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Dear Minister Nicolaides,

On behalf of the Executive Board of the Mount Royal Faculty Association, which represents the 800 academic staff of Mount Royal University, I am writing to protest the approach being taken by the government to the fall 2021 return to campus in light of the serious and ongoing threat to campus and public health from COVID-19. Our deep concern is not only for a safe and healthy workplace for our members and other University workers but also for a safe and healthy learning environment for our students, as well as out of care for the wider communities in which the University is embedded.

The publicly available data makes clear that Alberta is a leading driver of Canada's surging fourth pandemic wave. Our province is experiencing unacceptably high rates of new daily infections and test positivity rates, and steep exponential growth in active cases that is once again straining the capacity of hospitals and ICUs. Public health experts have indicated that we can expect the effects of this wave to intensify in the coming weeks and months. Beyond the risk of serious illness and death from COVID-19 and other deleterious knock-on effects from an overwhelmed public health care system, health experts have warned of the risk of serious outcomes such as long-COVID, even among younger populations with relatively lower COVID-19 mortality rates. All of the above threaten the wellbeing of members of the University community—even for those who are fully vaccinated, once transmission is allowed to become widespread because a large segment of the public remains unvaccinated or under-vaccinated.

Whereas the provincial government introduced temporary measures on September 4 for combating the latest pandemic wave, including "strong" recommendations to limit in-person contacts and social gathering sizes, and that *"employers are recommended to continue work-from-home measures where possible, and to pause or revert plans to have staff return to work"*, the Association is deeply concerned that Advanced Education has concurrently signaled to post-secondary institutions that in-person instruction is to continue as planned.

The Association especially objects to the fact that academic staff are being asked to accept an elevated risk from working under the conditions of an intensifying pandemic wave, relative to what is now being recommended for employees in other sectors as of September 4, all while the provincial government has neither taken appropriate steps to help mitigate the risks on university and college campuses nor provided corresponding policy, financial, or tangible supports for safe in-person instruction. Although we welcome the government's introduction of a robust indoor masking mandate, it is our position that our University must also implement a robust vaccine mandate, with proof of vaccination status required, that applies to all individuals coming to campus (except where exempted on protected human rights grounds, e.g., for medical reasons, and in that case with the requirement of frequent rapid testing.) This is especially important and reasonable under the circumstances given that provincial data clearly shows that the young adult population—an obviously predominant proportion of those coming to campus—are the least vaccinated Albertans by age group and are now leading infection rates by age group. As it stands, we can reasonably expect that the highly infectious delta variant will be present on our campus

now and into the fall, and that it will be circulating indoors among a campus population that the available evidence suggests will be nowhere near the full immunization rates epidemiologists tell us are necessary to stifle delta variant-driven spread. Other important measures include but are not limited to support for more course sections and correspondingly reduced class sizes as to permit greater physical distancing and smaller class cohorts, especially given that class sizes continue to rise as a result of budgetary pressures rooted in multiple rounds of funding cuts. In short, our deep concerns include that campuses like Mount Royal's may become loci for accelerating viral spread, endangering not only those on campus but also serving as sites for the virus to vector into wider communities that include unvaccinated members and vulnerable populations. Albertans deserve a more responsible approach.

Although the Mount Royal Faculty Association supports institutional autonomy underpinned by shared governance and opposes government overreach, we also believe that the Alberta government often has a legitimate role to play in fostering cooperation and sound, collective approaches to those issues that commonly affect all institutions with the Campus Alberta system. So far, we remain troubled that the Alberta government and Ministry of Advanced Education in particular, while pushing for the return to campus, have failed to provide the leadership, policy environment, and resources necessary for Alberta's universities and colleges to enact institutional policy and to implement systems that better-protect people on campuses and in surrounding communities.

Mount Royal University's academic staff have a long and proud tradition of dedication to our students. High-quality, in-person instruction featuring rich interaction with and mentorship of our students is a profoundly held faculty value. Nevertheless, in sum, if we are being asked to go above and beyond what is recommended for most other sectors of the province's workforce, i.e., work-from-home measures and the reversion of return-to-work plans, then your Ministry and government have a concomitant obligation above and beyond the norm to help us assure a safe and healthy teaching and learning environment. If you are to signal that the University is not to revert to remote delivery while recommending working from home for others, then we urge you to work with the University to ensure a campus at which everyone present is confident that they are in an environment with the best-possible pandemic health and safety measures, including but not limited to the assurance of a herd-immunity level of full vaccination. If the ultimate goal is a safe, lasting return to in-person instruction on our campuses then these are the measures that are most likely to enable us all to achieve it.

Respectfully submitted,

Lee Easton

President, Mount Royal Faculty Association

CC: Dr. Tim Rahilly, President and Vice-Chancellor  
Mr. Aex Pourbaix, Chair, MRU Board of Governors  
Mr. David Eggen, MLA Edmonton Northwest