# ALAIR 2026

39TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE & BUSINESS MEETING

## GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

MARCH 11–13, 2026

SOUTHERN UNION STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE
OPELIKA, AL

**Business and Technology Center**

301 Lake Condy Road
Opelika, AL 36801

## ALAIR 2026 Conference Schedule at a Glance

| Wednesday, March 11th | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **The Southern Room** | **Room 303** | **Room 309** |
| 3:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. | Early Check-In | Early set-up | Early set-up |
| 6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. | **Optional Group Dinner Gathering**<br>Auburn Marriott Opelika Resort: Southern Oak Restaurant | | |

| Thursday, March 12th | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **The Southern Room** | **Room 303** | **Room 309** |
| 9:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. | **Registration Available**<br>Southern Room Lobby | | |
| 9:30 a.m. – 10:15 a.m. | Roundtable Discussions and Networking | | |
| 10:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. | Vendor Demonstration: Coursedog | | |
| 11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. | **Lunch on Your Own** | | |
| 1:00 p.m. – 1:15 p.m. | **Conference Welcome** | | |
| 1:25 p.m. – 2:25 p.m. | Lightning Talks with Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE) Representatives | Measuring What Matters: Rethinking Success Metrics for Career-Focused and Applied Programs | The Many Hats of Institutional Researchers: Understanding the Diverse Roles of IR Professionals |
| 2:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m. | Vendor Demonstration: Ellucian Insights | **Refreshments Available in The Southern Room (Sponsored by Ellucian)** | |
| 3:45 p.m. – 4:45 p.m. | | Dual Enrollment in Alabama: A Decade of Transformation | Troy University's QEP: Comprehensive Internationalization for Continuous Quality Enhancement |
| 5:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. | **Optional Group Dinner Outing at Zazu Gastropub**<br>112 S. 8th St<br>Opelika, AL 36801 | | |
| 7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. | **Special Event: Rock 'n Roll Pinball**<br>815 S. Railroad Ave<br>Opelika, AL 36801 | | |

| Friday, March 13th | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **The Southern Room** | **Room 303** | **Room 309** |
| 8:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. | **Registration**<br>Southern Room Lobby | | |
| 9:00 a.m. – 9:45 a.m. | | Time to Degree at the Graduate Level | Smarter Surveys with AI: Building a Dynamic Prospective Student Survey |
| 9:45 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. | **Morning Beverage Break (Sponsored by Xitracs)** | | |
| 10:00 a.m. – 10:50 a.m. | | Creating a Streamlined Project Tracking System in Microsoft 365 | From Fall to Spring: Using Persistence Data and AI-Assisted Analysis to Drive Student Success |
| 11:00 a.m. – 11:50 a.m. | **Keynote in The Southern Room: Leading Change**<br>Chris Richie and Moriah Kent, Auburn University Human Resource Development | | |
| 12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m. | **Lunch and Business Meeting in The Southern Room**<br>Door Prizes to Follow | | |
| 1:00 p.m. – 1:30 p.m. | **Additional Business and Conference Adjournment**<br>Safe travels! | | |

| ALAIR Executive Committee 2025-2026 | |
|---|---|
| **President**<br>Jessica Carroll<br>*Alabama Community College System* | **Nominating Committee**<br><br>Brian McGhee<br>*University of South Alabama*<br><br>Mattie Hudson<br>*Wallace State Community College* |
| **Vice President/Conference Chair**<br>Jeffrey Guenther<br>*Athens State University* | |
| **Past President**<br>Preston Robinson<br>*Tuskegee University* | |
| **Secretary**<br>Michelle Tin<br>*The University of Alabama* | **Members at Large**<br><br>*This could be you!* |
| **Treasurer**<br>Jesse Lowe<br>*The University of Alabama at Birmingham* | |

ALAIR
Alabama Association for Institutional Research

# Welcome to ALAIR 2026!
# Growth and Transformation Through Institutional Research

The Alabama Association for Institutional Research (ALAIR) Executive Committee welcomes you to ALAIR 2026! The theme of growth recognizes the role of Alabama's plains region: Auburn University is well known for its agriscience programs, and the vision of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System's vision is to serve communities "to grow a better Alabama and a better world[1]." As institutional research professionals, we are tasked with supporting the growth of our respective institutions. The theme of transformation is a nod to Auburn-Opelika's recent culinary renaissance[2], as you will experience Thursday evening at Zazu Gastropub. We, too, are called to help transform our colleges and universities by improving student success and identifying demand for innovative programs.

This year's sessions will inspire us with new knowledge and renewed motivation to grow and transform our institutions of higher education, our state, and our region.

## Thank You to our Sponsors!

ALAIR is grateful for the support of our 2026 sponsors. We ask our members to consider them for future partnership opportunities.

### Gold-level sponsors

Ellucian
Thursday refreshments

Xitracs
Friday morning refreshments

### Silver-level sponsor

Coursedog

### Bronze-level sponsor

The University of Alabama College of Education

### Host institution

Southern Union State Community College

[1] *About us.* Alabama Cooperative Extension System. https://www.aces.edu/blog/category/about-us/
[2] *Auburn-Opelika is rapidly gaining attention for its culinary brilliance and innovative mixology*. Travel Taste + Tour. https://traveltasteandtour.com/2024/09/auburn-opelika-is-rapidly-gaining-attention-for-its-culinary-brilliance-and-innovative-mixology/

## Thursday, March 12th, 2026: Morning Schedule

**9:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.** **The Southern Room Lobby**

**Conference Registration**

**9:30 a.m. – 10:15 a.m.** **The Southern Room**

**Roundtable Discussions and Networking**

Topic 1
Effectively Using Economic Development and Workforce Data
Kelly Birchfield and Madison Hadley, Alabama Community College System

Topic 2
Design Thinking and Change Management Frameworks
Jeffrey Guenther, Athens State University

Topic 3
Informal Networking and General IR Discussion
Open, Unmoderated Roundtable

**10:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.** **The Southern Room**
**Vendor Demonstration** **Katherine Hsu, Coursedog**

**From Silos to Success: Using Unified Data to Power Student Outcomes**

Legacy academic systems—from scheduling to curriculum management—have long operated in isolation, leaving valuable insights trapped in departmental silos. By integrating these disparate processes into a single ecosystem, institutions can finally leverage the full power of their data. Join us to explore how a unified approach to academic operations provides the analytical roadmap needed to boost student retention and ensure long-term institutional health.

Learning Outcomes:
*Learn* to use predictive analytics to align course offerings with real-time student demand.
*Identify* practical methods for bridging the gaps between fragmented data sets across academic operations.
*Evaluate* how operational efficiency directly translates to higher student satisfaction and persistence.

**11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.** **Opelika/Auburn**

**Lunch Break**

You have 90 minutes to refuel before an afternoon packed with insightful presentations! With just a quick Google search, you're sure to find several unique culinary establishments within a short driving distance of the conference in the Opelika-Auburn area.

## Thursday, March 12th, 2026: Afternoon Schedule

**1:00 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.** **The Southern Room**
**Conference Welcome** **ALAIR Executive Committee**

### Concurrent Sessions I: 1:25 p.m. – 2:25 p.m.

**Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE) Lightning Talks**

**Scott Corey; John Glasscock; Jim Hood, Ph.D.** **The Southern Room**

This session will use a lightning talk format that will focus on a variety of topics. The topics will briefly touch on recent and pending data initiatives, IPEDS updates, latest changes to academic programming reporting, FAFSA completion, recent state legislation related to higher education, a conversation on current data edit procedures, and a few other topics along with a few prize drawings. To paraphrase Yankees great Yogi Berra, we won't know where we're going, but we'll make good time.

**Measuring What Matters: Rethinking Success Metrics for Career-Focused and Applied Programs**

**Jessie Lynn Nichols, Ph.D.** **Room 303**
**Dirt to Diva Data and Analytics**

Traditional student success metrics, such as retention, time to degree, and graduation rates, remain important in higher education, yet they often fail to fully capture the impact of career-focused and applied programs. As institutions expand workforce-aligned pathways, institutional research (IR) offices are increasingly called upon to develop measures that better reflect program effectiveness, labor market relevance, and institutional mission.

This session explores how IR can lead the transformation of success measurement for applied and career-oriented programs by incorporating complementary indicators such as employment outcomes, wage progression, industry credentials, licensure attainment, and employer engagement. Drawing on examples from career and technical education and work-based learning, the presentation highlights practical strategies for integrating these measures into existing IR frameworks.

**The Many Hats of Institutional Researchers: Understanding the Diverse Roles of Institutional Research Professionals**

**Jessica Carroll** **Room 309**
**Alabama Community College System**

In this session, we will discuss what institutional research is and why it matters, the various hats institutional researchers must wear with real-work examples, how to balance the many hats, and have time for self-reflection. We will discuss strategies so that you will be ready to wear any hat required of you!

## Vendor Session and Refreshments (sponsored by Ellucian): 2:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.

**The Southern Room**

**Ellucian Insights**
**Shelly Tomlin and Jake Victorson**

Over a 60-minute session, Ellucian will provide a high-level overview of the Ellucian Insights solution with a focus on common priority use cases for higher education. The presentation will include how Insights fits into Ellucian's overall SaaS strategy and how Insights can help Alabama institutions unlock the power of their data today no matter where they are in their journey to SaaS. The session will conclude with an opportunity for Q&A.

## Concurrent Sessions II: 3:45 p.m. – 4:45 p.m.

**Dual Enrollment in Alabama: A Decade of Transformation**
**John Glasscock** **Room 303**
**Alabama Commission on Higher Education**

Dual enrollment has become a larger portion of the college and university population in Alabama. As the custodian of higher education data for Alabama, the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE) will share a historical review of dual enrollment trends across the state, highlighting shifts in student demographics, institutional participation, and geographic distribution. Attention will be given to how access has expanded among student populations and across different post-secondary institutions. The session will also examine student outcomes, including credential attainment and continued enrollment in higher education after high school graduation. By tracing these changes, participants will gain insight into how dual enrollment is influencing student success in Alabama.

**Troy University's QEP: Comprehensive Internationalization for Continuous Quality Enhancement**
**Rich Ledet, Ph.D. and Johanna Alberich, Ph.D.** **Room 309**
**Troy University**

Troy University continues its comprehensive internationalization efforts in order to reinforce its status as Alabama's "International Institution." Our latest QEP was used to implement a plan that would promote global scholarship among students, and also mindfulness of cultural differences among employees working in traditional and on-line settings. This effort involved a student-focused initiative designed to enhance study-abroad activities, and an employee-focused initiative that led to the creation of a podcast devoted to promoting conversations about inter-cultural interactions and "belonging" in higher education. This presentation describes those initiatives in greater detail, provides information about implementation approaches, and discusses the multi-pronged assessment strategy used to measure progress. Conducted under the supervision of the university's Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness, our summary evaluation is discussed along with some of the lessons we learned. This presentation serves to benefit academic professionals involved in the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of any quality enhancement initiative.

## Optional Evening Activities

**Dinner: 5:00 p.m. – 6:30 pm.** at **Zazu Gastropub**, 112 S. 8th St, Opelika, AL 36801
**Pinball: 7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.** at **Rock 'n Roll Pinball**, 815 S. Railroad Ave, Opelika, AL 36801

## Friday, March 13th, 2026

**8:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.** **The Southern Room Lobby**

**Conference Registration**

## Concurrent Sessions III: 9:00 a.m. – 9:45 a.m.

### Time to Degree at the Graduate Level

**Ash Abebe, Ph.D. and Julia Thompson** **Room 303**
**Auburn University**

Auburn University's Office of Institutional Research is periodically asked to provide time-to-degree calculations at the graduate level to support reporting, planning, and decision-making, but several variables make it difficult to arrive at a simple rate. For example, graduate students are often part-time, often pursuing multiple degrees, and frequently earn a degree having been enrolled in something else until their last term. If we exclude all those students who don't pursue a specific degree full-time from beginning to end, the population size decreases substantially. Instead of providing a rate, we have historically provided raw data to allow requestors to make their own decisions about handling the variables. Through recent collaboration with Auburn's Graduate School, IR has created a more user-friendly data extract. In this session, IR will review the SQL code and dataset, and the Graduate School will describe how they use it to produce time to degree charts.

### Smarter Surveys with AI: Building a Dynamic Prospective Student Survey

**Iryna Muse, Ph.D.** **Room 309**
**The University of Alabama System**

This session showcases the design and implementation of a prospective student survey for the University of Alabama System (UAS). Developed to understand the college preferences and decision-making factors of Alabama high school seniors, the survey leverages AI-driven tools to enhance both functionality and visual appeal. It features a dynamic autocomplete question format, allowing respondents to quickly find and select their preferred institutions, replacing the standard dropdown approach. AI was used to generate and structure a JSON file hosted on GitHub, which the survey dynamically accesses in real time. Custom AI-assisted JavaScript powers advanced branching logic, including checks on respondents' top college choices. Embedded data fields, sourced from both the external JSON and respondent input, are captured for downstream questions, enabling tailoring of survey logic. AI-generated HTML further enhances visual engagement through interactive hover features for images and messages about the universities. By combining AI, GitHub-hosted datasets, and sophisticated survey logic, the instrument improves efficiency, data quality, and the overall participant experience. Additionally, AI-assisted reporting enables more user-friendly Power BI visualizations and streamlined analysis of open-ended responses. This project demonstrates a practical model for institutional research teams seeking to modernize survey instruments, providing actionable insights into student decision-making and showcasing a replicable approach for integrating AI into survey design, testing, and execution.

## Friday Morning Refreshment Break (Sponsored by Xitracs): 9:45 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.

**The Southern Room**

## Concurrent Sessions IV: 10:00 a.m. – 10:50 a.m.

**Creating a Streamlined Project Tracking System in Microsoft 365**

**Emily Rothenbacher** **Room 303**
**The University of Alabama**

Finding and maintaining a project tracking system that fits an institutional research office's needs can be expensive, laborious, or both. There are a wide array of packaged software as well as seemingly infinite in-house solutions, but small offices often face limited resources. This presentation will cover a Microsoft-based system that is flexible, easy to implement, and included with a A1, A3, or A5 Microsoft 365 subscription. The system uses a client-facing Microsoft Forms as well as the functionality of Microsoft Power Automate to help input and manage project requests in a Microsoft SharePoint list. We will cover how the development of such a system has progressed at The University of Alabama as well as steps to create one's own system. This solution allows for KPI tracking, a collaborative workflow, and additional automation opportunities. Attendees will leave with insights on creating their own similar project tracking system.

**From Fall to Spring: Using Persistence Data and AI-Assisted Analysis to Drive Student Success**

**Mandy Sessions** **Room 309**
**Wallace Community College**

This session explores a practical, data-informed approach to analyzing Fall-to-Spring persistence. In addition to traditional institutional research methods, the presentation demonstrates how AI-assisted tools, including ChatGPT, can support data interpretation, narrative development, and communication of findings while maintaining data integrity and ethical standards.

## Keynote Session: 11:00 a.m. – 11:50 a.m.

**The Southern Room**

**Leading Change**
**Chris Richie and Moriah Kent**
**Auburn University Human Resources Development**

## Lunch and Business Meeting: 12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.
## Door Prizes and Conference Adjournment: 1:00 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.

**The Southern Room**

**Thank you for attending ALAIR 2026!**
**Stay tuned for announcements about ALAIR 2027, and safe travels!**

## Keynote Speakers

**Colonel Chris Richie, USMC (Retired)**

Chris is a retired U.S. Marine Corps Colonel with a 30-year career of global leadership, including support of combat and humanitarian operations, diplomatic service at the U.S. Embassy in Abu Dhabi, and command of the Marine Corps' largest Aviation Command and Control (AC2) organization. He has led thousands of people across 20 countries and earned numerous personal and unit-level awards, including the Defense Superior Service Medal and Legion of Merit.

Since 2022, Chris has served as Director of Human Resource Development at Auburn University and teaches leadership in the Harbert College of Business. His team envisioned and created a university wide employee leadership development program that has produced over 1,200 graduates in the inaugural year. He sits on the Board of Directors for the Auburn University Credit Union and the NROTC Alumni Association and is Vice President of the East Alabama Chapter of Military Officer's Association of America.

Chris is a keynote speaker, mentor, and three-time award-winning author. His latest book, *The Invisible Medal: Leading with a Higher Purpose*, is an Amazon best-seller.

**Moriah Kent**

Moriah Kent is an Instructional Designer and AI Implementation Specialist. She is passionate about helping people embrace innovation with confidence and curiosity. With a global background in teaching in Japan, Bulgaria, and Indonesia, she brings a people-centered lens to increasingly digital environments.

At Auburn University, Moriah leads initiatives at the intersection of instructional design, workforce development, and emerging technology, including a thriving 8500+ member AI community supporting staff, faculty, and student employees. Moriah founded the AU Instructional Designers Group and contributes to the AU Women in Technology Leadership Team. She frequently leads workshops on topics such as generative AI for professionals and leadership development concepts such as emotional intelligence. Moriah's work bridges strategy and empathy, helping organizations build cultures where innovation is both scalable and deeply human.

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