Greetings from the Dean

I write this year’s Report with decidedly mixed feelings. In late summer 2016 I will step down after 10 wonderful and rewarding years as Dean. I am pleased by the progress we have made toward true excellence as a student-centered Graduate School but at the same time, much remains to be done as UA continues its march toward first-tier status as a national flagship university.

In last year’s Report, I was pleased to report that the one-year downturn in enrollment in fall 2013 had been reversed and that we were once again headed toward record enrollment territory. Unfortunately, fall 2015 enrollment dropped again to levels not seen since 2011, although we are still ca. 1000 students larger than the mean enrollment of the early 2000s. But the main reason for this downturn is in itself a reason for pride – our continued march toward record territory each year in retention numbers and graduations. From some 1,350 graduates in the mid-2000s, we graduated 2,020 students in 2014-15, including going from ca. 150-170 doctoral graduates to 379 in that same period. Simply stated, the key to once again growing our enrollment is simple – recruit proportionately more new students each year to replace our burgeoning number of graduates… and then some.

As I said last year “The pessimist complains about the wind. The optimist expects it to change. The realist adjusts the sails and moves on.” We in the UA Graduate School choose to remain optimists, but at the time, we recognize the reality that in the second decade of the 21st century, the winds of graduate education have definitely changed at the national as well as local levels and our sails must be adjusted accordingly. And our efforts in taking this approach are starting to move the UA Graduate School enrollment back on a positive trajectory, with a near-record number of applications this past year.

Enrollment aside, I’m also happy to report that we set some new marks for qualitative measures of excellence and student service. In terms of excellence in service to our students, we ran our 3rd successful 3 Minute Thesis competition in November 2015, after our campus winners in both 2013 and 2014 won the People’s Choice award at the regional competition in San Antonio and New Orleans, respectively. The 2015 UA competition, like the event in 2014, will be the subject of an upcoming documentary on WVUA/Alabama Public Television set to air in early 2016. We also worked with undergraduate recruiting/scholarship folks at UA to institute a plan whereby Presidential and/or National Merit Scholars who finished their undergraduate degrees early could retain their remaining scholarship awards to work toward a graduate degree. Approximately 400 UA students each year could avail themselves of this new game-changing plan.

New recruitment software tools have been rolled out to increase the number and quality of applications and cultivate applicants through their matriculation at the Capstone. We continue to place premium effort on supporting our students, with efforts to increase research and travel grant funding (to over $670,000 and 1,026 students supported in 2014-15, and with outstanding, national-exemplar mentoring and support programs like Tide Together, Graduate Parent Support, and our new WiSE program (Women in STEM Experience) across campus.

The UA Graduate School remains committed to excellence, growth and to the proposition that graduate education is one of the key economic drivers in Alabama’s
recession-rebounding economy! New UA President Stuart Bell, who came on board in summer 2015, is extremely bullish on expanding graduate education and research. The unprecedented growth we had in enrollment from 2006 to 2012 (from ca. 3,700 to 4,853) will almost surely be followed by a similar expansion to ca. 6,000 graduate students by approximately 2020. The UA Graduate School is playing an increasingly important role in moving the state of Alabama forward in the 21st century knowledge economy.

And the best is TRULY yet to come….

Dave Francko
Associate Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
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