

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Advanced Education's Misleading Communications Around COVID-19 Protocols

Edmonton, October 25, 2021 — The Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations is concerned that the information, around our universities' COVID protocols, coming from Minister Nicolaides does not match what our institutional administrations are communicating with us. This has significant potential to undermine our faith in the Minister and the Ministry, in that from Minister Nicolaides' letter, it appears that he either does not know or possibly does not agree with the COVID measures taking place at our university campuses.

"Minister Nicolaides' response to our letter about the new COVID-19 protocol is extremely disappointing," notes Dr. Kevin Kane, President of CAFA and Professor of Medical Microbiology & Immunology at the University of Alberta. "It contains both outdated and false information."

This misinformation includes both information that is out of date (the claim that mask mandates will end on Sept 27) and information that is patently false (the claim that no institution will be implementing mandatory vaccination mandates for students and staff). Furthermore, the wording of Minister Nicolaides' letter seems to imply that the ministry intervened in institutional autonomy to make the decision on how to return to campuses that keeps students, faculty and staff safe.

CAFA is calling on Minister Nicolaides to clarify his ministry's position, and whether he supports the existing vaccine mandates and the current COVID measures at our universities.

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Contact: Lori Morinville, lori.morinville@ualberta.ca, 780-232-6812

October 22, 2021

Honourable Demetrios Nicolaidis
Minister of Advanced Education
Office of the Minister
Advanced Education
403 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister Nicolaidis,

Thank you for your response to our August 17th correspondence. In our letter, we asked you to commit to implementing a scientifically based return to campus plan: with masking and vaccine mandates, and a commitment to share COVID data with students, faculty, and staff. Instead, your September 29th letter leaves more questions than it provided answers.

First, you claim that you “have indicated to our post-secondary institutions that [you] expect a full return to classroom for the fall 2021” semester, but later on suggest that the Board of Governors are responsible for COVID-19 responses on campus and that “Advanced Education does not intervene in institutional decision making.” Can you please clarify these remarks, since they seem to imply that you, as minister, did intervene in institutional decisions. More specifically, CAFA would like to know if you compelled a full return to campus and what were the consequences if they did not have a full return to campus?

Second, you claimed that public health measures (such as masking, mandatory isolations, and testing) would remain in place until September 27, 2021. This new deadline was two days prior to the date of your email, and every university in which we represent the faculty association has extended these meager public health measures for the entire fall semester. We expect our universities to extend these health measures into the winter semester as well.

Third, and very importantly, you claim that as of the date of your letter “no institution in Alberta has indicated that they will be implementing mandatory vaccinations for students, faculty or staff members.” This is clearly false, since on September 13th, University of Alberta, University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge, MacEwan University, Medicine Hat College, Mount Royal University, NAIT, SAIT, and Norquest College all announced they would introduce a vaccine mandate on campus. This is a full nine days before your letter was sent.

Furthermore, you claimed that “students who are not fully vaccinated, or who do not wish to disclose their vaccination status, must show a negative COVID-19 test before participating in in-person activities on campus.” We believe this to be misleading since every institution that announced a vaccine mandate would only allow rapid tests to be used by those with a health or religious human rights exemption: not those students and staff that do not wish to be vaccinated or disclose their status.

It is concerning that the information coming from you in your letter does not match what our institutional administrations are communicating with us. This has significant potential to undermine our faith in you and the Ministry, in that from your letter, it appears that you either did not know or possibly do not agree with the COVID measures taking place at our university campuses. We are requesting that you, please, clarify your stance and whether you support the existing vaccine mandates and current COVID measures at our universities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Kane', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr. Kevin Kane
President of CAFA and
Professor of Medical Microbiology & Immunology at the University of Alberta

Post-Secondary Institutions' Fall 2021 Plans AR 61671

From: AE Minister

Subject: Post-Secondary Institutions' Fall 2021 Plans AR 61671

Date: September 29, 2021 at 1:23:53 PM MDT

To: Kevin Kane

Dear Kevin:

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations (CAFA) sharing your concerns about returning to campuses for the fall 2021 semester. I appreciate the opportunity to respond.

I agree with you that the best thing that Albertans can do to protect their health, and the health of their families and communities, is to get vaccinated. Vaccines offer excellent protection from infection and severe outcomes, and they have drastically reduced COVID-19's ability to overwhelm our healthcare system.

The arrival of the vaccines does not mean the pandemic is over. We must all continue to follow public health guidelines, including physical distancing, practicing good hand hygiene, masking where required, and staying home when sick.

At the same time, we have heard repeatedly from students, parents, and educators about the importance of hands-on learning, especially in programs that have strong hands-on components. Our priority throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has been to protect the safety of students, faculty, and staff while minimizing impacts to students' education. In support of this priority, faculty and staff at our post-secondary institutions have done exceptional work and shown tremendous adaptability in transitioning programs to alternative formats. Nevertheless, I have indicated to our post-secondary institutions that I expect a full return to the classroom for fall 2021 wherever possible.

I understand your concerns about province-wide COVID-19 public health measures and what this will mean for in-person classes on campus. After closely monitoring COVID-19 in Alberta and reviewing emerging evidence from other jurisdictions, the decision was made that many public health measures will remain in place until September 27, 2021. These include mandatory masking orders in publicly accessible transit, taxis, and ride-shares; mandatory isolation for 10 days for those with COVID-19 symptoms or a positive test result; and widespread testing at assessment centres for any symptomatic individual. These measures were initially scheduled to be eased on August 16, 2021. Pausing this transition for six weeks will provide additional time to monitor patient outcomes and increase immunization rates across the province.

The boards of governors of Alberta's publicly funded post-secondary institutions are responsible for developing and implementing COVID-19 responses on campus, and Advanced Education does not intervene in institutional decision-making. This means that each institution is responsible for determining measures to protect the safety of students, faculty, and staff.

At this time, no institution in Alberta has indicated that they will be implementing mandatory vaccinations for students, faculty, or staff members. Recently, the University of Alberta, University of Calgary, and University of Lethbridge released a joint COVID-19 protocol for fall 2021. This protocol indicates that students who are not fully vaccinated, or who do not wish to disclose their vaccination status, must show a negative COVID-19 test before participating in in-person activities on campus (<https://www.ualberta.ca/covid-19/campus-safety/vaccination-questions.html>).

Thank you again for writing and sharing your perspective.

Best,

Demetrios Nicolaides
Minister of Advanced Education

Classification: Protected A