

Dear Minister Nicolaidis:

We, the undersigned, are writing to you to emphasize the critical contributions being made by Alberta post-secondary institutions in this time of crisis. While our schools have suffered under these extraordinary circumstances, our faculty, staff, and students have come together to give back to the community in managing the pandemic. There is no doubt to the crucial contributions post-secondary institutions are making for Albertans today.

Many of the heroes of this crisis have had post-secondary education sector training: the doctors and the nurses on the hospital frontlines; the laboratory technicians working around the clock testing for COVID-19; and the epidemiologists and mathematicians providing forecasting to Alberta Health Services. They could not have done what they did without university or college level training in their fields.

The commitment of post-secondary institutions to the people of Alberta was never more evident as during this pandemic. First and foremost, institutions and their staff ensured the safety of their students. When thousands of students across Alberta were required to leave residence with little notice, employees stepped up and worked overtime to ensure a smooth transition out of residence. When classes transitioned to distance delivery, [Athabasca University launched a free, massive open online course](#) (MOOC) on effective online learning strategies. Faculty at the other universities, polytechnics and colleges quickly transformed their classes to an online format: putting in hours of uncompensated time into transferring their content to online platforms so that students could complete their winter semester courses.

As the pandemic extended over two months, post-secondary institutions, staff, and students remained steadfast in their commitment to support the public. When there was a growing shortage of hand sanitizers, the Department of Chemistry at University of Alberta became the first Canadian university [to produce hand sanitizers](#) in their own labs. Secondly, when the healthcare system became overwhelmed with patients, institutions like the University of Calgary and Mount Royal University began [fast tracking nursing students](#) in their final semester to jump into service and join the frontlines of this battle. When Alberta Health Services recognized the need to protect their frontline healthcare workers, university researchers began working on [3-D printed reusable face shields](#).

Additionally, Alberta post-secondaries are leading the way towards developing a vaccine. Alberta Innovates recently announced a partnership with the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to jointly fund eight projects at Alberta post-secondary institutions to [research multiple aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). The Cumming School of Medicine is leading [a global study on COVID-19 and its impact on children](#) at the Alberta Children's Hospital. The [Li Ka Shing Institute of Virology](#) is currently analyzing the virus in their labs as we write this letter. As well, multiple medical research projects have been redirected towards this pandemic, including investigating the use of [an Ebola treatment](#) to potentially inhibit SARS-CoV-2 virus which causes COVID-19.

Despite these accomplishments, this spring's provincial budget cuts mean post-secondary institutions across Alberta are forced to continue making institution-level cuts and laying off staff even in the midst of this pandemic. These cuts are in addition to those announced in October 2019 and have resulted in mounting financial pressures on students through tuition and student loan interest increases and the elimination of student income tax credits. Layoffs hinder the important research detailed above and pose an unnecessary barrier to the progress of essential work, including support for Alberta's post-secondary students. Students rely on support staff to fully engage in their post-secondary studies. Researchers need support to write grants for federal funding and to administer labs and clinics. Eliminating support staff means researchers are overloaded, and this can lead to mistakes and delays; one team of University of Alberta research team recently lost biosafety designated staff in the midst of developing a potential vaccine for COVID-19. This grave oversight has the potential to delay a future vaccine, only extending this pandemic.

The true worth of Alberta's post-secondary institutions has been cast in sharp relief by this pandemic. The pandemic has shown that Alberta universities and colleges are not a cost, they are an investment. That investment in a rich, vibrant, and capable post-secondary education sector should not be contingent on high oil prices. An investment in Alberta's post-secondary education is an investment in the security of our food, our health, our wealth, and our standard of living. Laying off staff in post-secondary education only impedes Alberta's ability to battle this crisis and manage the subsequent economic recovery. We urge you, Minister, to work with post-secondary institutions to put a halt to these cuts and layoffs.

Yours,

A coalition of post-secondary sector organizations representing more than 12,000 faculty, 11,000 non-academic staff, and 266,800 students across Alberta





Public Interest Alberta

