

TimesDaily.com

12/17/11

Professor donates his salary for scholarships

By Hannah Mask
Staff Writer

University of North Alabama Professor Greg Risner loves what he does. He has taught in the school's education department for more than 31 years. This year, he'll take a pay cut to the tune of about \$78,000.

And he couldn't be happier.

Risner said he first became interested in the Raymond Isbell retirement program when he found out his insurance rates would skyrocket in the next five years if he didn't retire by Nov. 30.

"I love what I do and I wasn't ready to go," said Risner, who teaches in the elementary education program. "I was in a quandary because of the insurance increasing. It was disheartening because I'm the happiest professor (at UNA).

Teaching is my life, and UNA is a great place where I have terrific colleagues who are also close friends. "

Risner said he spoke with Donna Jacobs, dean of the College of Education, who told him about the year-long Raymond Isbell program.

The program began when Isbell, a former UNA professor, made the decision to retire in the early 1990s. Isbell then volunteered to continue teaching his course load for a year under the stipulation that his salary would go toward scholarships.

Risner said he felt strongly that Isbell's decision was right for him, too.

"I graduated from Vanderbilt. I have four degrees, and now I'm making less than the students I teach," Risner joked. "But I want to do this. I want to give back, because somebody did this for me. I could not have (gone to Vanderbilt) unless they had endowed scholarships for me. So now, it's time for me to give back. "

UNA Director of Planned Giving Barry Morris, who also participates in the Isbell program, explained that Risner wouldn't necessarily be working for free.

Anyone who retires from an institution that participates in the Retirement Systems of Alabama can work part time in the state and still collect state retirement, Morris said.

There is a maximum earning amount set by the state. In 2011, that maximum amount is \$22,000, which is what Risner will be paid.

Professors with a doctorate degree can typically earn more than \$100,000 a year, Morris said. So when Risner's earnings drop to \$22,000, the approximately \$78,000 remaining will be put into an endowed scholarship, called the Gregory Paul Risner New Teacher Scholarship.

Risner said he'll be classified as part time during his year of participation in the program, even though he's teaching the same course load and advising students. He will no longer be participating in activities such as sitting on committees or conducting research.

UNA spokesman Josh Woods said when a professor chooses to participate in the Isbell program, retire or go to part time for any reason, the transition is a smooth one.

"Say it's a professor from the College of Education who may have served on a particular committee in a position that is reserved for a faculty member from that academic area," Woods said. "That position would simply go to another faculty member from that same area. It's very much a seamless transition that's worked out through the professor and his or her dean. "

Woods also said because the Isbell program lasts a year, UNA does not feel that allowing a professor to continue to teach his or her classes as a retiree instead of hiring a fresh face is unfair to those who are looking for employment.

"I would note two things: There are not dozens of faculty members participating in this program," he said. "I believe there have only been about 10 to participate since it began in 2008, and those have not all been at once. Also, when faculty are hired, just by nature of seeking a professor, the university is looking for someone with a PhD in a particular field, and the majority of those people are not recruited from the Shoals. They're usually recruited from out of state. "

By contrast, Woods said, keeping retired professors on as volunteers who are establishing scholarships helps local students.

"We have faculty members here to ensure that students, and not just a handful of students but a lot of students in the Shoals, are able to get an education so that they can get jobs and help benefit our local economy," he said.

Morris estimates since the program's inception, more than \$1. 5 million has been put toward endowments, with \$150,000 of that being dispersed annually.

Risner said he didn't choose to participate in the program to paint himself as a hero.

"My dad passed away this time last year, and he taught me one thing in life, and that is 'Give back to those that helped you,' so that is why I did this," he said. "It's a joy to teach. It's a privilege to teach here. I have great students, and I have been very, very blessed. "

Hannah Mask can be reached at 256-740-5728 or hannah.mask@TimesDaily.com.