

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**Alberta's Faculty Call for Safe, Scientifically Based, Return to Campus Plans**

Edmonton, AB, August 17, 2021 – The Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations is calling on university presidents and the Minister of Advanced Education, Hon. Nicolaidis, to provide scientifically based return to campus plans for our institutions. More specifically, CAFA would like to see:

- 1) A return to using our joint health and safety committees to make decisions on the reopening of campuses and the procedures to keep all students, staff and faculty safe,
- 2) A return of asymptomatic testing on our campuses to provide the real time data needed to make the best health decisions, and
- 3) A commitment to share the data of campus outbreaks and campus vaccination rates with the joint health and safety committees and our student representatives.

If the university administrations or provincial government cannot commit to these modest requests, CAFA is calling for our universities to institute

- a) a mandatory masking mandate until autumn COVID waves are controlled and suppressed, and
- b) a vaccine passport system, similar to what the Calgary Chambers of Commerce is calling for.

These measures are the most basic health and safety procedures that is being recommended by scientists and experts across the world today. In fact, over 600 universities in the USA have already mandated vaccines in the return to campus plans. Recently a wave of Canadian institutions has done the same: notably University of Western Ontario, University of Saskatchewan, University of Ottawa, and University of Toronto have all put a vaccine mandate in place for a return to their campuses.

“The Government of Alberta always talks about comparable institutions, but when our often trotted out University of Alberta comparable, the University of Toronto, puts a vaccine mandate in place our government and institutions are shamefully silent,” notes Dr. Kevin Kane, President of CAFA and Professor of Medical Microbiology & Immunology at the University of Alberta.

These recommendations are not just to keep the campus community safe, but rather for all Albertans. Universities are a unique environment for rapid and pervasive spread of highly contagious air-borne pathogens. For example, our students are often crowded into classrooms with full occupancies in the hundreds, and these classrooms often are windowless, in aging infrastructure with inadequate ventilation. Since universities are often the large single-site employer in their communities, any outbreak on campus will reverberate throughout the wider community.

The Government and people of Alberta have already learned what happens when outbreaks are dismissed and workers' concerns sidelined. We saw it happen at High River's Cargill meat processing plant, and we don't want the same preventable tragedy on our campuses.

August 17, 2021

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Dear Minister Nicolaides and the Institutional Presidents,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations (CAFA). We represent over 6,600 members at University of Alberta, University of Lethbridge, MacEwan University, Mount Royal University and University of Athabasca. Our members include professors, sessionals, librarians, instructors, IT teams, and professionals across many of our great universities.

CAFA members are deeply concerned with the back to classes protocols that are being planned at all our institutions. Our members should be represented by academic staff associations on joint health and safety committees at our institutions, but these bodies have been placed on hold for most of the pandemic, as our senior administrations have made all COVID decisions without any meaningful input from faculty, staff and our students.

CAFA is asking you to make sure our academic staff associations (and our colleagues' Staff Associations and our students' unions) are meaningfully engaged, in our joint health and safety committees, in any return to campus plans. More than just that, CAFA is calling for real time data of community and campus outbreaks as a preventative measure to keep the entire community safe. If the provincial government and our institutional leadership cannot provide scientific data of COVID cases and vaccination rates on campuses to our associations, CAFA is calling for a mandatory masking mandate and vaccine passports across all of Alberta's universities.

Many universities across the globe have listened to up to date expert scientific advice, by instituting a vaccine mandate on their campuses. Over 600 universities in the USA (including CalTech, Denver, Georgetown, Northwestern, Harvard, MIT, and many others) have already mandated vaccines in their return to campus protocols. Recently a wave of Canadian institutions has done the same: notably University of Western Ontario, University of Toronto, University of Saskatchewan, and University of Ottawa have all put a vaccine mandate in place for a return to their campuses, while many other Canadian universities have instituted mandatory vaccines for student residents or varsity sports. More are likely to follow. These are not political stunts, but rather best practices based on sound scientific research and advice.

Universities are a unique environment for rapid and pervasive spread of highly contagious air-borne pathogens. For example, our students are often crowded into classrooms with full occupancies in the hundreds. These classrooms often are windowless, in aging infrastructure with inadequate ventilation; as well as most students sit at desks or in chairs bolted into the floor that cannot be moved to create distance between our students and colleagues. Cafeterias, hallways, transit centres, and labs are overcrowded—with students, faculty and staff—often jammed against each other during class changes and other busy times of the day. These kinds of hazards will also place the wider community at risk: since universities are often the largest single-site employer in their communities, and thus any outbreak on campus will reverberate throughout the wider community.

The upcoming waves of CoV2 infection will be the result of the Delta variant (or a further variant): which is more virulent, with a transmission rate far higher than the origin strain of CoV2, and documented to lead to higher rates of young people facing serious complications and hospitalization than the original strain of CoV2.

Alberta's new restrictions on COVID testing, and the cancellation of contact tracing will be disastrous for the university community and beyond. For example, Bill Flanagan, President of the University of Alberta, claimed that the U of A “[as] an institution, we will continue to monitor and follow expert public health advice in all of our planning and be responsive to any changes or emergent issues.” We wonder how that would be possible with the Government of Alberta restricting who can be tested and therefore how quickly, leading to real-time gaps in infection data, that would in turn severely handicap any efforts to contain outbreaks. All credible scientific advice demonstrates that rapid testing to locate outbreaks, and isolation of COVID positive individuals is a strongly effective strategy to slow person to person transmission.

CAFA strongly believes that all members of the campus communities should have access to information such as vaccine rates on campus and any real time information on COVID outbreaks. With this information, students, staff, and faculty can make the best decisions about how to keep themselves safe. As of today, no Albertan university institution is prepared to give its community members access to vaccination rates or campus outbreak data. CAFA calls on the provincial government to continue asymptomatic testing and allow institutions to collect comprehensive data on vaccination rates.

Vaccination is the best solution to returning to classes safely and a return to normal. This is indisputable, as evidenced by the vastly lower infection rates in vaccinated compared to unvaccinated individuals, with the origin CoV2 and its variants. We strongly support all vaccination efforts, but these efforts must come with clear data being provided to students

and workers. Without knowledge of what our campus vaccination rates are and updates on when and where COVID outbreaks occur, a mask mandate and vaccine passports for on-campus learning are by far the best solutions to keeping students, staff and faculty safe on our Albertan universities.

The Government and people of Alberta have already learned what happens when outbreaks are dismissed and workers' concerns sidelined. We saw it happen at High River's Cargill meat processing plant, and we don't want the same preventable tragedy on our campuses.

As our institutional and governmental leaders in post-secondary education, you will be held responsible for the outcomes of your back to campus protocols. The proposed campus protocols are inadequate in the face of rising infection rates with a highly transmissible CoV2 variant. The back to campus protocols also need to take into account proven tools available to prevent or control transmission. A return to campus with your proposed protocols may very assuredly lead to significant outbreaks, harming our students, staff and faculty and their respective communities. It may also lead to campus shutdowns and return to solely online learning that is neither popular nor in the best interests of the campus community. We emphatically call upon you to implement the measures we have indicated, that are based on sound scientific evidence, and the advice of leading experts in the fight to end this pandemic.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Kane', written in a cursive style.

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