

Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations
10171 Saskatchewan Dr NW #410, Edmonton, AB T6E 4R5
780-232-6812

ACIFA – Alberta Colleges and Institutes Faculties Association
10171 Saskatchewan Dr NW #410, Edmonton, AB T6E 4R5
780-423-4440

The Mintz Moment: Alberta's Post-Secondary Future Will Be Decided Now

In the next few weeks, the **Commission on the Funding and Function of Post-Secondary Education** will make its final recommendations to government on how Alberta funds its colleges and universities. As presidents of the provincial organizations representing faculty and staff unions in the sector, we know that this report will determine whether our post-secondary system begins to recover from six years of damage or slips past the point of repair. Chaired by University of Calgary economist Dr. Jack Mintz, the commission — widely known as the Mintz panel — carries the responsibility of shaping Alberta's post-secondary future for decades to come.

The choice could not be more urgent. Since 2019, government cuts have stripped nearly half a billion dollars from institutional budgets. Political interference has undermined independence, enrolment from international students has collapsed, and an expected 40% surge in 18–21-year-olds will soon crowd into a system already stretched to breaking. Program shutdowns, defunded research, and mass layoffs are no longer warnings — they are happening now.

Appointed in November 2024, the panel's mandate is to reimagine Alberta's post-secondary funding model from the ground up. The risks they must address are clear — and the solutions are within reach if they act.

Risk 1: More students, fewer instructors

Alberta will lead the country in population growth over the next decade, with the 18–21-year-old cohort alone rising by 40%. Yet many departments have lost half their faculty through layoffs, early retirements, and hiring freezes. The result will be overcrowded lecture halls, cuts to smaller programs, and fewer opportunities for students from rural, Indigenous, or low-income backgrounds.

Risk 2: Erratic and intrusive funding Volatile budgets and political interference have made long-term planning nearly impossible. Government has intruded into collective bargaining, interfered with research funding, and dictated which programs survive. It has channeled funding toward government priorities, including for private academic institutions such as MaKami College. Smaller schools, which cannot scale up or down quickly, are especially vulnerable.

Risk 3: Declining international enrolment

Colleges and universities were pushed to rely on international tuition. Now, with federal cuts to student visa programs, that revenue is vanishing — and Alberta has no clear plan to replace it.

These risks can be turned into opportunities — if the panel and government act decisively. We believe the Mintz panel will succeed if it follows six core principles.

1. End political interference in campus decision-making

Institutions and their unions understand local needs better than politicians. Bargaining mandates should be set openly at the table, not in government offices. Conditions in Olds or Lethbridge differ vastly from those in Edmonton.

2. Invest in rural institutions

Colleges and polytechnics in smaller centres are vital to local economies, Indigenous communities, and rural entrepreneurs. They deserve stable funding as the backbone of rural education and an essential public service.

3. Restore research competitiveness

Alberta's researchers are world-class, but cuts and political tests for research grants have weakened their ability to compete nationally. We need stable, discipline-spanning research funding, free from ideological interference.

4. End the funding roller coaster

Performance-based funding that shifts annually prevents responsible planning. Institutions need steady, predictable operating grants to remain competitive.

5. Strengthen governance

University boards have been too quiet in the face of poor management and political interference. Better training, clear governance standards, and reduced political control will help boards protect their institutions.

6. Fund a broad skill base

Yes, we need workers for high-demand jobs. But employers also want graduates skilled in critical thinking, teamwork, and complex problem-solving. AI's disruption of coding jobs shows why we must invest across all disciplines — from agriculture to English.

The damage of the past six years is immense, but not irreversible. With stable funding, local decision-making, and respect for both academic and regional needs, Alberta can restore its post-secondary system to the national leadership position it once held. The Mintz panel still has time to make that happen. Albertans will be watching.

Lee Easton is President of the Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations (CAFA).

Shauna MacDonald is President of the Alberta Colleges and Institutes Faculties Association (ACIFA).