

March 21, 2022

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

Dear Minister Nicolaides,

The Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations (CAFA) is concerned with the recent Government of Alberta directive that all post-secondary education institutions resume in-person learning without masking and proof of vaccination requirements. While all faculty are eager to resume in-person learning, we hope that our administrations do this in a way that prioritizes faculty, staff, and student safety, and aligns with the safety guidelines our institutions released when announcing a winter semester.

Universities and other PSE institutions are supposed to be autonomous and make their own decisions. This is not the first time that the Government of Alberta has intruded on the independence of our institutions—back in Sept of 2021, your government intervened in institutional decision making by attempting to force a complete return to classes in the early autumn.

Forcing our administrations to change plans in the middle of a semester is unhelpful in inspiring confidence that our schools are a safe place to be. The students and faculty already have pivoted our learning and teaching to on-line and hybrid models to keep everyone in our campus community safe. Many students and faculty have made many sacrifices to ensure our entire campus community remains healthy, and a political directive to reopen our classes could make those sacrifices futile and meaningless.

We are not calling for an unending mask or vaccine mandate, but rather for our institutions to follow their own plans: in which they agreed to keep the masking mandate until the end of the semester. This request is amplified by our students. For example, the University of Alberta Student Union has released a poll of their students that demonstrates that 76% of students support the continued use of the mask mandate for the rest of the Winter semester. This plan was agreed to by all of the returning students and faculty when they re-entered the classroom for the winter semester.

Lastly, we are concerned that this decision is not being made with the most up to date scientific advice. Alberta's COVID case count is still very high, with several hundred new cases on a daily basis, and ~6400 total cases between Feb 28-March 13. The real numbers are much higher due to reduced testing at this time. With every case, there is the risk of needing hospitalization or intensive care. Furthermore, the Omicron BA.2 subvariant is predicted to result in yet another wave of COVID this spring.

High volume traffic in corridors and close proximity in classrooms on campuses makes for high risk COVID transmission environments. Please do not subject campus faculty, students, and staff to these circumstances without the protections of proper masking to the end of the semester. Allow PSE institutions to fulfill their commitment to faculty, staff and students and maintain mask mandates to the end of the semester.

Sincerely,



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