

For Immediate Release

CAFA's Response to the UCP's Threat to Cancel Athabasca University's Funding

Edmonton, August 11, 2022 - Last week, Alberta's Provincial Government threatened to cut off all operating grants if Athabasca University's senior administration does not agree to make changes to their Investment Management Agreement (IMA), and end their Near-Virtual plan and reverse the trend of moving jobs out of the town of Athabasca. The Confederation of Alberta Faculty Association is concerned with this government tactic—we see such a threat as unnecessary and could put the school at risk of closing.

“This is a fight at the top between decision makers, at Athabasca University and in the UCP government, that have demonstrated little regard for the impacts of their decisions on real people. The faculty and staff at AU should be meaningfully involved with these decisions, not just treated as pawns in their game,” says Rhiannon Rutherford, President of Athabasca University Faculty Association.

Many of the academic staff at AU have signed contracts, years ago, that did not force these workers to relocate. CAFA believes that AU should honour these existing contracts and allow their academic staff to continue working from their homes. The fact that the AU executive has spent years slowly relocating their senior administration away from Athabasca should not mean that the long-term academic staff should be punished for this. Immediately relocating the senior administration and increasing new hires in the Athabasca region is the best long-term plan for the stability of both the town and the university.

CAFA strongly supports institutional autonomy for all Albertan universities, but we do not believe that shuttering a campus, leaving taxpayer-funded buildings empty, and allowing senior administration to live in resort towns and in other provinces is within the scope of institutional autonomy.

“Institutional autonomy is about letting the school, through its faculty and staff, make decisions about program offerings, pedagogical practices, and research agendas,” said Jon Doan, President of CAFA. “What institutional autonomy does not mean is that the presidents can prioritize their personal pet projects while living in whatever city they want to.”

CAFA is calling on the Government of Alberta and the senior administration at Athabasca University to work out a solution that grows jobs in Athabasca while ensuring the stability of the institution for all staff and faculty that work there and for their students that have worked so hard to attend a world-class distance learning university. Threatening to withdraw operating grants should be the last lever that any provincial government would use. CAFA recommends that Peter Scott and the AU executive stop trying to negotiate in the media and sit down with the UCP government and the unions that represent AU workers to come up with a plan that benefits the university, its students and staff, as well as the region of Athabasca.