

“Good afternoon colleagues, I am going to take some presidential license today, and do things that are different from my normal routine with you. First, I am going to focus the entirety of my remarks on one important issue and that is the controversy that has arisen over the changes at The Flor-Ala, and second I am going to stick uncharacteristically close to some prepared notes. I have to make sure that my own remarks are clear and accurate as I stand accordingly. The student media adviser at UNA was informed in September of 2018 that the university would discontinue its staff position and recreate the media adviser position as a faculty line within the department of communications. The media adviser has protested this decision and claims that it constitutes administrative retaliation for an article that appeared in The Flor-Ala in weeks preceding the announcement. He filed a complaint with the College Media Association, which after cursory investigation, made the decision to censure the University of North Alabama. Now ladies and gentlemen, there’s a lot at play here, and permit me to try and unpack these issues one at a time, and I want to begin with what may well be the most important question in today’s discussion. There was and is no retaliation involved in this case. The decision to move the media adviser’s position from a staff line to a faculty line has been three years in the making, and that decision was driven by Dean Carmen Burkhalter. The fact that an article critical of

the administration appeared in The Flor-Ala that same month was coincidental.

Any student newspaper routinely publishes articles that are critical in tone. In my time as president, The Flor-Ala has taken me to task for a transition to Division I and the decision to create a smoke-free campus and various other issues. I accept that, and I defend the students' rights to criticize me or others at the university.

But efforts to link Dean Burkhalter's notice of this personnel transition to one article in the paper, represent an ex post facto creation of a narrative designed to lead to a predetermined and misleading conclusion. More generally, there's been an effort to conflate an academic decision and to relate it in routine personnel notification with an attack on the First Amendment at UNA. I find it objectionable that any group purports that own the First Amendment and interpret it for the rest of us. Candidly, this raises my professional past. I've taught the Constitution, Bill of Rights and First Amendment every year of my professional life since 1987 and extended through this current semester. I celebrate the First Amendment as a citizen, I teach it as a professor and I protect it as a president of this university.

Now let's turn our attention to actions taken by the College Media Association. It is important to understand what this organization is and what it is not. CMA is not a licensing body, not a regulatory body, not an accrediting body. It is an advocacy group, and its formal name on business documentation provides some evidence

of the primary group for whom it advocates: College Media Advisers Inc. We received notice in early October that our student media adviser had filed a complaint regarding the discontinuation of his staff position. CMA then moved to assign a principal investigator to lead the inquiry of UNA. Remembering that much of this dispute centers on our decisions to transition media adviser from staff line in student affairs to a faculty line in the department of communication, it bears mentioning that the investigator assigned to the UNA case by CMA comes from a university, where he is a media adviser who is in a staff position reporting to student affairs. The first official communication from that investigator in my office occurred on Oct. 24th. That initial communication contained a strong warning that UNA was on the path to censure, and advised no resolution of the issue could take place unless we yielded to his demand to suspend the search for a new tenure-track professor of communications. Our move to transition media adviser's position from staff to faculty status has been in process for years, and we shared cleared written evidence that decision timeline with the College Media Association. Inexplicably, CMA did not acknowledge that evidence in any of its subsequent communications nor in the announcement of censure. Significantly, no CMA representatives ever visited our campus as part of this investigation. No CMA representatives asked to speak with me regarding the association's

concerns. Moreover, the CMA's principal investigator admitted that his own investigation found 'no smoking gun'— his words not mine— to substantiate the claim of retaliation. The investigator went on to affirm that UNA administrators have "an honest desire to improve the Department of Communications" and observe "there is nothing to indicate these administrators do not have the best interest of the college, its students, and faculty at heart," and yet, despite these reassuring findings and observations and despite our submission of requested evidence showing the long history of this decision process, CMA decided to proceed with censure and they did so quickly. Only seven business days lapsed between our submission of the documentation requested by CMA and the announcement of censure. News of the censure in related developments have given rise to sensational headlines in the local press. University officials have been criticized and our views have been misrepresented, while the claims of others are taken at face value. But what are we to make of this and what are we to make of the fact that the current media adviser served as executive editor for a prominent local news organization before moving to UNA, an association that has never once been acknowledged in that outlet's reporting on this topic? Candidly, I'm shocked and saddened about this rush to judgment by the manner in which it's been reported and I must wonder about the motives of those who have invoked the

First Amendment, while simultaneously ignoring the basic tenets of fair journalism and the requirements of an objective investigation. Setting these feelings aside, I will tell you that I regret that the good name of our university has been called into question by this censure. Fortunately, what has been done can be undone, and I want you as my faculty colleagues to know that it is my intent to work with Provost Alexander, Dean Burkhalter, Dr. Cain, and the faculty and staff and students within the department of communications to re-engage with the College Media Association with the goal of getting this censure removed. It is a priority forward. I am confident that we will make this happen because in fact the First Amendment is alive and well at the University of North Alabama. On my watch, there will be no censorship of student media, as it's been there will be none, and there will be no manipulation of our student journalists. It would be wrong for me as president or Dr. Alexander as provost to attempt to use The Flor-Ala to advance a personal agenda. I submit it is no less wrong of anyone else to do like this. You are my colleagues, and you have lived with me for almost four years. I'm proud of what we have accomplished working together on shared governance, academic freedom and, yes, First Amendment issues. We will continue this journey together, and as personnel matters arise, you have my commitment that I will handle those with fairness and discretion, and in return

I've asked you to give me the latitude and space I need to navigate difficult issues such as the one I have called before you today. Thank you for your time and attention."