

As one of Alberta's two undergraduate universities, Mount Royal University is a teaching-focused institution that draws on over 100 years of delivering high-quality programs in a wide range of disciplines and professions. The Mount Royal Faculty Association represents over 946 academic staff including 386 full-time tenured and tenurable faculty, senior lecturers, lab instructors, clinicians as well as over 400 contract academic staff. Recently, Mount Royal University moved to the bicameral governance model provided under Part 1 of the Post-secondary Learning Act.

This submission contains input from the Association's Advocacy Committee as well as the MRFA Executive Board. We have been guided by the Association's approved Advocacy Goals that stress the need for consistent stable provincial funding for post-secondary education and the urgent need to address the overreliance on contract academic faculty whose precarious working conditions mitigate against achieving the goal of excellence in Alberta PSE.

In addition to those principles, this submission espouses the following principles specific to the Review 2030 of Alberta PSE:

1. *Quality postsecondary education requires restored and improved funding through the Campus Alberta Grants.*

The Association opposes the use of performance-based metrics, institutional investment agreements and austerity budget measures, all of which reduces institutional autonomy, increases costs to students, and infringes on collective bargaining. This shift in the role and focus of PSE is already diminishing the quality of Alberta post-secondary education, instead of the government's advertised pursuit of improved program outcomes.

2. *A liberal arts education is essential to meeting the needs of a rapidly diversifying population, a growing Indigenous population and to meet our obligations as recommended by The Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Liberal arts education also offers the best means to provide learners with the necessary values and skills to navigate the challenges of automation, digitization and a diversified economy.*

Undergraduate liberal arts education (i.e. not focused on a particular vocation or on particular employers' needs) has a vital role in maintaining a prosperous society. The array of higher order critical thinking, communication skills, and problem solving abilities are best acquired through liberal arts education, which can be coupled with professional programs or in Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math (STEAM) disciplines. The government focus on completion rates and employment as the sole indicator of success for a postsecondary education is one that should be avoided.

3. *Institutional autonomy is central to meeting the specific needs of communities and economic diversification. Alberta needs a system that is responsive to local needs and to specific economic circumstances.*

4. *Boards of Governors and General Faculty Councils must reflect a more diverse Alberta, including racialized and Indigenous peoples who are often underrepresented in Alberta PSE.*

These principles align with those that are outlined in the submission provided by the Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations (CAFA) submission dated September 15. The MRFA brief elaborates on those points from the perspective of an undergraduate teaching-focused university.

Key Questions

Alberta has a wide variety of post-secondary institutions and programs which demonstrate that a “one-size fits-all” approach detracts from the goal of maintaining our institutions and programs world-class position. From your organization’s perspectives, what are the key challenges that the provincial government needs to step up and address to support the work of Alberta’s diverse post-secondary system?

The contention that Alberta’s PSE system is over-funded relative to other provinces such as B.C. and Ontario is open to debate given that substantial questions have been posed about the data on which this claim is made. The MRFA emphasizes that the government’s decision to cut Campus Alberta Grants for the next three years will work against the need to engage Alberta’s postsecondary system to confront the social, environmental, and economic challenges that face Alberta.

The Association also notes that while Alberta has two research universities in the top 200 universities, these rankings are slipping while undergraduate universities that have excelled at student satisfaction face major challenges in maintaining this excellence in the face of reduced funding. With these factors in mind, the Mount Royal Faculty Association has identified three major challenges the provincial government must address.

1. Maintain access to high-quality public liberal education for all Albertans.

The Mount Royal Faculty Association contends that a single-minded focus on completion rates and employment rates overlooks other equally important dimensions of a post-secondary education. To be clear, with Mount Royal University’s long history of offering programs that have high success in graduate job placements, the MRFA knows that employment outcomes are important, but we also know that liberal arts education provides learners with the knowledge and values of an engaged citizenry, and perhaps more importantly, to navigate the challenges that arise with automation, climate change and an increasingly diverse population and workplace.

Likewise, while the Association understand the importance of supporting innovation for economic diversification, the MFRA cautions against a single- minded emphasis on economic innovation at the expense of those in social, scientific, artistic and environmental fields. A similar caution applies to the underestimating the importance of fostering creativity, an important outcome of liberal arts education. Creativity is closely aligned with

diverse fields such as video game design, AI, big data and health and wellness. Neglecting creativity means neglecting a major area of future employment opportunities.

2. Ensure that Alberta's post-secondary system is accessible.

Access to the postsecondary education remains an important policy consideration in shaping Alberta's postsecondary system. However, despite some surveys showing general satisfaction with system access, rural enrolment is lower than those in urban areas. Some students want to stay and learn in their community rather than pursue higher education in larger centers. Alberta's post-secondary system can address these lower participation rates by continuing funding for more collaboration between undergraduate universities and local colleges. Collaborative programs such as those between Medicine Hat College, Red Deer College and Keyano College help students acquire baccalaureate degrees in business and education while remaining in their communities.

More emphasis on credit transfer between and among different institutions is also essential. Drawing on Mount Royal's long history of providing and accepting transfer credits, the Association advocates for using the Alberta Council for Admissions and Transfers to engage all stakeholders in discussions about standards for transfer with an eye to improving student mobility and education quality. Transfer discussion can also address other forms of credential collaboration such as two year diplomas + two years of degree work and block transfer, both of which can also address access and affordability in innovative ways.

Alberta has lower participation in postsecondary education than Ontario or B.C., especially among those ages 17-24. This lower participation rate is partly a consequence of attractive employment opportunities that offer better returns than postsecondary education. There is some feeling that lower rates of participation may also be attributed to parental success which has come without higher education. There is therefore less support from parents for young adults to pursue higher education.

The Association suggests that more resources be allocated both to academic advising within the K-12 system and that current incentives for undergraduate university/high school collaborations to bridge the transition between secondary and postsecondary education be maintained and even enhanced. The collaboration between Mount Royal University and Bishop Carroll High School offer an example of such successful programs.

3. Keep Alberta's PSE System Affordable

Tuition has increased at a rate greater than inflation and more seats are going to international students who pay higher tuition fees, as universities attempt to deal with this loss of provincial funding. The COVID-19 pandemic has also shown that an over-reliance on international students poses a high risk to institutions' revenues. The government has said that learners will pay more to attend postsecondary education and yet it makes no provision for greater student support to offset these increased costs of higher education.

What support do Alberta's post-secondary institutions, students and staff need from the provincial government?

Undergraduate universities need the provincial government to affirm the unique role they play in the Alberta post-secondary system as it offers a personalized and teaching focused liberal arts education that engages community orientation with broad educational outcomes that favor long term intellectual outcomes and competencies for learners. Changing universities' mandate of research and liberal arts education to favor vocational goals and focus promises to affect the current standing and place that each post-secondary institution has taken in Alberta's PSE system, with long-term consequences that cannot be weighed or verified under such strict time constraints as proposed under the current review.

1. Maintain Provincial Research Funding

The Association supports the CAFA submission about the need for a peer-reviewed system of provincial research funding. Following CAFA, the MRFA is concerned about the tendency to position university research and its value entirely in terms of commercialization, as if research is conducted only for the benefit of private industry. This view overlooks the value of basic research from which many subsequent applications flow. The Association also opposes the idea that university research should serve only private industry when other pressing social, medical and environmental research must be undertaken for the public good. Research is generated by human curiosity, which often drives major breakthroughs.

At the very least, the MRFA advocates that research funding be available for a broad spectrum of fields and disciplines, not just STEM disciplines or oil/gas development. Indeed, the Association rather than a focus on STEM, the Association suggests that STEAM— Science, Technology, Arts and Mathematics become the focus of research funding.

2. Provide Targeted Support for Undergraduate Research

Many faculty at Mount Royal University undertake research and scholarship, which engages undergraduate students. The MRFA supports a system to fund undergraduate participation in research, perhaps to take the place of the cancelled STEP program. Undergraduate research provides learners with the skills and aptitudes required for research they may undertake in graduate programs or within their chosen professions.

Support for, and facilitation of, research at the undergraduate level also means targeted funds for the acquisition of research equipment and laboratory equipment. Such funding should also extend to creating experiential learning opportunities, whether they be research, internships, co-ops etc. Targeted funding is particularly needed for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized students who have historically been underrepresented and underfunded within postsecondary institutions and excluded from undergraduate research opportunities.

Alberta's post-secondary institutions are essential to Alberta's economic prosperity and future success. What supports do Alberta's post-secondary institutions need from the provincial government to ensure post-secondary work in research and skills training are sustainable and successful while respecting public health orders related to COVID-19?

1. Infrastructure to Support Personalized Learning

For over a century, Mount Royal University has specialized in delivering successful programs that enhance student success. There remains a need for institutions such as MRU that focus on personalized learning in smaller classes where professors and students can interact. The Association urges that adequate funding be provided to maintain this focus on students and personalized learning. Specifically, there must be funding for infrastructure (capital funding) that supports growth of programs in small classrooms, and avoids packing more students into large auditoriums. There needs to be adequate room for lecture/discussion space, and most importantly, for laboratory space. Targeted funding for faculty and students to have access to new technologies and technical capacities (i.e. labs, software programs, E/R) is essential.

2. Support Experiential Learning Opportunities

Fund and support work opportunities and experiential learning programs that help integrate students in the labor force instead of mandating short term priorities. The workforce priorities of today will not be the same in 5 years, while a well-designed academic education process will enable students to adapt and respond to new challenges and opportunities.

How is the existing governance structure working at your institution? Can you give suggestions on how to improve existing governance of your institution?

Bicameral governance at postsecondary universities remains the best guarantor of academic excellence and quality programs. Buttressed by the peer review process, bicameral governance ensures that the program curriculum meets the highest standards of academic rigor and respects academic freedom. Mount Royal University recently moved to bicameral governance under Part 1 of the PSLA. This has necessitated changes at both the Board and the General Faculties Council which are only now being implemented. Based on its long history as a public institution under three different governance models, the Association offers the following suggestions with respect to effective governance.

1. Board members must possess a deep commitment to PSE overarching academic mission and long-term institutional interests. Ideally the Board will include arms-length members who have experience and expertise in education and research at post-secondary institutions, and support the collegial governance culture of PSE institutions generally. The Association echoes CAFA's call for Board members to receive proper training about their roles.
2. Representation among directors on the Board of Governors at PSE institutions from diverse groups, especially racialized and indigenous groups. Ideally Boards will feature members from diverse occupational, educational, etc. backgrounds.
3. Better definitions of what constitutes 'academic' decisions and those of "management/operations" is required. Similarly, to further strengthen General Faculties Councils, specifically regarding its role in relation to the Board of Governors, a simple legislative change could be to remove the words "Subject to the authority of the Board"

from the powers of the General Faculties Council in the PSLA, making it conform with other Canadian jurisdictions.

4. Separate the role of Chair of the General Faculties Council from that of the University President. The Association supports the CAFA proposal that the role of President and the Chair of the GFC should be separated since conflating the two roles allows the President to control debate and, at times, silence members whose views are contrary to that of administration. At the very least, legislation should allow GFC the option of creating an academic staff member to act as a Speaker who will direct GFC meetings.

Your organization's top 3 Requests of the provincial government

In summary the MRFA makes the following three major requests for Alberta PSE. These recommendations echo those made by CAFA in its submission.

1st: Long Term & Stable Funding

The government's determination to shrink postsecondary funding at the very moment that Alberta needs its colleges and universities to address the province's future is misplaced. The MRFA has long advocated for sustainable predictable funding for postsecondary education. Moreover, the Association is concerned with the government's intention to implement performance based metrics as the basis for future funding. While the Association accepts the need for accountability, it opposes the use of metrics that move universities towards ever greater alignment with industry and will inevitably infringe on academic freedom.

2nd: Maintain and Enhance Institutional Autonomy

A strong collegial government system ensures that credentialing, program decisions, and pedagogical decisions are being made for academic reasons and not to cater to the current but shifting economic environment. Academic freedom is the university core value: institutional autonomy is central to maintain this value and ensure that it is not subordinated to a system focused on job training and skilling. The MRFA supports the CAFA proposal that the institutional autonomy be expanded to our collective bargaining process, especially given the provincial government's interference in the process.

3rd: Address the Precarity of Academic Teaching Staff (Sessionals)

The reliance on contract academic faculty runs counter the need to create an excellent system of postsecondary education. The MRFA supports CAFA proposal to create a number of "Alberta Teaching Excellence Chairs," awarded competitively to outstanding sessional instructors in Alberta PSE institutions that provide 5-year contracts, with competitive renewals. The MFRA advocates for specific funding directed towards converting eligible contract academic faculty into full-time tenurable positions.

YOUR ORGANIZATION'S TOP 3 CONCERNS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE SECTOR

The Mount Royal Faculty Association has identified the following three concerns that must be addressed for the best future of Alberta's PSE system.

1st: Online Instruction

The shift to increased reliance on online instruction is problematic. While on-line instruction has proven to be a satisfactory way to deliver instruction in an emergency, the pandemic has underscored how excellent on-line courses require specialized knowledge and the infrastructure evident in Alberta's Athabasca University, where a team of educational developers, web designers and editors work to create exceptional on-line learning opportunities. Faculty have also seen that students do not have the economic means to afford the internet or the necessary bandwidth to access on-line learning.

Accordingly, the MRFA urges the provincial government to provide the necessary resources to ensure that learners can access and that faculty can create the best learning materials and experiences possible. Rather view on-line delivery as the means to reduce costs while increasing access, the MRFA suggests that appropriate technologies be deployed to ensure greater access. With all due respect to excellent instructors who specialize in online learning, it is difficult to imagine a world-class post-secondary system in Alberta if there's a persistent system-wide shift to online instruction.

2nd Restructure for Long-term Student Success

The focus on short-term deliverables (e.g. success among graduates in finding jobs in targeted sectors) in PSE is misguided. Benefits to society from PSE accrue over the long-term. Universities already respond to changing needs and priorities in society through community partnerships and, perhaps more importantly, through our faculty's expertise that puts them at the forefront of societal, technological, and cultural change. Universities should be positioned to be leaders (not followers) in societal change.

3rd: Accessibility

Accessibility cannot be arrived at, when students face cumulative increases in tuition of 7% for three (3) years in a row. The Alberta 2030 points to tuition in Alberta being \$5900 a year, yet this number does not take into account three (3) years of tuition increases which will place the cost of attending post-secondary education close to the highest level in the country.