

For Immediate Release

Press Release for Fair Deal Research Funding Announcement

Edmonton, July 23, 2020 - CAFA is deeply concerned about Minister Nicolaidides' announcement about extending the UCP's Fair Deal rhetoric into Alberta's universities and how we receive federal research funding. The creation of a new research working group on this premise misunderstands how federal research money is allocated, and fails to recognize how the UCP's actions and policies further risks such funding going to institutions in other jurisdictions. Glaringly, the new research funding working group only lists research projects that pertain to the sciences, health, and engineering fields; while excluding the fine arts, humanities, and social sciences—which make up roughly 50% of Albertan students and researchers in our universities. Exclusion of the humanities and social sciences from the mandate of the working group is reflected in that there is not a single trained social scientist on the working group.

“CAFA strongly believes in the independent peer review process that governs all federal research funding in Canada: government funding should never be allocated based on geography or ideology, but on research excellence” said Dr. Kevin Kane, president of CAFA and Professor of Medical Microbiology & Immunology at the University of Alberta.

Federal research funding is allocated by a process of peer-review where individual researchers, or small groups of them, generally apply to one or all of the Tri-Council funding agencies: the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Each individual research project is adjudicated based on the merits of the project by an expert panel of fellow researchers. Many important research projects are not funded every year because of the extreme competitiveness of these grant programs and the stringency of the peer review processes. If awarded, the federal government funding is attached to these individual researchers—this money travels with them to other Canadian institutions if they get a new appointment. At no point is the province where the researcher lives a factor in determining which projects receive federal research dollars.

When institutions or jurisdictions want to increase the federal research dollars flowing into their universities, they have many established best practices to draw on. Institutions can hire support staff to help with the application process or provide administrative labour to help projects be completed in a timely manner. The last two years of UCP's cuts have forced institutions to reduce the size and effectiveness of their research support teams.

“This Fair Deal panel on federal research funding is based on misguided criticism of the functioning Tri-Council funding system,” stated Dr. Kane. “Instead, the UCP government should be re-examining their cuts to Alberta's post-secondary education system and the negative impact that is having on Alberta researchers.”

Provinces often set up provincial research funding programs to increase research activity and develop new scholars: for example, Ontario has created the Trillium Scholarships that help young researchers build up funding portfolios and to increase the number of highly qualified graduate students contributing to exceptional labs and projects. The real problem is that the current Government of Alberta itself doesn't provide Alberta researchers with a Fair Deal, since it doesn't provide “seed” research dollars and other supports to enhance the feasibility and competitiveness of federal grant applications by our researchers.

CAFA is a federation of academic staff associations in Alberta. The five member associations are: The Association of Academic Staff University of Alberta, Athabasca University Faculty Association, Grant MacEwan Faculty Association, Mount Royal University Faculty Association and the University of Lethbridge Faculty Association. The objectives of the Confederation are to promote the quality of education in the province and to promote the well-being of Alberta universities and their academic staff.