 program allows us to connect with students early, invest in their development and welcome them into our organization with confidence. It has been rewarding to see students grow through the program and transition seamlessly into internships and full-time roles."

Together, the Engineering Expo and i4 partnership underscore UAH's role as a hub for workforce development, strengthening connections between students, industry partners and Alabama's high-tech economy. ■

◀ UAH students and recent graduates gather with UAH President Dr. Charles Karr and Lauren Youngblood, campus recruiter at Northrop Grumman, to celebrate more than 60 full-time and internship offers. Northrop Grumman is currently the leading employer of UAH alumni.

Inaugural Engineering Expo connects students with leading employers

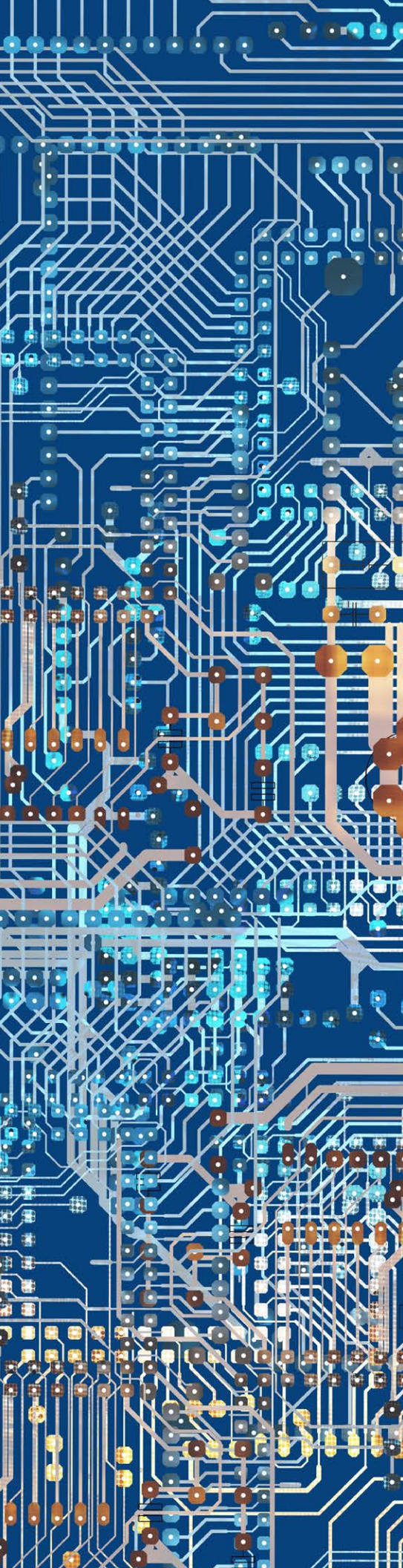
UAH hosted its inaugural Engineering Expo in February 2026, bringing together engineering employers, industry partners and students for a hands-on exploration of careers across Alabama.

Timed to coincide with National Engineers Week, the event featured interactive exhibits and demonstrations from companies spanning aerospace, defense, automotive manufacturing, infrastructure, energy and advanced technologies.

UAH leadership emphasized UAH's focus on experiential learning and industry engagement. The event then transitioned into a browsing-style fair encouraging direct conversation between students and employers.

"UAH's location in the heart of Huntsville's high-tech corridor gives our students unparalleled access to industry leaders and real-world engineering challenges," said Candace Phillips, senior coordinator of career services at UAH and organizer of the Engineering Expo. "This event is about showcasing those connections and helping students see how what they're learning in the classroom translates directly into impactful careers."

In addition, student organizations were represented, and the event highlighted the hands-on innovation and leadership that define the UAH engineering experience. ■



New partners, New possibilities

Microsoft and Palo Alto Networks join I²C as corporate partners

Microsoft and Palo Alto Networks joined the UAH Invention to Innovation Center (I²C) as Corporate Innovation Partners. The collaborations mark significant milestones for Huntsville and the federal technology community, reinforcing the region's position as a national leader in defense, aerospace and advanced computing innovation.

Microsoft brings enterprise-grade cloud, artificial intelligence (AI) and hybrid-edge capabilities tailored to fit federal enterprise. The collaboration will support federal agencies in modernizing legacy systems, operating securely across hybrid and multi-cloud environments, and adopting responsible, verifiable AI for mission-critical applications.

The company will tap into UAH's robust research and talent base, the Department of Defense ecosystem at Redstone Arsenal and North Alabama's growing startup network. Together, these assets will accelerate prototype-to-deployment workflows and deliver mission-assured cloud and edge solutions for defense, space and aerospace applications.

"This partnership exemplifies UAH's role as a hub of innovation for federal enterprise," explains Rigved Joshi, assistant vice president for innovation and entrepreneurship at UAH and director of the I²C. "By bringing Microsoft into the I²C, we are creating new pathways to accelerate mission readiness, expand

workforce development and drive sustained economic growth across North Alabama."

The collaboration with Palo Alto Networks strengthens the university's industry-academia pipeline by expanding funded research collaborations and providing additional opportunities for experiential learning. Students will benefit from internships, co-ops, executive training and upskilling programs designed to prepare graduates for high-demand cybersecurity and advanced technology careers. The partnership also reinforces the role of the I²C as a regional innovation hub that connects industry, academia and entrepreneurs to accelerate commercialization and mission-ready solutions.

The initiative establishes a North Alabama base for Palo Alto Networks within the I²C innovation hub at UAH, positioning the company to work closely with university researchers, startups, government organizations and regional industry partners to prototype, validate and transition secure, field-ready solutions.

"Palo Alto Networks recognized the opportunity to embed enterprise cybersecurity leadership directly into one of the nation's most mission-focused innovation ecosystems," Joshi says. "Through co-location at I²C, we can accelerate the translation of university research into deployable technologies while expanding workforce opportunities for our students." ■

UAH hosts inaugural Army Best Drone Warfighter Competition



Skyspear™ drone advances next-generation aerial defense capabilities

UAH hosted the inaugural Army Best Drone Warfighter Competition at its Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) and Counter-UAS Test Range, highlighting the university's expertise in advanced uncrewed systems research, testing and training. The competition reinforces UAH's role as a national leader in uncrewed systems integration and innovation.

Sponsored by the Army Aviation Association of America (AAAA) in coordination with the U.S. Army Aviation and Maneuver Centers of Excellence, the three-day competition brought more than 200 elite drone operators from active duty, Reserve and National

Guard units to Huntsville to compete in a series of demanding technical and tactical challenges. More than 800 attendees observed the event.

The competition showcased the robust capabilities of the Huntsville UAS and C-UAS Test Range, which is managed by UAH and situated adjacent to Huntsville International Airport. The 2,500-acre restricted airspace facility supports research, development, test and evaluation (RDT&E) of uncrewed aerial systems and counter-UAS technologies, providing a realistic environment for military training, first responder exercises, industry demonstrations and academic research. ■

UNCREWED ADVANTAGE

The Rotorcraft Systems Engineering and Simulation Center (RSESC) showcased the Skyspear™ autonomous aerial defense platform at the U.S. Department of Defense Technology Readiness Experimentation (T-REX) 26-2 event at Camp Atterbury in Indiana. Developed by UAH staff and students, Skyspear™ is an attack drone designed to operate in challenging environments in support of the evolving needs of the modern warfighter by providing advanced counter-uncrewed aerial systems (C-UAS) capabilities.

Constructed using lightweight, additive-manufactured components, Skyspear™ is a high-speed first-person-view-capable interceptor platform

designed for air and ground launch operations. The system exceeds 130 miles per hour and incorporates autonomous engagement algorithms, RF-silent guidance, resilient mesh communications and modular payload capabilities. The system can be rapidly reconfigured for mission-specific operations and integrates seamlessly into tactical network architectures.

"Version 1 of the system was developed under a research application for the U.S. Army Special Operations Forces," explains RSESC Director Jerry Hendrix. "Once that program ended, the university invested funding to extend the program. We're now up to Version 5, and the system has four patents pending." ■



Stinging threats

CCRE researchers secure patents to defend against cyber attacks

Transforming doctoral research into patented technology is a challenging achievement, particularly while completing a Ph.D. Dr. Aaron Werth and Dr. Rishabh Das, successfully navigated this process, earning U.S. patents for innovative cybersecurity technologies developed through their dissertation research at UAH's Center for Cybersecurity Research and Education (CCRE).

Werth's patent detects and protects programming logic controllers (PLCs) from commands or ladder logic uploads that would harm the physical process that the PLC manages. A PLC

is a specialized "hardened" industrial computer that automates, controls and monitors critical infrastructure, such as manufacturing or power grids. PLCs are high-value targets; breaches can cause significant production shutdowns, equipment damage or public safety hazards.

Das' patent develops and tests a multilayer intrusion detection approach that operates within industrial controllers, serving as the final line of defense against cyber attacks. Das compares the notion to a hive of bees. Each "bee" (controller) performs local sensing, collecting process measurements. When a threat is confirmed, the "hive" escalates alerts to operators, leveraging swarm-like behavior.

The patents underscore the strength of UAH's doctoral programs and CCRE's mission to advance cybersecurity research while preparing the next generation of technical leaders. ■

When more becomes less

Researchers find 'solution packages' may weaken buyer relationships



Business researchers Dr. Yongchuan "Kevin" Bao and Dr. Yi Tan published a study that challenges the long-held assumption that offering services in a solution package strengthens relationships between manufacturers and their customers. The work reveals a counterintuitive outcome: Expanded product offerings with services to solve clients' operational problems may actually increase the likelihood of customer default, potentially undermining buyer-supplier relationships.

The work draws on a dataset of 446 manufacturing firms to examine the unintended consequences of manufacturers shifting from selling standalone products to delivering integrated "customer solutions." While prior literature has emphasized bundling products with

services, the researchers identified a "dark side" to this strategy. When firms fail to meet customer expectations by solving problems arising in unexpected situations, disputes and defaults become more likely. To address these challenges, the research highlights two critical paths.

"First, invest in operational capability," Bao advises. "High operational efficiency allows a firm to respond with the speed and agility needed to address the 'unknowable unknowns' that inevitably arise during solution implementation. Second, manage market expectations. Businesses must be cautious with heavy advertising, as it can inflate customer expectations to unattainable levels, increasing the risk of disputes and defaults." ■



College of Nursing streamlines BSN program for workforce readiness

The UAH College of Nursing recently announced that it would transition to a four-semester Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program, a change designed to better support student success and align with workforce and industry needs.

"This change reflects our commitment to ensuring that our program structure supports both student success and the evolving needs of the nursing profession," said Dr. Karen Frith, dean of the UAH College of Nursing, who recently retired. "By refining how and when content is delivered, we are better positioning our students to succeed academically and transition confidently into clinical practice."

The new structure maintained a more consistent academic load of approximately 15 credit hours per semester and aligned more closely with scholarship

timelines and the needs of active-duty military students.

"We took a close look at how students progress through the program and where adjustments could improve their experience," said Dr. Sheila S. Gentry, associate dean for undergraduate programs. "This structure allows for a more cohesive learning experience, where students are building knowledge and applying it in practice in a more integrated and meaningful way."

The revised curriculum, developed through faculty collaboration and student feedback, adjusted and combined courses to better align instruction with clinical application.

The updated program takes effect in fall 2026 for students applying to the nursing major, while freshmen entering as nursing majors will complete the program in four years. The College of Nursing also offers its accelerated three-semester BSN option for students who already hold a bachelor's degree.

Both pathways reflected the college's commitment to preparing practice-ready nurses to meet regional and national healthcare needs. ■

Investing in nurses invests in community

UAH College of Nursing supporters play a vital role in helping our students become well-trained nurses.

Bryant Bank's longstanding commitment – a 2014 pledge of \$3 million over 30 years – provides \$100,000 annually for the Bryant Bank Dean's Scholars Program, a nursing scholarship for high-achieving freshmen from Alabama.

"Bryant Bank was built on the belief that investing in people is the highest form of community banking," said Ken Watson, Bryant Bank, North Alabama Market President. "North Alabama is growing, and the need for talented, compassionate healthcare professionals has never been greater."

A new support system – the James Raper and Scott Holtham Compassionate Care Endowment – began in the spring 2026 semester for the college's faculty and staff.

"When we invest in the resilience, connection and emotional health of our faculty and staff, we are ultimately investing in every patient who will one day be touched by the nurses they help to form," said Dr. Yeow Chye Ng, professor and associate dean of graduate programs.

The endowment honors the legacy of two individuals whose lives reflect compassion, generosity and unwavering support for others: Raper, a UAH alumnus and acclaimed UAB nursing professor, and Holtham, a lawyer known for helping children and their families. ■

PASSION FOR SERVICE

Dr. Karen Frith's Nursing deanship marked by college and community innovations, top graduates

◀ Dr. Karen Frith reflects on her long career as a nurse and nurse educator in her office at the College of Nursing at UAH. Now retired as dean of the college, she takes the "MENTOR" sign on her bookcase and the spirit it represents into a new chapter filled with plans for travel, gardening and continued opportunities for service.

Dr. Karen Frith, retired dean of the UAH College of Nursing, leaves a legacy of strong mentorship, program advancement, technological innovation, community service and more. She began her deanship in 2021, amid the challenges of COVID-19, and ended it on June 25, 2026, at an especially exciting time for the college.

Nursing is producing some of its best graduates: In the past five years, the first-time pass rate for the National Council Licensure Examination has never dipped below 99%; in two of those years, it was 100%.

The 11-month accelerated degree program, one of Frith's major goals, is an unqualified success.

"We developed it for people who already had a non-nursing degree but wanted a career change," Frith said. "We were the first in the nation to develop a second-degree program paired with an apprenticeship at a hospital. We seated

our fourth class in January, and we have a waiting list."

Nursing enrollment, after pandemic-era declines, is expected to increase for fall 2026. A recruiting technique Frith employed is the Discover Nursing app: a virtual UAH nursing student describing the program plus a panoramic tour of the cutting-edge Simulation & Learning Innovation Center.

"It's augmented reality that we take into high school classrooms. We're the only college in the university that has it. I've always used technology to try to push healthcare and education."

Frith came to the deanship with a community vision: engaging nurses in health advocacy, education and outreach to improve health equity.

Her first step was the May 2024 Health Equity Summit with leaders from government, corporate, nonprofit and

academic sectors. The Health Equity Symposium in October 2024 offered a broader conversation addressing cognitive health, veterans care, and cancer prevention and support.

Then Frith created a new position – the college's first associate dean for research – and appointed Dr. Azita Amiri, who proposed UAH Neighborhood Nursing. The program began in select neighborhoods in January 2026.

"Faculty and students have seen over 500 neighbors," Frith said, "and they've had some really remarkable lifesaving things happen."

After a 42-year career as a nurse and nurse educator – including 19 years as professor, researcher and administrator at UAH – Frith intends to continue serving her community by volunteering with UAH Neighborhood Nursing and mentoring adolescent girls while she enjoys her well-earned retirement. ■

READING THE SKIES

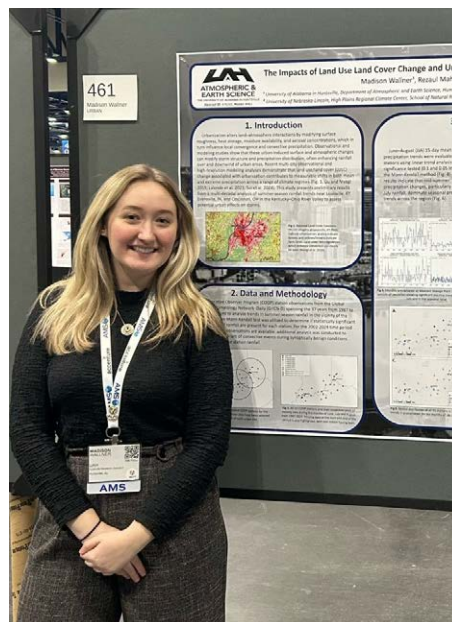
Grad student turns childhood wonder into award-winning research

Madison Wallner, a graduate research assistant of Atmospheric and Earth Science (AES), transformed a moment of childhood awe into a professional pursuit: studying thunderstorms to predict why some events grow so much larger, leading to potential new prediction models.

As a 10-year-old growing up in Columbus, Ohio, Wallner witnessed firsthand the violent 2012 Midwest derecho – an intense line of powerful straight-line winds that eventually traveled 700 miles, leaving millions without power and resulting in 22 deaths.

“That experience sparked a deeper curiosity about how storms form and what allows some of them to become so powerful and destructive in comparison to others,” Wallner says.

The researcher transformed that childhood awe into a life mission. Her research examines how urban



▲ Graduate research assistant Madison Wallner stands with her award-winning research poster at the 106th American Meteorological Society Annual Meeting. Her study on how urbanization influences precipitation patterns earned First Place in the Best Urban Student Poster Presentation competition.

environments influence weather patterns, particularly how urbanization and land use change influence precipitation patterns. UAH enabled her to leverage NASA resources to process decades of observational data and advanced analytical techniques to identify increasing precipitation trends, uncovering how storms can form or intensify near urban areas.

Her work highlights that cities are not just passive environments, but rather actively influence where and how storms develop, culminating in the opportunity to present her findings on the national stage at the 106th American Meteorological Society Annual Meeting where she received the First Place Best Urban Student Poster Presentation award. ■



AES researchers honored for hurricane science and tropical meteorology

The Department of Atmospheric and Earth Sciences continued to shine nationally through achievements in hurricane research and student success. Assistant Professor Dr. Xiaomin Chen received the American Meteorological Society (AMS) Banner I. Miller Award for research that improved NOAA's Hurricane Analysis and Forecast System, advancing forecasts of hurricane structure and rapid intensification. His work is helping forecasters better anticipate some of the most dangerous storm behaviors.

Chen's impact extends to mentorship. At the 106th AMS Annual Meeting, his graduate students earned top honors at the Symposium on Tropical Meteorology and Climate. Zebulon Leffler received first place for oral presentations, while Ethan Prunty earned an Honorable Mention. Their award-winning research reflects UAH's growing leadership in tropical meteorology, forecasting science and the development of future atmospheric researchers. ■

A lasting legacy in climate science

Dr. John Christy retires after nearly four decades of leadership and service at UAH

When Dr. John Christy arrived at UAH in 1987, the university's atmospheric science enterprise was still growing. Nearly four decades later, he retired after helping establish UAH as a nationally recognized leader in climate and atmospheric research, leaving a legacy of scientific achievement, public service and institutional leadership.

Christy concluded his academic career in July 2026, following more than 25 years of service as Alabama's State Climatologist. During his tenure, he played a central role in advancing UAH's reputation in atmospheric and Earth system science while contributing to climate research at the national and international levels.

As director of the Earth System Science Center (ESSC), Christy oversaw the center's growth from approximately 20 employees in 2000 to more than 140 today, expanding its research portfolio, federal partnerships and applied science mission.

Internationally, Christy is recognized for his work on satellite-based climate observations. In 1989, he and Dr. Roy W. Spencer developed a global temperature dataset derived from microwave satellite observations beginning in 1979. The work fundamentally advanced the ability to monitor Earth's climate and earned the Spencer-Christy team NASA's Medal for Exceptional Scientific Achievement

in 1991, followed by a Special Award from the American Meteorological Society in 1996. Christy was inducted as a Fellow of the American Meteorological Society in 2002.

"Over almost four decades, Dr. Christy's leadership as a faculty member and research center director helped strengthen UAH's standing as a hub for atmospheric and Earth system science," said Dr. Robert Lindquist, UAH vice president for research and economic development. "At the same time, the Alabama Office of the State Climatologist has become a renowned source of climate data and interpretation for agencies, policymakers, researchers and the public."

Beyond his research accomplishments, Christy's career reflects sustained engagement with science policy and public service. He has contributed to multiple Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change assessment reports, served on National Research Council panels and testified before U.S. congressional committees more than 20 times.

As Alabama's State Climatologist, Christy helped guide the evolution of the Alabama Office of the State Climatologist into a critical resource for agriculture, water resources, emergency management and infrastructure planning. Today, the organization serves as Alabama's lead contributor to the U.S. Drought Monitor, and the Lawn and Garden Moisture Index developed by Christy is used extensively across the Southeast.

Beyond his professional accomplishments, Christy maintains strong commitments to community, faith and family. He has remained active in church service throughout his life, completed the Mountain Mist ultra-marathon 10 times and is a proud grandfather to seven grandchildren.

His lifelong connection to climate science began well before his academic career. Christy built his first climate dataset as a teenager in 1966, a passion that ultimately shaped a distinguished career that left a lasting mark on UAH, the state of Alabama and the global scientific community. ■





SPOTLIGHT ON SPRING SPORTS:

UAH student-athletes shine with conference and national academic honors

Success at UAH isn't measured solely by wins and championships. It's also reflected in the classroom, where Charger student-athletes continue to excel academically while competing at the highest levels of NCAA Division II athletics.

This spring, UAH student-athletes earned conference and national recognition for their achievements in the classroom. Here are the highlights:

- 13 Chargers were named to the 2026 Gulf South Conference (GSC) All-Academic Teams, recognizing upperclassmen who have maintained at least a 3.20 cumulative GPA while making significant contributions to their teams through leadership, service and athletic performance.
- 160 student-athletes earned a place on the 2026 GSC Spring Academic Honor Roll with a cumulative GPA of 3.00 or higher.
- 17 Chargers received College Sports Communicators (CSC) Academic All-District honors, recognizing student-athletes who combine outstanding academic achievement with excellence in competition.
- Men's lacrosse also earned distinction from the Peach Belt Conference (PBC), with four Chargers named to the 2025-26 PBC All-Academic Team and 45 student-athletes recognized on the PBC Presidential Honor Roll.

ACADEMIC HONOREES

Baseball: CJ Carson (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District), Taylor Bush (CSC Academic All-District), Seth Staggs (ABCA/Rawlings NCAA Division II South All-Region Second Team)

Softball: Katie Bracken (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District), Mia Brown (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District), Alexa Douthitt (CSC Academic All-District)

Men's Lacrosse: Carter Henninger (CSC Academic All-District, PBC All-Academic), Chris Aiello (CSC Academic All-District, PBC All-Academic), Matteo Siciliano (CSC Academic All-District), Griffin Utz (PBC All-Academic), Zach Rudgunas (PBC All-Academic)

Women's Lacrosse: Sarah Cole (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District), Ella Rutherford (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District), Sydney Schiavone (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District)

Men's Track & Field/Cross Country: Wes Egalite (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District), Ahmed Ibrahim (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District), Julius Williams III (GSC All-Academic)

Women's Track & Field/Cross Country: Tamsyn Gibbs (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District), Anna Katherine Hopkins (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District), Amiah Murry (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District), Hailey Smith (GSC All-Academic, CSC Academic All-District) ■

Changing Lives through Generosity

Donor support empowers UAH basketball star Lili Wilken

The player who achieved more fame and spent more time in the spotlight than any other in UAH women's basketball history was able to do so because of the generosity of an anonymous donor.

Lili Wilken, the most decorated player ever for the Chargers and a first-team All-America selection who led her team to its first NCAA Division II Final Four, was the recipient of an endowed scholarship from a donor requesting no publicity for herself.

"The donor is someone who comes from a family that cares deeply about education and then deeply about giving women's sports the same type of opportunities that the men's sports have had," said Dr. Cade Smith, UAH Director of Athletics. "She's been really invested in all our programs, not just basketball."

"It really means a lot to me personally, to know that someone has the confidence in me, and they want me to be able to perform my best on the floor to help out the program and the community," Wilken said.

Endowed scholarships are an avenue for donors to make a perpetual impact that directly affects student-athletes and makes a difference in their lives, often alleviating strain on their families and enabling them to focus on academics and athletics without having to seek other

employment. They also aid coaches in the complexity of roster building.

"When this particular scholarship was endowed, I thought, 'What a program, that has the interest of supporters and boosters and alumni that want to give back and have that available to players,'" head coach Allen Sharpe said. "What an opportunity...It's money well-spent. It's in a good place because these are good kids that are here first and foremost to get a degree, and then if we can win some games, let's win some games."

Win a few, they did.

In Wilken's two seasons, the Chargers won 59 of 72 games, captured the NCAA South Region championship and advanced to the program's first NCAA Division II Final Four. A chemistry major with a 4.0 GPA, Wilken earned Academic All-America first-team honors, NCAA Division II Coaches' All-America recognition, Gulf South Conference Player of the Year and set a school record with 836 points in a season.

"I'm very proud to be able to say, for the rest of my life, that I was on the two teams that turned this program around," she said, "and I know that with Coach Sharpe, it's going to keep going this way. I'd always wanted to win a championship in college, and we did that. It's a great feeling to be able to wear that on your chest and say I went to UAH and played basketball there." ■





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Amy (B.S.B.A., 2009) and Matthew Willson (B.S.B.A., 2011)

Your connection to UAH doesn't end at graduation.
As one of more than **55,000 alumni**, you'll always be
part of a community that's shaping what's next.

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your impact through one of our giving societies,
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