A submission for the consideration of the

Expert Panel on Post-Secondary Institution Funding and Alberta's Competitiveness





Executive Summary

The **Students' Union, University of Calgary** (commonly abbreviated to **UCSU**) is the students' association responsible for promoting the welfare of undergraduates at the University of Calgary. Our highest governing body, the Students' Legislative Council, is currently in its 83rd cycle. The council, led by four full-time Executives, consists of representatives elected by their peers from all Faculties of the University, as well as representatives who participate in the University's governing bodies. The Executive comprises the President and three Vice-Presidents, who respectively provide for academic, internal, and external matters.

We are a multi-faceted organization that provides services and amenities for students, including hosting events throughout the year and running on-campus businesses from which we derive 90% of our revenue. Furthermore, we advocate for the interests of the students we represent before the University and all tiers of government. We take our duty of care to students extremely seriously and pride ourselves on charging one of the lowest students' association fees in Canada, which we have not increased since 1995. We do not raise or introduce fees without putting proposals to a referendum.

This practice is even more important now, as Albertan undergraduates face a period of unprecedented tuition increases and student debt. We take this view with the benefit of institutional knowledge that began shortly after Alberta's founding as a province. We trace our origins to the Student Council established in 1945, when the Calgary Normal School became the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education in Calgary. Two name changes and one campus later, the University of Calgary received autonomy in 1966. As the face of our institution has changed over time, so has our mission.

Our earlier efforts were primarily spent on planning dances, athletic events, and conferences for students, as well as administering the yearbook. These days, our work has expanded to running a campus food bank, funding on-campus wellness services, administering a health and dental plan for undergraduates, providing for undergraduate academic research, and fundraising on behalf of local charities and causes. Each year, we run a tax clinic for low-income members of our community, staffed by trained volunteers. We operate and disburse bursaries and awards to students according to merit or need, at times distributing more than \$1 million annually.

Fast Facts

60%+

of Albertan post-secondary students are below the age of 25¹

More than half

of Albertan post-secondary students are undergraduates²

2nd

the University of Calgary is Alberta's second-largest public university

Alumni

include the current Premier of Alberta, two Prime Ministers, and more Olympians than we can name

Common abbreviations throughout this document

- Post-secondary institution (PSI)
- Post-secondary education (PSE)
- Students' Union, University of Calgary (UCSU or SU)

It is through our programming devoted to helping students in need that we have observed a concerning uptick in demand for various forms of financial relief. Since 2019, our food bank has experienced record usage, and the number of students seeking on-campus mental health provision has also risen. We have heard from students who are among the 10% of Canadian post-secondary students to experience emergency or unsheltered living situations due to financial constraints. Food insecurity is prevalent enough on our campus that, last year, we introduced a \$3 meal in our restaurant, *The Den*, so that students who may feel uncomfortable approaching our food bank can at least find something to eat.

We do not present these stories with the intention of appealing to emotion. Rather, these are simply the reality of our operations. In our most recent annual survey, 90% of student respondents identified that they are most concerned about tuition and fees than any other area of advocacy.

While we appreciate that the Expert Panel's purpose is not solely to consider the experience of students, we understand that the Panel's mandate is to assess Alberta's ability to compete on a global level with excellence in higher education. We advance that, before Alberta can provide for the world, it must provide for Albertans first. It is our view that Alberta's post-secondary ecosystem is failing to do so and is instead burdening the province's students—the majority of whom are under the age of 25—with debt that will have consequences not just within their lifetimes, but for the provincial economy as a whole.

In this submission, we make the case that cuts to Alberta's post-secondary ecosystem that began in 2019 may have been not just excessive, but unnecessary to begin with. We outline all the ways in which yearly tuition increases will ultimately have diminishing returns. We consider whether Alberta can expect its current targeted enrolment initiative to produce the labour market returns it expects. We also address the impact of budget cuts on the student experience, ranging from depleted administrative support, classrooms absent of structural integrity, and reduced access to instructors or programming. Finally, we discuss whether common concerns raised around equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives and free speech on Albertan campuses are reflective of reality.

Overall, we present this submission in the hope it will aid the Expert Panel to understand where Alberta's current post-secondary ecosystem is not serving its students. We believe it may be harming them instead, and this is not an opinion we have reached without careful thought and consideration, as we intend this submission to explain. We ask the Panel to keep in mind that, behind every financial decision the province makes regarding investment into its post-secondary sector, there are thousands of Albertans who are already struggling and will be affected more than we could ever convey through facts and figures.

Finally, we wish to thank the Expert Panel for the time and consideration it has devoted to what is no doubt a monumental undertaking. We make ourselves available to expound on the topics we have addressed in this submission, and to further provide any insight into the student experience that may aid the Panel in its findings.

Yours sincerely,

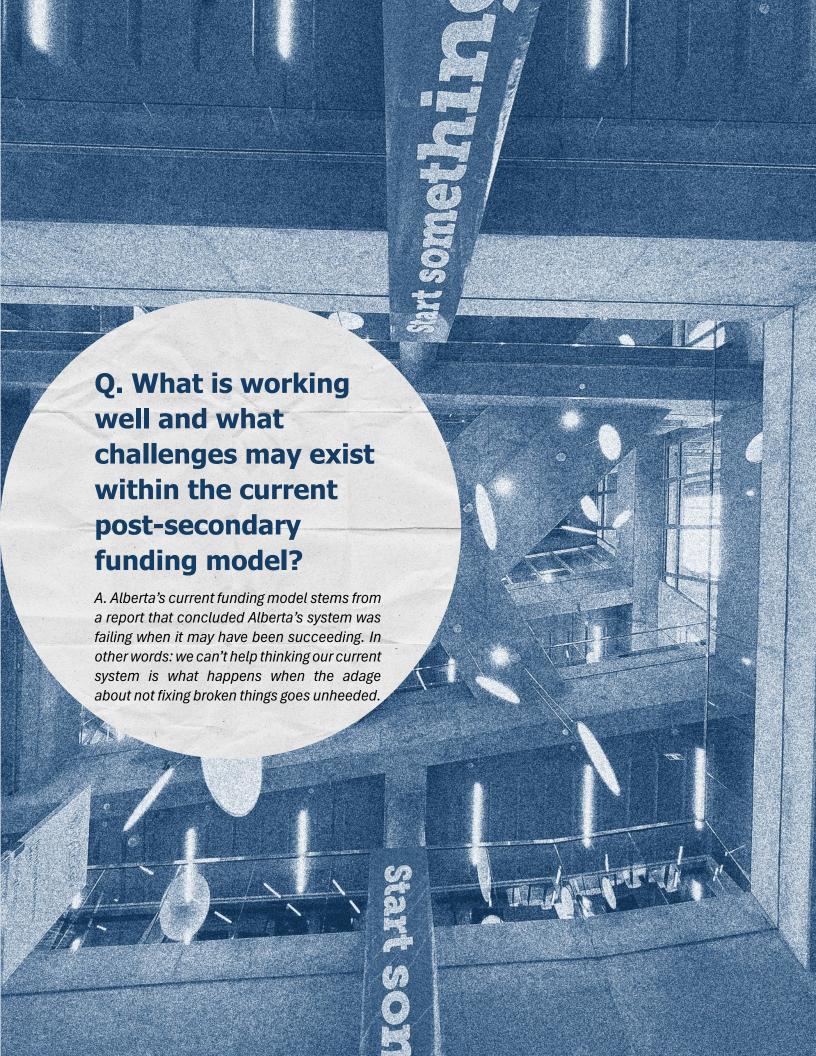


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On the positives

The 2% tuition cap

In 2023, the provincial government announced that it would restrict post-secondary institutions (PSIs) from raising tuition and fees without encumbrance.³ Albertan PSIs now cannot increase tuition by more than an average of 2% each year; a single program's fees cannot be raised more than 10%.⁴ Given that the average cost of an Albertan undergraduate's education is higher than the national average,⁵ this measure provided predictability and affordability for students at a time when they needed it most.

Students get a say in tuition and fee proposals

Alberta's Tuition and Fees Regulation provide that post-secondaries must maintain a consultation mechanism to discuss proposed increases to tuition and fees with their students' and graduate students' associations, as applicable. This allows students' associations, including UCSU, a guaranteed channel of communication to transmit the concerns of students with institutional leadership. The UCSU has had some success advocating on behalf of students, particularly international students, through this prescribed mechanism.

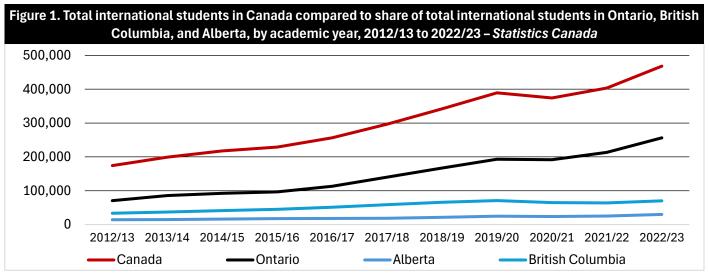
Students are kept informed of regulatory changes

Students' associations in Alberta receive access to expanded editions of the Guidelines to the Alberta Tuition Framework, a document that accompanies the Tuition and Fees Regulation which is designed to aid post-secondary administrators in understanding how and when they can raise tuition and fees. Being fully informed of the process enables students' associations to provide transparency to the student body and to engage with the process from a position of understanding.

Albertan institutions hold their own with less international funding

In January 2024, the federal government introduced an intake cap on international study permit applications.⁷ This cap represented a 35% drop in the number of study permits that would be granted compared to 2023, intended to correct a trajectory of "unsustainable growth." Canada had seen an observable rise in international students: between 2012 and 2022, the national number of international enrolments increased by 169%. Some of the reason for this boom, the government suggested, could be found in the practices of private colleges. The then-Immigration Minister described these institutions as "the diploma equivalent of puppy mills" which did not offer "a legitimate student experience."

This characterization understated the role of public PSIs in the "nationwide explosion" in international student numbers. CBC analysis identified that, of the 30 Canadian colleges and universities granted the most study permits in the year before the cap, 29 were public institutions. Furthermore, most of the international students in Canada went to one province: Ontario. Of the 10 PSIs with the most study permits approved in 2023, 9 were Ontarian; one was British Columbian. Just 10 public colleges in Ontario accounted for 30% of all study permits issued in Canada between 2021 and 2023. 55% of all international enrolments for the 2022/23 academic year were in Ontario, up from 53% the following year.



As Figure 1 shows, the recruitment of international students by Ontarian PSIs entered a phase of rapid growth in 2016.¹⁷ This coincided with the then-provincial government's decision to freeze per-student funding for domestic students.¹⁸ The incumbent government, first elected in 2018, did not adjust these freezes, instead reducing domestic tuition by 10%, prohibiting institutions from raising domestic tuition again, and reducing operating funding to PSIs.¹⁹ This prompted Ontario's PSIs to recruit globally to recoup what they had lost, as international students pay up to five times as much for the same program as domestic students.²⁰

While Alberta has seen rising international enrolments since 2019, when a period of operating funding cuts began for its own PSIs, the volume of study permits issued for the province has not been comparable to Ontario, nor has it ever been historically.²¹ However, this is not necessarily for lack of trying. The study permit cap has already negatively impacted the bottom lines of Albertan PSIs. The University of Calgary experienced an \$11 million loss of revenue ahead of 2025,²² and some colleges in the province are bracing themselves to receive up to 80% fewer international applicants.²³ Rather, Alberta may be at a brand disadvantage: more than 80% of all overseas visitors to Canada visit either Ontario, Quebec, or British Columbia.²⁴

Whatever the cause, Alberta's PSIs are better equipped to recover from a fall in international enrolments. There is also a chance for Alberta to capitalize on attracting talent that will no longer be captured by Ontario's dominant ecosystem. Alberta has not historically attracted enough international undergraduates to reach its cap.²⁵ Therefore, that Alberta received fewer international students after the cap's announcement has more to do with damage done to Canada as a 'brand' than Alberta's inability to accept them.

That is not to say that international students should continue to be viewed as an alternative to operating funding. Ontario's policy has demonstrated that this strategy is unsustainable: a decade of stagnant public funding means its colleges now lose money on most of the domestic students who enrol, ²⁶ and bankruptcy is on the cards for many public institutions worst affected by study permit caps. ²⁷ Furthermore, we have observed with concern that being increasingly viewed as a convenient source of funds has coincided with greater negative outcomes for international students, with some evidence to suggest that suicides are climbing among this demographic. ^{28,29} Instead of repeating Ontario's mistakes, Alberta has an opportunity to renew investment in its post-secondaries to ensure its higher education ecosystem avoids the same fate, while also developing a strategy to attract the best in global research talent.

On the current model: how we got here

In this section, we advance that Alberta's post-secondaries have been underfunded since 2019. We appreciate that, while it is easy to describe something as underfunded, such a claim holds water only when it is made clear what a system now lacks compared to a time in which it was better funded. We will therefore review the findings of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Alberta's Finances, which convened in March 2019 to review Alberta's provincial spending. Supporting the Panel were research packages by consultancies KPMG³⁰ and MNP. MNP's document focused on best practices for "business attraction and capital investment" but did not conduct a specific review of post-secondary education (PSE).³¹ The Panel's analysis of PSE was therefore mostly informed by KPMG's work, which compared Alberta to Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia (B.C.).³²

The Blue Ribbon Panel identified that Alberta's PSIs historically received the lion's share of their funding through the Campus Alberta Grant, a base operating fund from the provincial government.³³ Over time, how much funding a PSI received ceased to be tied to metrics such as enrolment or program offerings.³⁴ As such, the Panel concluded that Alberta's post-secondary system lacked direction, with a funding model unfit for achieving specific goals such as meeting labour market needs.³⁵ Compounding matters was that Alberta seemingly spent more per student than Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia; its institutions relied too much on provincial funds and too little on tuition or alternative revenue sources.³⁶ The most consequential findings the Blue Ribbon Panel made were as follows:

- Albertan PSIs were overly reliant on government funding;
- Alberta was overspending per full-time equivalent student compared to Quebec, B.C., and Ontario; and
- Albertan PSIs were not producing enough timely graduates.

This damning assessment led to historic budget cuts for Alberta's post-secondaries. Funding was reduced by a third between 2019 and 2023,³⁷ with subsequent investments unadjusted for inflation in Budgets 2024 and 2025.³⁸ It is for this reason that we will take a closer look at whether the Blue Ribbon Panel was correct to make its three major conclusions. We shall provide our reasons for disagreeing with the Blue Ribbon Panel's

interpretation of the data at the time. We aim to demonstrate to the Expert Panel's satisfaction that Alberta's institutions were, in fact, meeting the metrics that the Blue Ribbon Panel expected of them. Through this analysis, we aim to demonstrate that a return to pre-2019 funding levels would be an effective place to begin when crafting a new formula for funding post-secondaries. Finally, we provide the student perspective on metrics that future investments could be tied to.

On the Blue Ribbon Panel #1: Were Albertan PSIs overly reliant on government funding?

The Blue Ribbon Panel concluded: "Alberta universities and colleges depend far more on government grants and rely far less on tuition as a share of revenue compared to their British Columbia and Ontario counterparts... [They should have] less reliance on government grants [and more on] funding from tuition and alternative revenue sources [via] more entrepreneurial approaches..."³⁹

The Panel relied on calculations by KPMG breaking down the finances of Albertan PSIs, as seen in Table 1. KPMG achieved this by taking the averages of self-reported financial data from colleges and universities that participated in a national survey.⁴⁰ KPMG concluded that Alberta's PSIs were overly reliant on government grants compared to British Columbia and Ontario. For example, Alberta's universities derived 54% of their revenue from government sources compared to Ontario's 36%. (The Government of Quebec's policy was to fund its PSIs more generously by design, so we shall not consider Quebec in as much detail.)

Table 1. University and college revenue by source and province, 2016/17, according to KPMG's division of revenue sources into four umbrella categories for the Blue Ribbon Panel									
	Share of total revenue, universities, derived from Share of total revenue, colleges, derived from								
Province	l grante	Tuition & fees	Own source revenue	Other grants	Government grants	Tuition & fees	Own source revenue	Donations & non-govt. grants	
Alberta	54%	18%	24%	22%	64%	22%	11%	2%	
B.C.	44%	28%	21%	6%	52%	34%	13%	0%	
Ontario	36%	35%	22%	7%	42%	43%	14%	1%	
Quebec	62%	16%	15%	8%	85%	7%	7%	1%	

We believe the way KPMG calculated these figures was inappropriate. Firstly, KPMG included federal research funding under "government grants." As these funds are restricted to supporting research activities and cannot be spent on general operations, including them under "government grants" inflates the impression of how much expressly provincial operating funding Alberta's PSIs received. Additionally, including funds received from foreign and other provincial governments as "government grants" was also a curious decision, as surely PSIs were still being entrepreneurial by contracting with governments other than Alberta's. Finally, no reason was given as to why "non-government grants and contracts" were not included in "own source" revenue but separately as "other grants" in Table 1. As per the source survey's methodology, non-government grants are funds that PSIs earn by performing services, such as selling goods or conducting research. We have therefore taken the source survey's data pools and divided them into revised categories, inspired by KPMG's categories, shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Revised categories of revenue of universities & colleges						
Universities	Colleges					
Provincial grants	Provincial grants					
Provincial revenue – Municipal revenue	Provincial (regular grants, other provincial, Canadian Foundation					
Flovincial revenue – Municipal revenue	for Innovation matching fund) - Municipal					
Federal grants (including research)	Federal grants (including research)					
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council - Health	Employment and Social Development Canada - Canada					
Canada - Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council -	Foundation for Innovation - Canadian Institutes of Health					
Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) - Canada	Research - Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of					
Foundation for Innovation (CFI) - Canada Research Chairs – Other	Canada -Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council -					
federal	Other federal					

Own-source revenue (including contracts, sales,	Own-source revenue (including contracts, sales,
investments, and donations)	investments, and donations)
Other provinces – Foreign - Donations (individuals, businesses,	Bequests, donations, non-government grants (from businesses
not-for-profit organizations) – Endowment - Other investment -	and individuals, as well as non-profit organizations and
Non-government grants (individuals, business enterprises, not-	foundations) – Investment income – Ancillary enterprises –
for-profits) - Sales of services, products - Miscellaneous	Borrowings – Miscellaneous
Tuition and fees	Tuition and fees
Credit course tuition – Non-credit tuition – Other fees	Fees (programs, continuing ed programs, and other fees)

When we divide university and college revenue sources according to these categories, a different story emerges. Table 3 provides that Alberta's universities were closer to self-generating a third of their revenue than KPMG gave them credit for, and the differences between the abilities of Alberta's universities to self-fundraise compared to comparator province universities were much slighter. We observe a similar closing of the gap when we reassess how much Albertan colleges were able to self-generate. In fact, Alberta's colleges appear to have been better at self-fundraising than those in British Columbia.

Table 3. University & college revenue by source & province, 2016/17, as per Table 2's revised categories								
	Share of tot	al revenue, ur	niversities, dei	rived from	Share of total revenue, colleges, derived from			
	Provincial Tuition and Own source Federal Provincial Tuition and Own source Federal						Federal	
Province	funding	fees	funding	funding	funding	fees	funding	funding
Alberta	46%	18%	29%	7%	62%	22%	14%	2%
B.C.	34%	28%	28%	10%	50%	34%	13%	3%
Ontario	26%	35%	29%	9%	41%	43%	15%	1%
Quebec	48%	16%	23%	13%	84%	7%	8%	1%

Viewed this way, it becomes apparent that Alberta's universities and colleges did not rely on provincial dollars as a greater share of funding due to a lack of fiscal initiative. Alberta's institutions were already self-generating an almost identical share of their revenue as institutions in comparator provinces. If the larger PSE ecosystems of Ontario and British Columbia had topped out at self-generating a similar percentage of their revenue, we believe Alberta's PSIs had also reached their upper limits. Why, then, did Albertan institutions appear to be overly reliant on provincial funding?

Across all four provinces, we find that government funding is inversely proportional to tuition revenue. In other words, when we consider enrolment numbers, we find that Alberta's PSIs were not inexplicably receiving too much provincial investment. Rather, they received this investment specifically to fill the gap that tuition dollars were covering in the other provinces. KPMG did not factor the volume of paying students per province into its findings, and, in doing so, unfairly undermined how 'entrepreneurial' Alberta's institutions really were.

KPMG calculated their figures as shown in Table 1 by dividing provincial budgets for the fiscal year 2016/17 by the number of post-secondary enrolments recorded by Statistics Canada.⁴² We present these enrolment numbers in Table 4, as KPMG did not; we also consider Table 3's findings in the context of Table 4.

Table 4. University & college enrolments in Alberta and comparator provinces by student status, 2016/17								
		Universities			Colleges			
Province	Domestic enrolments	International enrolments	Total	Domestic enrolments	International enrolments	Total		
Alberta	117,291	13,065	130,356	55,218	5,241	60,459		
B.C.	142,581	36,771	179,352	84,108	14,514	98,622		
Ontario	462,528	64,932	527,460	244,209	48,183	292,392		
Quebec	276,270	39,780	316,050	210,711	5,412	216,123		

We use these enrolment numbers with some caveats. Statistics Canada's enrolment reporting is, by its own description, not a definitive "enumeration of all students" each year. Enrolment is reported according to how many students were enrolled as of a fall 'snapshot' date. This excludes spring or summer students entirely and, furthermore, students who enrolled in multiple programs at the time of the snapshot are counted twice. Statistics Canada itself cautions that this results in especially unreliable data for colleges, which administer

shorter programs and year-round admissions.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the numbers provide a reasonable picture of which provinces receive the most students.

That Alberta's universities were 20 percentage points more reliant on provincial dollars than B.C.'s universities, and 12 percentage points more than Ontario's, begins to seem more reasonable when we consider that B.C. had 32% more university students and Ontario had 121% more. The situation was similar for colleges. Alberta's relied on provincial revenue for 62% of their funding compared to B.C.'s 50% and Ontario's 41%, but B.C. and Ontario respectively had 48% and 132% more college students. In sum, there were 4 students enrolled in Ontario's universities to every one student enrolled in Alberta; 400 students can comfortably pay into more of their instructor's salary than 100 students. KPMG also did not consider the number of international students in each province. Tuition paid by these students can equal the tuition paid by five domestic ones, allowing PSIs in provinces with more international enrolments to require less provincial funding. It should have been accounted for that, in the year KPMG reviewed, Alberta's universities received 64% fewer international students than those in B.C. and 80% fewer international students than Ontario. Its colleges also received 64% fewer than counterparts in B.C. and 90% fewer than those in Ontario.

Furthermore, we suspect that simply having a larger student population will result in financial boons for Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia's institutions beyond just their payment of tuition. These institutions will produce larger alumni networks, creating alternative revenue streams through donations or events. Enrolment may perpetuate more enrolment, as students who graduated and enjoyed their experience will recommend their PSI to people they know. Indeed, there is some evidence that university-graduate parents are likely to encourage their children to attend their alma mater. Developing strong reputations that sustain enrolment from international communities will also be beneficial, due to this demographic's high rates of tuition.

A final factor to consider is that federal grants generally favoured PSIs, particularly universities, in the three comparator provinces. Table 3 shows that Ontario received five times as much federal funding as Alberta for the 2016/17 academic year. Federal research funding can be leveraged by PSIs to improve their national reputation, thus attracting more self-generated revenue in the form of contracts or tuition.

Why Alberta's institutions attract fewer students

Even in light of the above, we have considered that the cuts recommended by the Blue Ribbon Panel would be nonetheless warranted if Alberta's institutions were somehow squandering their comparatively generous provincial grants. Yet we posit that reaching this conclusion would require ignoring the more informative variable of **availability**. Alberta has 15 universities to Ontario's 33 and British Columbia's 25. Though Quebec has 10, we expect that the province enjoys higher enrolment due to its PSE ecosystem capturing Francophone students, international and domestic, in a way Alberta cannot.⁴⁷

While Alberta has a similar number of colleges, they may be disadvantaged by **location**. Half of Alberta's 14 public colleges and technical institutes lie outside Alberta's five largest cities⁴⁸ with some spanning multiple rural campuses. (2 of Alberta's 12 public universities⁵¹ also lie outside Alberta's five largest cities.) Most of British Columbia's PSIs orbit Vancouver; most of Ontario's are near Ottawa or Toronto; many of Quebec's flank Montreal. Rural Alberta could be a hard sell when recruiting both Albertan and out-of-province students. Rural Albertans are less likely to enrol in PSE at all, and while other provinces have seen a revival of their rural populations since 2018, more rural Albertans continue to move to urban areas than vice versa. Furthermore, providing public services costs more in rural areas, as they are generally further from central service centres and more sparsely populated than urban locales. Alberta's colleges therefore may unavoidably cost more to run and struggle to recruit as many students due to location more than internal flaws, hence a comparative reliance on provincial dollars.

Alberta also has limited **brand recognition** compared to Quebec, B.C., and Ontario. No other province in recent years has embarked on such an ambitious publicity campaign to combat "misconceptions" held by the rest of the country as Alberta in 2022, when the government launched *Alberta is Calling*. ⁵⁶ If other Canadians need convincing of our province's charms, it stands to reason that the same applies to global talent. In 2023, 82% of all overseas visitors to Canada travelled to Ontario, Quebec, or British Columbia, ⁵⁷ suggesting that Alberta may need to place a few more long-distance calls to boost its image on the world stage. This is not something its PSIs will be able to do alone—and certainly not with insufficient funding.

Finally, the post-secondary ecosystems of the comparator provinces benefit from the perception of **prestige**. In Table 5, we review two of the highest profile rankings of universities, *Maclean's* and *Times Higher Education*, to see how Alberta's universities fare against the competition.⁵⁸ While we appreciate that rankings paint in broad strokes, they can nonetheless influence where prospective students choose to apply.⁵⁹ These rankings can also serve as a 'temperature check' on the national perceptions of certain province's PSE systems. Only two Albertan PSIs, the Universities of Alberta and Calgary, made the cut for *Times Higher Education;* no Albertan comprehensive university was recognized by *Maclean's*. While the University of Lethbridge was recognized by the *Maclean's* rankings of primarily undergraduate universities as Canada's 11th best in 2025, this marked a decline from its 2024 ranking, when it placed 6th.⁶⁰

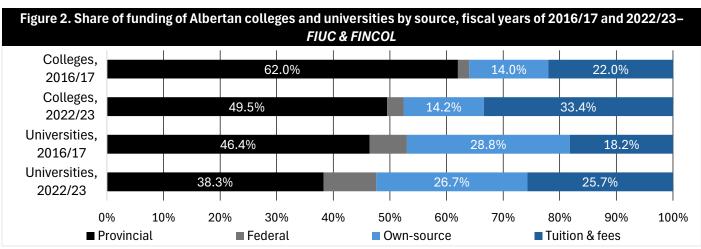
Table 5. Number of institutions per province appearing in <i>Maclean's top 15</i> comprehensive universities and <i>Times Higher Education's</i> top 25 Canadian universities, 2018 and 2025 rankings						
Maclean's Times Higher Education						
Province	2018	2025	2018	2025		
Alberta	0	0	2	2		
B.C.	2	3	4	3		
Ontario	8	8	8	11		
Quebec	2	1	6	5		

What makes the post-secondary institutions of other provinces "better"

Some of the methodology behind tables like that of *Maclean's* or *Times Higher Education* is subjective. Behind the *Times'* rankings are variables like reputation, measured by submitting a survey for a panel of academics to complete. These academics nominate whichever universities they perceive to be the best for teaching and research in their field. Other metrics are more objective, such as the number of citations an institution's papers receive, or the number of patents resulting from its work. Acceptable via a survey sent to Canadian post-secondary faculty and administrators. It is likely that, when PSIs improve their objective metrics, subjective ones will also improve. Prolific and high-quality paper output will lead to more citations; more patents will raise the institution's visibility. However, the ability of a PSI to engage in technology transfer to the private sector is directly linked to predictable and appropriate public funding, as we shall now review.

A closer look at: why underfunding prohibits post-secondaries from finding alternative revenues

Figure 2 shows that Albertan PSIs have plugged holes in their budgets not by diversifying their revenue, but by almost entirely pushing the burden onto students. Between 2019 and 2023, provincial dollars as a share of funding for universities reduced by 8 percentage points; tuition and fees increased by 7.5 points. For colleges, provincial dollars as a share of revenue reduced by 12.5 percentage points while tuition and fees climbed by 11.4 points. Though the Blue Ribbon Panel's recommendations intended to inspire PSIs to seek private partnerships, their reduced public funding may be the very thing preventing them from doing so.



Technology transfer can be resource-intensive for industry and institutions alike

A 2017 report to the federal Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology on intellectual property (IP) identified that, where PSIs receive insufficient public funding for research and development (R&D) efforts, transferring technology to the private sector can itself be prohibitively expensive. ⁶⁴ Giving evidence to the Committee, a U15 representative described that, ideally, PSIs would reduce the risk of early-stage IP by creating and testing prototypes, thus ensuring that a product is ready for commercialization. ⁶⁵ When PSIs must operate with cost-cutting in mind, their capacity for private-sector partnership diminishes. They may become more protective of their IP, as it represents an alternative revenue source in the absence of public funding. After all, no scheme exists to compensate Canadian PSIs for releasing IP to the private sector at the point of creation. ⁶⁶ This means PSIs must not only leverage diminishing funds to conduct R&D, but they must then take on some of the cost of crafting licensing arrangements.

Complicating matters is that no national template exists to guide PSIs in the realm of IP ownership.⁶⁷ It is important for PSIs to maintain the freedom to craft their own, as these can form an "integral part" of collective bargaining agreements with faculty, thus presenting a tool for PSIs to attract talent.⁶⁸ However, the unavailability of something as straightforward as a central source of accessible information can complicate understanding IP even for the most motivated industry leaders, as the Standing Committee heard in 2017:

"The lack of reliable and useful information capable of supporting policy-making and economic activity is perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to technology transfer in Canada... [As a result,] parties that might be inclined to engage in technology transfer lack the information necessary to identify and assess opportunities to do so." ⁶⁹

As one industry representative remarked, small and medium-sized businesses have limited time and resources to identify technology transfer opportunities, ⁷⁰ meaning that negotiating with PSIs that all have different policies can be "a difficult process." This is economically impactful, given that half of Canada's GDP relies on these businesses. ⁷² Programs in the United States, such as the Small Business Technology Transfer scheme, had been successful at moving early-stage IP out of universities and into the public sector. ⁷³ Canada maintains no equivalent that bridges the gap between businesses and PSIs.

In 2017, in consultation with industry, Universities Canada crafted a set of recommendations to address the issue. These would see the creation of a "national IP concierge service [offering] tools and initiatives" to

streamline public-private technology transfer, such as "IP toolkits with template collaboration agreements" and a "national database" of legal services specializing in IP, particularly pro-bono ones.⁷⁴ While there is a Canadian Intellectual Property Office,⁷⁵ it could benefit from taking inspiration from its counterpart in the United Kingdom. Canada's IP office does not offer resources akin to the U.K.'s practical IP frameworks,^{76,77} which are guides designed to empower various stakeholders. Examples are provided in Figure 3. The accessibility of these products may contribute to why an average 85% of the British IPO office's clients are satisfied with its services,⁷⁸ compared to only 37% of clients using its Canadian counterpart.⁷⁹

We appreciate that investigating paths to technology transfer in Alberta is outside the scope of the Expert Panel, particularly because IP is a federal issue. However, we include this analysis for two reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates that when PSIs are asked to operate like the private sector, the real private sector can lose out. Two, the Government of Alberta has taken steps to reduce red tape in recent years; the creation and maintenance of PSI-related IP guidelines for the benefit of industry, akin to those in Figure 3, would be light on resources for potentially pronounced returns.

The research capacity of post-secondaries is threatened by underfunding

The constraints that prevent businesses from engaging in technology transfer also hinder post-secondaries. Alberta's PSIs are expected to conduct the same quality of research with reduced personnel in spaces that are physically unsuitable. For example, the Universities of Calgary, Lethbridge and Alberta collectively owe nearly \$1.5 billion in outstanding deferred maintenance.⁸⁰ At

Figure 3. Example guidelines by the United Kingdom's Intellectual Property Office

Lambert Toolkit

A set of model agreements and a guide for university to business

IP for Universities



Need to learn about IP and how it can help your business? Start here! Four light touch modules covering the basics of copyright, designs, trade marks and patents.

the University of Calgary, poorly maintained facilities directly threaten the research capacity of critical units including the Cumming School of Medicine. A 2023 independent assessment of the department found that the "upkeep of current space" was at "a critical stage affecting students, staff, and faculty," putting research activity "at risk." Similar problems were identified within UCalgary's Faculty of Kinesiology in 2024, with reviewers noting that many of its facilities were "held together by love and duct tape." 82

Operating funding cuts have also meant a loss of talent required to conduct R&D. The University of Calgary's Faculty of Arts was one of the most affected by the post-2019 funding model, absorbing a 25% budget cut.⁸³ Between 2021 and 2023, the Faculty recorded a 5.3% reduction in permanent academic staff,^{84,85} despite also seeing a modest rise in enrolment.⁸⁶ Subsequently, faculty are taking on more teaching work, while also being asked to conduct research in disciplines outside their field.⁸⁷ At the University of Lethbridge, a 2025 review of its chemistry research output identified a shortage of academic staff.⁸⁸ It was noted that, "without additional resources," the department will be unable to "maintain [its] program and research output" at previous levels.⁸⁹

Canadian research funding already lags the world

In recent years, Canadian PSIs have been criticized by industry leaders for their approach to private-sector partnerships. The Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology heard in 2017 that PSIs seem to "misunderstand the amount of risk to which a private firm exposes itself by engaging in technology transfer". Two industry leaders recounted difficulties negotiating with PSIs that wanted to "maximize" their own profits; a third questioned why PSIs should be allowed to profit at all from IP created with public funds. PSIs have also received criticism for using public research funds—described by one think tank as being "poured into the university sector"—only for half of all patented IP produced by PSIs to end up in foreign ownership.

Missing from these analyses is that, since 2007, provincial funding for PSE had fallen nationally, particularly in Alberta and Ontario. This has prompted PSIs to conduct the same risk assessments of their own fiscal health as private firms. Just over 50% of Canadian PSE funding derives from public monies, compared to the OECD average of nearly 70%. Canada is the only G7 country to have reduced government-funded R&D as a proportion of its GDP in recent years, Contrary to the perception that public monies are 'pouring into' the sector. R&D is something Canada's PSIs do well; they conduct more than a third of all R&D activity nationwide. The UCSU is unsurprised that reduced funding for both their operating and research budgets has given rise to PSIs adopting the customs of commercial enterprises, up to and including demonstrating greater protectiveness over their IP.

Post-secondaries innovate more than they patent - and what they do patent isn't lucrative

The other side of this coin is that many PSI-generated innovations are never patented to begin with. In 2024, the World Intellectual Property Organization assessed that Canadian post-secondary researchers generate significantly more research than industries are patenting,⁹⁷ suggesting a gap between potential and realized commercial opportunities.

The fact that PSIs allow these opportunities to pass them by becomes easier to understand when we consider that post-secondaries make little in return for their R&D activities. As Figure 4 illustrates, in 2009, PSIs were on track to spend almost as much on managing their intellectual property as they stood to receive in IP-generated income.⁹⁸

This trajectory appears to have continued for the worse beyond 2009. Although Statistics Canada

on managing intellectual property compared to total income from intellectual property (in millions), 2005-2009 - Statistics Canada \$70 \$60 \$50 \$40 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 Income from Intellectual property intellectual property management expenditure

Figure 4. Canadian post-secondaries' total expenditure

ceased to continue updating the dataset from which Figure 4 derives, more recent analysis from 2017 found that Canada's top research institutions spent nearly \$6 billion on R&D that year, but generated less than \$75 million from licensing their IP.⁹⁹ This analysis also found that in no year between 2008 and 2017 did institutions' combined annual income from IP surpass \$100 million.¹⁰⁰ It is unlikely that any leftover profit can comfortably

fund many additional research projects, fostering an environment in which Canadian PSIs are reluctant to patent any discoveries for which there is no clear path to commercialization.¹⁰¹

That PSIs cannot commercialize their IP is not necessarily a net negative for the national economy. To provide an example, the University of Waterloo earns around \$55,000 annually from IP licensing revenue, 102 but the economic footprint spawned by its R&D operations is substantial. One analyst estimates that the "tech ecosystem" built up around the University's activities delivered \$71 billion to Canada's economy in 2023, representing 8% of Ontario's GDP that year. 103 Some of this sum will be due to the success of the institution's graduates. Startups founded by Waterloo alumni were recognized in 2021 as producing better returns on investment than startups founded by alumni of renowned American universities Stanford and Harvard. 104

Conversely, when research institutions face pressure to generate licensing income, they can be forced into an "antagonistic" role towards industry, as one nanotechnology CEO opined to technology news outlet *The Logic* in 2019.¹⁰⁵ If expected to act themselves as entrepreneurs, PSIs can hoard IP that could be better leveraged by industry. This has the effect of transforming research institutions into "patent trolls" that punish companies "for using the technology" produced by their R&D efforts.¹⁰⁶ 'Patent trolls' are popularly defined as hostile non-practicing entities, or "organizations that hold patents but do not produce goods and services based on those patents."¹⁰⁷ They instead pursue royalties through litigation when their patents are infringed upon by bodies capable of bring products to market.

Under ordinary circumstances, PSIs are not patent trolls: they license patents "to companies that can bring the technology to market," which is not necessarily harmful to economic growth. As we have reviewed, it may be too expensive for PSIs themselves to commercialize or even patent every innovation its R&D activities produce. Therefore, licensing arrangements can be generous to investors that engage with PSIs. It is industry standard for PSIs to receive, on average, 10% of revenues under licensing deals. However, when public research institutions can no longer rely on predictable public funding, their very existence is threatened by allowing industry to benefit the most from their work. We therefore expect that small- and medium-sized businesses will continue to lose out where foreign investors have deeper pockets.

Foreign investment is becoming a better deal for post-secondaries

Registering Canadian-produced IP with foreign owners is not a PSI-only problem. A 2019 study found that Canadian inventors are "increasingly likely to transfer or sell their intellectual property to foreign entities," especially to American companies with the capital needed to "invest in innovation." Between 1998 and 2017, the share of Canadian-invented patents transferred to foreign firms upon issuance rose from 18% to 45%. As with PSIs, cost is often the reason Canadian inventors forfeit the rights to their technologies. Inventing incurs expense at every stage, from development to production, to scaling up for the purpose of competing in global markets. 113

It is also increasingly common for PSIs to mirror the private sector by relying on global partnerships. Foreign funding to Canadian PSIs grew 15% between 2011 and 2020,¹¹⁴ perhaps because working with foreign investors can provide scalability. In 2021, a federal Special Committee on Canada-China Relations heard the example of a joint enterprise between Canadian medical researchers and Chinese industry partners.¹¹⁵ This team would be "far more likely to put into production a medical device in Suzhou than in Halifax, given China's vast industrial capacity."¹¹⁶ PSIs have also had more exposure to the possibility of global partnerships in recent years. Operating funding cuts have resulted in an increased reliance on the tuition revenues of international students, who, in Alberta, pay around four times as much for the same program as domestic students.¹¹⁷

Keeping IP domestic would require PSIs to be well-funded enough that they can afford to take risks. If Alberta's PSIs cannot rely on public funding to remain operational, the rest of Canadian industry serves as a cautionary tale that one of the non-government revenue streams it turns to will be innovations yielded from institutional R&D, whether that is for their internal benefit or the benefit of overseas investors.

On the Blue Ribbon Panel #2: Was the Government of Alberta overspending per student?

While it is one thing to examine whether Albertan post-secondaries were doing enough to diversify their revenue streams, it is another to consider whether the province was nonetheless spending disproportionate amounts of public funds per each full-time equivalent (FTE) student. This was the conclusion KPMG reached in their work for the Blue Ribbon Panel. To reach this finding, KPMG reviewed each province's advanced education budget estimates for the 2018/19 fiscal year and separated each line item into one of eight categories of its own design. This design is the *Connected Enterprise* model, the name given by KPMG to its idea of how best to logically group PSI funds by purpose (e.g. funds going towards "enterprise strategy," or "support for students"). KPMG then divided the totals in each category according to enrolment numbers for the 2016/17 academic year as reported by Statistics Canada. Table 6 reproduces KPMG's conclusions, which purport to show that Alberta spent the most per FTE student of the four provinces.

Table 6. KPMG's assessment of how much each provincial government spent per full-time equivalent student as of 2018/19, sorted by expense categories of KPMG's own design									
	Enterprise Adult Supports for System Stakeholder Research Enterprise Enterprise						Enterprise	Total	
	strategy	learning	students	management	management	nescuron	operations	technology	
Alberta	\$17	\$18,914	\$4,479	\$304	\$59	\$4,685	\$7,894	\$157	\$36,510
B.C.	\$4	\$18,584	\$4,151	\$95	\$495	\$3,838	\$4,134	N/A	\$31,299
Ontario	\$19	\$10,461	\$4,610	\$173	\$342	\$1,213	\$4,705	\$22	\$21,536
Quebec	\$90	\$13,588	\$2,669	\$770	\$35	\$939	\$7,678	\$61	\$25,822

By presenting specific dollar amounts, we would expect the datasets KPMG used to be robust. However, KPMG caveated the table reproduced in Table 6 by noting that "consolidated views for British Columbia [did] not exist" at the time of its exercise, and Ontario's were "limited and not detailed." KPMG therefore used "estimating assumptions to allocate expenditures across the Connected Enterprise model." Yet it is not possible to discern the line of reasoning KPMG employed to categorize line items in provincial budget estimates as, for example, "supports for students."

Looking to Ontario's 2018/19 budget estimates for context clues, we find that a possible example of a *student support expense* may be the sub-item 'Services,' valued at \$36.6 million, under line item 'Colleges, Universities and Student Support'. This is speculative, however, as Ontario's estimates do not further delineate how much of this fund was earmarked for *student* services directly. Similarly, contained in British Columbia's budget estimates are the line items 'Educational Institutions and Organizations' and 'Student Services Programs,' allocating \$2.1 billion to things like student performance initiatives and the administration of "student services programs." However, these line items also provide for matters such as general institutional operations or loan forgiveness that may not fit into a category entitled "supports for students."

Furthermore, as we have already outlined, Statistics Canada's enrolment numbers are conservative estimates. They are a snapshot of fall enrolments only, leading to underestimation for colleges, and some students are counted twice. Ergo, a calculation that not only relied upon faulty estimates for both its numerator and denominator, but drew each from two different fiscal years, was used to justify sweeping cuts.

Indeed, the Government of Alberta would later distance itself from KPMG's conclusions. The Ministry of Advanced Education's Budget 2022 business plan outlined metrics used to evaluate the health of Alberta's PSE system, with one being provincial operating investment per FTE student. Here, the Government calculated that it had, in fact, spent \$13,967 per FTE student in 2018/19, 121 a dramatic difference of \$22,543 compared to KPMG's \$36,510 calculation. Figure 5 shows the relevant excerpt, and that the Government of Alberta still concluded it had spent more per student than British Columbia and Ontario, by \$3,571 and \$7,267 respectively. Still, given the disadvantages and fiscal considerations unique to Alberta that we have already outlined, these differences are far more reasonable than KPMG suggested in Table 6: that Alberta spent \$5,211 more per student than British Columbia, and \$14,974 than Ontario.

Figure 5. Government of Alberta's assessment in 2022 of how much it spent per post-secondary student in 2018/19

2.b Performance Indicator: Provincial operating investment per full time equivalent student (Operational investment per full-time equivalent student is calculated using the provincial operational grant funding as per the Canadian Association of University Business Officers and Statistics Canada reporting. Statistics Canada is also the source of the student enrolment numbers.) This measure takes a pan-Canadian approach to enable comparability across provinces. As such, the targets reflect system-level investment in post-secondary operations.

In 2019-20 the provincial government invested \$12,666 for each full-time equivalent student enrolled in approved programs at Alberta's publicly funded post-secondary institutions. This result was higher than British Columbia (\$10,396) and Ontario (\$6,700). (2020-21 data available January 2023).

2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
\$14,048	\$14,127	\$14,197	\$13,967	\$12,666

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On the Blue Ribbon Panel #3: Were Alberta's post-secondary institutions failing to produce graduates?

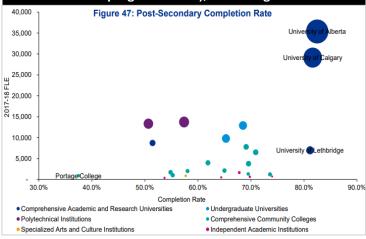
The Blue Ribbon Panel emphasized that "Alberta's future depends on having one of the most highly skilled and well-educated populations in the world." In this vein, the Blue Ribbon Panel was concerned that poor graduation rates would jeopardize the province's development, especially because "not all Alberta's [PSIs were] successful at getting students to... graduate" in a timely fashion. In fact, the Panel found that 9 of Alberta's 26 public PSIs had an average completion rate below 60%, and Portage College notably had a completion rate of just 38%. This finding stemmed from a chart created by KPMG, seen in Figure 6.

KPMG derived the completion rates from provincial data following completions by students who enrolled in 2011, tracked for up to three years after their expected program end date. We have consulted the same source¹²² to reverse-engineer how KPMG reached its conclusions.

To demonstrate KPMG's method, we consider a hypothetical institution that offers only bachelor's degrees and diplomas. 90% of undergraduates graduate within seven years—the expected length of their four-year program, plus three years. Meanwhile, only 40% of students taking a two-year diploma graduate within five years. KPMG would average those numbers and deem the institution's completion rate to be 65%.

This means that KPMG took the unusual decision to give equal statistical weight to the actions of a

Figure 6. Completion rates at Albertan PSIS, as an average of all program types (2011 cohort tracked until three years after their program ended), according to KPMG



hypothetical undergraduate who took academic leave, and a hypothetical micro-credential enrolee who stopped attending after one month. We believe these categories should not have been assessed identically when evaluating a PSI's graduation rates, especially because the Blue Ribbon Panel appears to have itself been confused by this. The Panel described the graph in Figure 6 as showing (emphasis ours) that not all of Alberta's PSIs succeeded at getting students to "graduate over a **seven-year period** subsequent to beginning their course of study." This suggests that the Panel misinterpreted Figure 6 as referring only to bachelor's programs. We do not fault the Panel for this; we raise this only to highlight that KPMG failed to define what it meant by "program types" for the purposes of its exercise, and wonder if the Blue Ribbon Panel may have reached a different conclusion had they been fully informed of how KPMG reached its numbers.

Another claim that warrants further inspection is KPMG's conclusion that Portage College had a 38% completion rate. The cohort that KPMG examined to reach its findings was the 2011/12 intake. 123 We have consulted this source to find Portage's numbers, presented in Figure 7. The figure shows that, while only 19% of Portage certificate students from this cohort completed their programs 'on time' (no more than one year later than their expected graduation date), around half of diploma and university transfer students completed 'on time.' While averaging these figures leads one to conclude that Portage College's 2011/12 intake had a 38.3% completion rate, this does Portage a disservice when we consider its mandate.

Figure 7. Portage College completion rates, 2011/12 cohort – <i>Government of Alberta</i>								
Institutions and Credential Types		Typical Duration of Program	Total Completion	Cumulative Total Completion Rate 3 years after Typical Duration				
Portage College	Certificate Diploma Applied & Bachelor Master Doctoral University Transfer	1 2 4 3 6	19% 46% NA NA NA 50%	53% NA				

By provincial order, Portage College has traditionally served "disadvantaged" or "underrepresented" learners. As of 2019, 19% of its students are single parents. Compared to Canadians without children, parents are 30% less likely to enrol in post-secondary education to begin with; they do enrol, they are likelier to be part-time, thus taking longer to graduate. People who did not complete high school are also well-served by Portage. 27% of its 2019 intake had left high school early. Dislike or disengagement with high school is a strong predictor of declining to pursue post-secondary education. With this context in mind, KPMG's assessment could be viewed as penalizing Portage for simply fulfilling its duty to provide a pathway to PSE to groups with historically low rates of engagement, and doing so with a fair degree of success.

Exacerbating matters is that the data KPMG used to make the conclusions in Figure 6 was misleading—of which the Ministry of Advanced Education was aware. Alberta's completion records for 2011/12's cohort had been deemed to be unrepresentative of Portage College in particular, to the extent that Portage's completion rates were assessed differently from 2013 onwards. Even so, KPMG relied upon the 2011 figures. It fell to Portage's leadership to explain, after the Blue Ribbon Panel published its findings, that many of its 2011 enrolees "had no intention of completing" a qualification, with one example being that of childcare providers taking upskilling courses to stand out in the labour market. How these enrolments were recorded by the province was therefore changed to exclude "non-program enrolments," and, as the Ministry noted, Portage's completion rates began rising "significantly starting from the 2013/14 cohort calculation." 133

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, it cannot be said that KPMG's work tells us much about graduation rates at all. Figure 6 only looks at *timely* completion, weighted to include non-program enrolments, meaning that students who did not intend to 'graduate' in the first place are still presented as having failed to do so. While it is certainly worthwhile to ask why students may be quicker to graduate from certain PSIs than others, Alberta is not an outlier on a national scale when we look specifically at graduation rates. Table 7 summarizes Statistics Canada's reporting on graduation rates of Canadian and Albertan students pursuing bachelor's or college qualifications, and how many months this takes them on average. 134

Table 7. Graduation rates and average time to graduation of Canadian and Albertan students in the 2014/15 entry cohort, by program type								
Program type	Bachelor's degree Career, technical or professional training diploma							ning diploma
	Graduation	Graduation	Graduation	Average time	Graduation	Graduation	Graduation	Average time
	rate at 4	rate at 6	rate at 8	to graduate	rate at 3	rate at 4	rate at 6	to graduate
	years	years	years	(months)	years	years	years	(months)
Alberta	27.5%	71.2%	77%	58.8	65.2%	68.9%	71.3%	28.8
Canada	38.4%	73.9%	78.6%	58.4	40.4%	51.4%	57.7%	38.4

Compared to the national average, Albertan undergraduates are notably less likely to graduate within the expected length of their program, by a gap of nearly 11 percentage points. Still, this gap closes within six and eight years to below three percentage points, meaning Alberta's longer-term outcomes are not significantly worse. The average Albertan undergraduate could still be expected to graduate in under five years, within

three months of the average Canadian undergraduate. Although KPMG suggested that colleges were among the worst offenders for poor completion rates in Figure 6, we see the opposite in Table 7. As diplomas can take between one and three years to complete, it reflects well on Alberta's colleges that Albertan diploma students are likely to graduate on time at a rate nearly 25 percentage points above the national average. Alberta's diploma graduation rates remain consistently high even after the 4 and 6 year marks, and Albertan diploma students could expect to graduate almost one full year earlier than the average Canadian.

What would an appropriate funding formula look like?

As the Blue Ribbon Panel identified, how much money Albertan PSIs received through their base operating grant had, over time, ceased to be based upon a distribution formula in any meaningful sense. How much money a PSI received was determined according to their distribution the previous year, adjusted as per need or inflation. After 2019, this was altered; PSIs are now expected to meet certain targets and standards. Those shown below are expected of every institution to which the metric applies.¹³⁶

Percentage of graduates who report being employed two years after graduation

Percentage of apprenticeship graduates who report being employed up to 18 months after graduation

Proportion of approved programs that offer workintegrated learning opportunities for students Percentage of post-secondary graduates who are satisfied with the quality of their education

Total domestic learners enrolled in approved programs at Alberta's public post-secondaries

Percentage of apprenticeship graduates who are satisfied with the quality of their education

This means that Alberta has now joined Ontario to tie PSI funding to output-based metrics. Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec distribute funding according to a per-student formula: how much money institutions receive is based on the number of students they have, sometimes with different subjects attracting different levels of investment due to cost of delivery. All other provinces use a model akin to Alberta's pre-2019.

As a students' association, we are not as well-equipped as the University of Calgary's administration to speak to the advantages and disadvantages of Alberta's current model. Nor would we be better positioned to suggest an alternative than the University and the other PSIs throughout the province. We can, however, provide the Expert Panel with our view on what certain formulas and metrics mean for students, to complement the insights that the province's institutions will no doubt themselves be providing.

The meaning of 'public' in public post-secondary

The Ministry of Advanced Education's 2025-28 fiscal plan, announced as part of Budget 2025, highlights that post-secondary institutions will self-generate 58% of their own revenue as of the 2025-26 fiscal year. This is up from 53% in the 2022-23 fiscal year. As we have already discussed, this is not because PSIs have managed to self-generate enough to make up the difference. Rather, as shares of PSI operating budgets, the decline in provincial dollars was almost completely commensurate to the increase in student dollars. Table 8 shows that the 2023/24 fiscal year marked the first time since at least 2009/10 that government funding as a combined category dipped below constituting at least 55% of the University of Calgary's operating revenue.

lable 8. Percentage of the University of Calgary's operating revenue derived each fiscal year from the Ministry of Advanced Education, federal grants, and student dollars, 2009/10 to 2023/24 (two-year intervals)								
Fiscal Year	Provincial	Federal	Combined government	Student				
2009/2010143	48.0%	11.0%	59.0%	16.4%				
2011/2012144	48.0%	9.8%	57.8%	17.2%				
2013/2014 ¹⁴⁵	47.5%	10.3%	57.8%	17.7%				
2015/2016 ¹⁴⁶	47.6%	11.0%	58.6%	17.0%				
2017/2018 ¹⁴⁷	48.6%	11.8%	60.4%	16.3%				
2019/2020148	44.3%	12.7%	57.0%	17.3%				
2021/2022149	41.5%	13.6%	55.1%	20.5%				
2023/2024 ¹⁵⁰	37.0%	13.7%	50.7%	23.8%				

Should this continue, the University will cease to fit the definition of a public PSI used by the federal government: that of a degree-granting institution which receives "50% or more of [its] operating revenue... from government appropriations,"¹⁵¹ or a university "that receives the majority of its funding from federal and provincial governments."¹⁵² Of course, these are not definitions that necessarily apply in Albertan legislation, but they do encapsulate a straightforward idea of what makes a PSI a *public* one—interpretations that, we advance, most people would understand and accept. After all, there must be a difference between publicly funded institutions that are fully "accountable to Alberta taxpayers" and thus obligated to provide for them in turn, ¹⁵³ and independent academic institutions, which run more "niche" programming and are not required to follow a government mandate despite receiving some public funds. ¹⁵⁴

While federal funding to the University of Calgary has increased each year, this has been approximately inline with inflation. ¹⁵⁵ Federal funding is also largely received to support research activities rather than general operations. If we assume, from Table 8, that federal funding of this nature could be expected to constitute at least 10% of the University's yearly revenue, we propose that the Government of Alberta should aim to make unrestricted operating funding constitute at least 45% of each public PSI's annual revenue.

The advantages to the Government, and to all Albertans, is that PSIs would receive around 55% of their funding from public monies. That share is enough to establish the comfortable continuance of government entities as the dominant stakeholder in institutions that should be accountable to the taxpayer, ensuring that Alberta's PSIs continue to operate in the public interest. This will also ensure that PSIs can afford to relinquish short-term profits or cost-cutting measures for the longer-term benefit of the provincial economy. The advantage to PSIs is that a dependable and adequate funding ratio will allow the breathing room required to chart a course for excellence rather than continuing their current route of mere maintenance.

This is not to say we believe no expectations should be placed on PSIs. Any funding in excess of this ratio could be tied to different metrics or formulae; the provincial government is also fully entitled to set the mandate of each PSI as it sees fit. Failing to meet these mandates, however, should be an opportunity for negotiation rather than grounds for automatic punishment. This is because, as we shall now discuss, output-based metrics can themselves be arbitrary and counterintuitive.

Funding: why leave it up to the institution?

"Bad" salaries are sometimes for the best

One of the performance indicators Ontario uses to assess the functioning of its PSIs is the employment earnings of graduates, two years after graduation. However, this ignores the not insignificant number of workers who may knowingly work for less than they are 'worth' simply because they are motivated to do work that they perceive to be in the public interest. Research suggests that workers who are personally motivated to conduct 'meaningful' public sector work will endure lower salaries than they might get in the private sector. Graduates who may, on paper, appear to be underachieving relative to expectations may in fact be contributing their talents in a way that saves the province money on providing the services these workers provide.

PSIs can't control the job market, and asking them to might make it worse

As of early 2025, Alberta's labour market is going through a period of high unemployment relative to the national average. 158 When PSIs are tasked with ensuring most of their graduates secure a job after leaving, this can have the unintended consequence of prompting them to only admit students they perceive as more employable. There is evidence that colleges tasked with meeting performance-based funding metrics are less likely to admit students from lower-income backgrounds. 159 Other research suggests that, the more specialist an educational program, the likelier providers are to select students they deem to be less 'challenging.' 160

While the financial outcomes of graduates who were already better positioned to attain them will look good on a paper review of a PSI's performance, this will create problems for the province in the long run. Acquiring a PSE is a shortcut to economic mobility. As such, graduates are less likely to need social assistance programs or public health services and will have fewer interactions with the justice system in their lifetime. PSIs are not adequately resourced to accommodate learners from all backgrounds, the province will ultimately pick up the tab.

Post-secondary could be a "public good" - or, at the very least, a "provincial good"

Economic arguments for generously funding universities and colleges generally rely on describing these institutions as public goods. 163,164 This would require PSIs to fit the influential definition of economist Paul Samuelson: that of a commodity that all "enjoy in common in the sense that each individual's consumption" does not detract from "any other individual's consumption of that good. 165 Of course, critics of describing education as a public good would point out that this is an optimistic view of educational resources: when a student is in a classroom, "they take up another [student's] ability to sit in the same seat. 166 While this could be overcome by increasing funding to accommodate demand, this money must come from somewhere—namely, the Albertan taxpayer.

But Alberta is in a better position than most to meet the task, having seen a record-breaking increase of working-aged newcomers¹⁶⁷ while also harbouring the youngest population in Canada.¹⁶⁸ Together, these align to serendipitously represent a generous tax yield alongside an impending surge in demand for PSE. If Alberta is looking for a skilled and dynamic workforce to satisfy the shortcomings that led to *Alberta is Calling*, it need look no further than the incoming students it stands to retain right now, if it backs its post-secondaries enough that they can compete with the rest of Canada.

As we explore later in this submission, all PSE can be valuable, and the province already receives a competitive return on investment from funding its PSIs. In that sense, PSIs 'pay for themselves': for every dollar the University of Calgary spends, Alberta gets at least \$3 back. Additionally, no targets can legislate discoveries into being, even as a complement to a PSI's existing work. Innovation often arises from research with no commercial end in mind: the internet began as a series of passion projects driven by the curiosity of academics. It is hard to imagine PSIs funding this work if they had to show immediate returns. Tying a PSI's funding to the achievement of outcomes, rather than the provision of education, shifts their mission statement from providing for Alberta's learners to providing for their own viability.

PSIs can and should be expected to report robustly on their finances and performance. However, they should also be permitted, and indeed enabled, to focus on providing high-quality academic programming without having to consider how to meet targets they are often unable to predict or meaningfully plan for. In this way, PSIs may not strictly fit the definition of a 'public good,' but they can be a provincial asset.

Analysis

We acknowledge that the Blue Ribbon Panel's work was done over just six months, during which time it was expected to review a multi-billion-dollar budget¹⁷¹ and how spending could be maximized for a population of then-4.3 million.¹⁷² Some generalizations are to be expected in this context and the report certainly raised interesting questions that invited further investigation. However, it is only by questioning a report that has been relied upon by the Ministry of Advanced Education as recently as February 2025¹⁷³ that we can demonstrate why the resultant budget cuts to PSIs were not only excessive, but perhaps unwarranted to begin with.

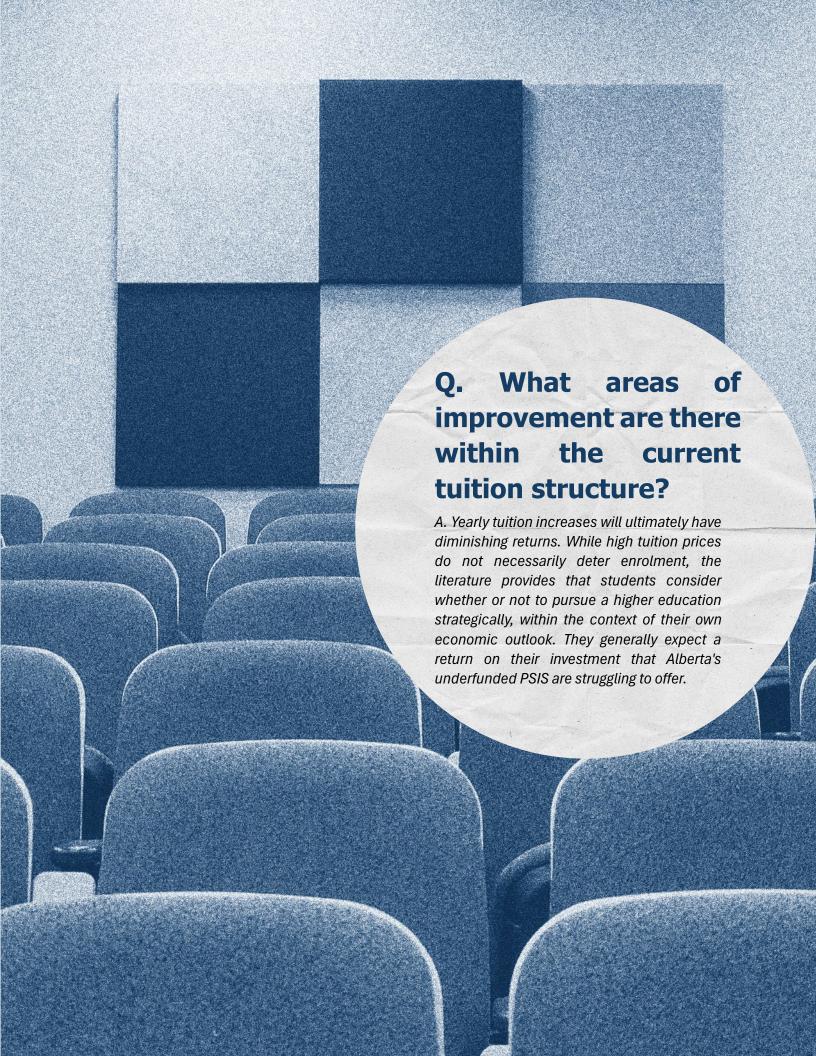
In this section, we found that Alberta's institutions were not overly reliant on provincial funding before cuts began in 2019. Rather than demonstrating the sort of complacency that might warrant a one-third cut, Alberta's universities were generating similar levels of own-source revenue to universities in the comparator provinces. Only by having much higher enrolment numbers were institutions in the comparator provinces able to rely more on tuition revenue for their operations than provincial dollars. Alberta's institutions requiring more provincial dollars is most likely unavoidable due to conditions unique to Alberta, such as a smaller student base, providing to rural areas, and starting from a position of lesser brand recognition. KPMG did not account for these factors to our satisfaction.

Furthermore, if Ontario and British Columbia's better-established and internationally recognized universities and colleges had topped out at self-generating around 30% and 15% of their revenue respectively, we see no reason to conclude Alberta's institutions had not also reached the upper limit of their ability to diversify their revenue reliably and sustainably. We have given some reasons why expecting our PSIs to rely on tuition and fees to the same degree as comparator provinces is unrealistic unless the provincial government is content with an outcome in which year-on-year increases begin to price Albertans out of PSE, or, at the very least, ensure that Albertan students continue to be among Canada's most indebted. We have also provided evidence that KPMG was incorrect to assess that Alberta's PSIs were failing to produce graduates in a timely manner; our colleges, in particular, were doing better than most.

We submit that, while it is likely accurate to conclude that Alberta was spending *more* per student than the other two provinces, that is not the same as *over*-spending. It is an unavoidable dimension of running a functional post-secondary ecosystem in Alberta. Put simply, the Government of Alberta may have an internationally competitive post-secondary ecosystem that greatly benefits Alberta over time, but costs more to fund each budget cycle; or, it may have a post-secondary ecosystem that downloads a larger share of operating costs onto its students, saving the taxpayer money in the short term at the expense of a skilled and fiscally stable local labour force later. The unfortunate reality is that it cannot have both.

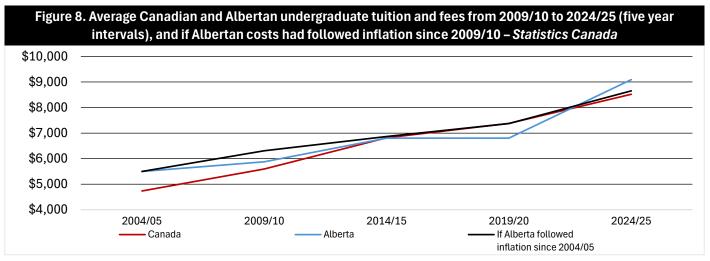
Only through renewed and steady investment would Alberta's institutions have been positioned to compete with those in other provinces, particularly those in the comparators examined by KPMG. Instead, Alberta's institutions were told to get their funds from elsewhere just months before the world shut for business due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷⁴ While intended to incentivize PSIs, which is not itself a negative thing, the funding cuts only placed them in a state of managed decline wherein their goal is not to improve but to survive. We need only look to Ontario, a province that has cut funding to its post-secondaries even more dramatically than Alberta. Now that fewer international student dollars are accessible to Ontario's PSIs, they are facing multimillion-dollar deficits as of February 2025.¹⁷⁵

Perhaps this is why higher education receives only a passing mention in the *Alberta is Calling* campaign's list of things that make our province great. After all, one promise Alberta could not make to prospective new residents was that its post-secondaries were undergoing a period of revitalization, to ensure they had any chance of competing with better-established institutions in Canada's three most-populated and most-visited provinces.



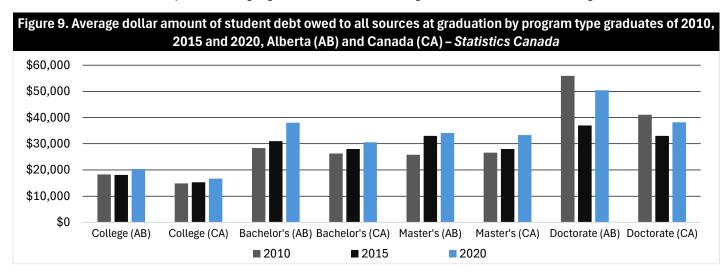
What is the current tuition structure like for students?

Pursuing an education in Alberta is expensive. 90% of students at the University of Calgary feel tuition and fees should be the UCSU's top advocacy priority, 177 likely because Albertan undergraduates can now expect to pay 7% more in tuition and fees than the average Canadian. 178 Yet Alberta was not always this pricy. Figure 8 shows that the average undergraduate's bill rose an average of 1.6 percentage points per year between 2004 and 2019, generally in-line or below local inflation. 179,180 Budget cuts in 2019 precipitated the average rising 34% by 2024—7 percentage points annually—to the effect of outpacing inflation.



While college costs are not centrally tracked, Statistics Canada reports that the revenue of Alberta's colleges climbed 31% between 2019/20 and 2022/23¹⁸¹ despite seeing a 2% drop in enrolment in this time. It will be of cold comfort to graduate students that Statistics Canada does not report their programs as having seen a comparable jump in cost, as they will have paid for undergraduate programs themselves.

Few Albertans finance their education independently. 85% of Alberta Student Aid recipients would not have been able to attend PSE at all without borrowing money, 183 informing Figure 9's finding that Albertan students of all four major PSE pedigrees can expect to graduate with larger debts than the national average. 184 As of 2020, undergraduates and doctorate students will owe a respective \$7,000 and \$12,200 more than the average Canadian. Comparing only Albertan graduates of 2020 to 2015, master's graduates owed 3% more than their earlier counterparts; college graduates, 13%; undergraduates, 23%; and PhD graduates, 36%.



Alberta Student Aid already relies on debt more than other provinces

In 2021, the provincial government acknowledged that Alberta Student Aid's grants to loans ratio might benefit from revision. *Alberta 2030* articulated the government's aim to prioritize grants and bursaries in future student aid disbursements. Despite this, only 15% of aid disbursements for the 2023/24 academic year took the form of grants or bursaries. While this was up from 2022/23, when non-repayable aid constituted 13% of all

disbursements, it was still down from 17% in 2021/22. By comparison, Quebec, Manitoba and Saskatchewan respectively distributed 86%, 187 22%, 188 and 30% 189 of their 2023/24 student aid budget as non-repayable aid. This is not to say Quebec's model is suitable universally, but at the very least, Alberta's fellow prairie provinces devote more generous shares of their budgets to keeping students out of debt.

Although interest was removed from federal student loans in April 2023, the provincial portion of loans a student receives from Alberta Student Aid still accrue interest. Alberta does offer a twelve-month grace period upon graduation, double that of the federal period, in which interest does not accrue and repayment is not required. However, Albertans are still missing out compared to their peers elsewhere. Interest does not accrue on loans from Newfoundland and Labrador, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba, and Prince Edward Island. Furthermore, Alberta Student Aid recipients who took out loans before July 2023 will pay interest according to the prime rate plus 1 percent, while later recipients pay the prime rate only.

For a lucky few, Alberta Student Aid offers 51 scholarships, of which undergraduates are eligible for 39.¹⁹⁴ Some require the recipient to fulfil narrow conditions, such as graduating from a certain high school or winning a scholarship previously. (After excluding those with the narrowest eligibility criteria, the average value of Alberta Student Aid's undergraduate scholarships stands at around \$2,000.¹⁹⁵)

Students need to work to supplement their loans, which is difficult in Alberta

Student aid offerings are often insufficient for a student's living costs. Alberta Student Aid's monthly housing allowance of \$775¹⁹⁶ would not cover most rentals on the private market, where a single room could be expected to cost \$875 a month. Students therefore commonly supplement their aid packages with work. Averaging responses to the UCSU's annual surveys between 2019 and 2024 suggest that 55% of UCalgary undergraduates will seek work during the academic year, rising to 71% during the summer. They will do so in a province with Canada's joint-lowest minimum wage and, as Table 9 shows, a rate of summer youth unemployment (ages 15-24) than has generally trended higher than the national average for a decade.

Table 9. Unemployment rate of Canadian and Alberta youth in the July of each year, 2014 to 2024 – Statistics Canada											
Youth unemployment rate (persons 15-24)											
July	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Alberta	8.7%	10.7%	14.8%	12.5%	12.4%	12.8%	26.1%	12.9%	10.1%	13.1%	13.8%
Canada	12.7%	12.9%	13.0%	10.6%	10.5%	11.3%	24.1%	12.0%	9.0%	10.3%	14.0%

We note that youth unemployment was consistently above the national average between 2019 and 2023, which coincided with the elimination of the Summer Temporary Employment Program. A wage subsidy scheme that connected students to summer work opportunities, this provided 3,000 jobs at a cost of \$3,333 per student.²⁰¹ Its spiritual successor, the Work-Integrated Learning Industry Voucher initiative, provided just 650 jobs over three years for a cost of \$5,000 per participant.²⁰²

Interestingly, the literature suggests that students who work part-time hours have better grades^{203,204,205} and labour market outcomes after graduation.^{206,207} However, these impacts diminish the more hours a student works, with those who work over 20 hours a week experiencing poorer academic attainment and a reduced likelihood of graduation.^{208,209} As the cost of higher education scales, Albertan students will have to work more hours, to the detriment of the very studies they are working to pay for.

Are Alberta's tuition and fee regulations fair to both students and institutions?

Alberta's institutions determine and alter how much they charge students in-line with the Tuition and Fees Regulation (Alta Reg 228/2018).²¹⁰ Below, we summarize the four main fee types that Albertan PSIs can levy, and for what purposes. We derive the language used from the Alberta Tuition Framework, provincial guidelines that exist to help PSIs interpret the Regulation.²¹¹ Since operating funding cuts began in 2019, many institutions have upped the cost of tuition and mandatory non-instructional fees (MNIFs) each year.²¹² MNIFs can go up as much as a PSI sees fit, so long as they do not exceed 'cost-recovery' levels; supplementary fees are unregulated. Though the government capped annual institutional tuition increases at an average of 2% in 2023,²¹³ PSIs can still raise the cost of single programs by up to 10%.²¹⁴

Tuition fees	Mandatory non-instructional fees (MNIFs)
and services that facilitate their program. Each year, institutions	Students pay for goods and services that are untethered to a specific program, but still deemed important for their studies, via <i>MNIFs</i> . These fees may provide for on-campus services such as health or athletic centres.
Exceptional tuition increases (ETIs)	Supplementary fees

Exceptional Tuition Increases

Institutions can effectively circumvent restrictions on tuition hikes by applying for exceptional tuition increases (ETIs), which they can seek once per program every 5 years. The Ministry has exercised its right to refuse ETI proposals—including a blanket refusal in 2024, expressly citing concerns of affordability for students²¹⁵—but also approved some large ones. In 2022, the Universities of Calgary and Alberta got the green light to increase tuition for some business, engineering, law, and medicine programs at rates ranging from 16% to over 100%.^{216,217} While the Framework states that an ETI's purpose cannot be to offset budget cuts or merely maintain existing standards, it is hard to see how ETIs could be anything but in the wake of ongoing funding cuts. Further doubt is cast on the legitimacy of ETIs as a distinct mechanism from general tuition increases when we consider that, between 2019 and 2022, the Universities of Calgary and Alberta had seen their base provincial funding cumulatively reduced by 18%²¹⁸ and 33%²¹⁹ respectively.

It will likely not surprise the Expert Panel to hear that UCSU, as student representatives, viewed these ETIs unfavourably. As an organization with our own businesses, however, we are sympathetic to the University's situation. It was not only tasked with finding alternative revenue streams equivalent to 18% of its operating budget in just three years, but was ordered to do so just months before the COVID-19 pandemic saw many potential alternative revenue streams close for business in December 2019. Still, this is precisely why we believe it is implausible that an Albertan institution could genuinely demonstrate that changes in circumstances since 2019 had no influence whatsoever on any decision made to pursue an ETI.

Under existing provincial guidelines, ETIs cannot be sought to maintain standards or compensate for budget shortfalls. Therefore, Alberta's institutions should have no reason to apply for, or be granted, ETIs during a year in which they simultaneously seek to raise general tuition prices across the board. Seeking both at once suggests that their finances are not so stable that an ETI would only ever serve to improve one program instead of meeting fiscal challenges. We appreciate that there are legitimate reasons to increase tuition for the sake of fiscal sustainability, just as there are legitimate reasons to increase tuition for the sake of improving a program. It would be fairer to students if institutions were not permitted to 'double dip.'

Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees

According to the Alberta Tuition Framework, a mandatory non-instructional fee (MNIF) can be charged for "related goods and services [that] many students want and need," where students show "a willingness to pay for them." How the money raised is spent must be presented in a "transparent fashion," as it is "important for students to be able to understand the exact goods and services" for which they paid. No guidance is provided to institutions on *how* they should communicate the nature of MNIFs to students, or what data—if any—they must present as evidence that these fees are indeed necessary for services that "many" students want and need. They therefore interpret their duty to explain MNIFs 'transparently' to their students differently.

Some institutions provide performance metrics. The University of Alberta is one example. Its 2021/22 MNIF report provides that the Records, Registration and Convocation Services unit managed graduation ceremonies for 9,150 students that year—a service we would describe as innately of value to "many" students. This information is useful to students to help them decide if they believe any given service is worth the price tag. While the University of Alberta's 2023-24 MNIF report is not yet public, we understand that this edition also provides how much an office spent on *indirect costs* (expenses such as utilities or cleaning) and direct costs (expenses such as salaries or equipment). Students can therefore see the total cost of each

MNIF-funded office and discern which cost more or less over time. The University of Calgary's MNIF reports do the same and take the further step of explaining how the University calculates indirect costs.²²⁴

Still, not all institutions go to the trouble of publishing expenses by office. Mount Royal University's MNIF report takes the approach of presenting students with totals alone. For example, students were informed that the total cost of service delivery for units under the Recreation and Athletics fee went over-budget for the 2023/24 year, reaching \$6.9 million.²²⁵ The report does not say *which* of the services provided for by this MNIF (such as the University's sports teams, or perhaps fitness centre) went over-budget. Mount Royal does at least publish both the budget and actuals of a fee in dollar amounts, which others do not.

All three of these universities' reports are more forthcoming than SAIT: its website describes the purpose of each MNIF in short blurbs. One such description is that its student technology fee goes towards "technology to enhance the student experience";²²⁶ no further information is provided. While we appreciate that it may be difficult to provide eye-catching metrics for IT, the University of Alberta's MNIF report at least provides that its own IT department is responsible for managing 5,500 wireless access points: a simple metric that helps students to understand the importance of a department's work.²²⁷

Overall, most Albertan PSIs do not publish anything close to the detail students require to determine whether the MNIFs they pay go towards funding services that "many" students genuinely want or need. We recognize that there will be legitimate reasons why fees may go up, but first, students must fully understand the product they are being asked to pay for, so that they can decide if they truly want to 'buy.'

Program-length tuition guarantees

International students receive a guaranteed tuition rate for the standard length of their program.²²⁸ During the Expert Panel's consultation with some Albertan student leaders, the prospect of extending this guarantee to domestic students was discussed. This would certainly bolster stability for future Albertan students. However, we consider this potential practice in the context of the current economic landscape.

When inflation scales, enrolees embarking on a four-year program will be more valuable in year one than they will in year four. This is something post-secondaries will keep in mind while budgeting. To ensure they receive the maximum amount of revenue from any given student during the usual 'lifetime' of an enrolment, PSIs will have every incentive to accept students who can comfortably 'pay their way' over students who cannot.²²⁹ The cost of providing services to recruit and retain students from lower-income backgrounds can cost up to a third more than providing them for higher-income students.²³⁰ Therefore, an unintended consequence of tuition guarantees may be that Albertans from disadvantaged backgrounds who stand to benefit the most from a post-secondary credential socioeconomically may struggle to find a PSI willing or able to accommodate them.

Furthermore, while the issue of administrative bloat in Canadian PSE may be overstated—as we explore later in this submission—we do not disagree with the heart of the criticism PSIs receive for perceived overspend on this area. We, too, believe a PSI's academic mission is paramount. Tiering domestic students, with separate intakes paying different rates of tuition on different schedules, will redirect valuable administrative hours to billing that could have been spent on supporting academic operations.

Finally, tiering students stands to cause problems depending on the length of the guarantee. Following 2019, the Faculty of Arts at the University of Calgary has seen a 25% cut to its budget.²³¹ The UCSU has heard from Arts students who have struggled to enrol in classes they require to graduate—sometimes delaying their ability to complete on time—to the extent that we recently ran a survey to identify the full scale of availability issues.²³² Though the Faculty has tried to ease bottlenecks by doubling class sizes, the University only has 11 learning spaces that can accommodate over 200 students.²³³ We would not be surprised to learn that other Albertan PSIs are struggling to physically provide enough classrooms for students to graduate on time. It could also be true that some students will need to take a year out of education on grounds such as health.

Whatever the reason, some students will take five or more years to complete a program through no fault of their own. A program-length tuition guarantee would need to account for this issue. It could be the student who loses out, when they must effectively pay for all the cumulative tuition increases they skipped in their fifth year anyway. It could be the institution that loses out through providing for cohorts whose tuition did not keep pace with inflation. In either case—whether it is the student who takes on more debt than expected, or the PSI struggling to pay its day-to-day bills—it is Alberta that loses out in the long run.

At what point does raising tuition have diminishing returns?

As the *Post-Secondary Learning Act* describes, an "affordable" post-secondary system is "one in which finances do not limit any Albertan" from enrolling. Conventional wisdom suggests that students from lower-income backgrounds would be the demographic with the largest sensitivity to PSE price increases, but this relationship is more complex than a simple matter of price.

When faced with high tuition, low-income students perform a cost-benefit analysis

The cost of higher education can certainly be a deterrent. Recent analysis by the Government of Alberta identified a negative relationship between high tuition and enrolment, particularly among "consistently underrepresented learners" from low-income or minority backgrounds. ²³⁴ Yet this is not definitive. Ontario saw no large fall in enrolment after it deregulated tuition for professional programs in 1998, even among students from low-income backgrounds. ²³⁵ What the data did find was a small drop in enrolment by middle-income students. ²³⁶ A 2009 empirical analysis similarly found middle-income Canadians to be the most responsive to price changes, estimating that a \$1,000 tuition hike could reduce enrolment by 2.5 to 5 percent. ²³⁷

How students define affordability may therefore be tied less to the cost of tuition itself than their perception of a price as value for money. Indeed, Ontario's Higher Education Quality Council found in a 2010 study that low-income students were generally willing to pay for PSE if they believed in its long-term benefits, only showing less interest in applying for student loans when tuition was "relatively high"—defined by the study as \$6,000 or more.²³⁸ The Council nonetheless concluded that a \$1,000 reduction in the cost of PSE would result in larger net participation among low-income students than high-income ones.²³⁹

Furthermore, lower-income students are likelier to enrol in PSE if they have a long-term plan, suggesting that personal goals can outweigh concerns about costs. A 2020 study of American high schoolers from low-income backgrounds found that those who wanted to pursue a bachelor's were likelier to enrol in degree programs than two-year credentials, even when they did not expect to receive financial aid.²⁴⁰ Students also respond positively to being able to plan ahead on terms they view favourably. A 2008 Canadian analysis estimated that just by having access to knowledge of funding opportunities, a student's likelihood of enrolment rose by 7%.²⁴¹ Furthermore, a study of all four-year public universities in the U.S. found that high tuition influenced students who were more reliant on student aid to apply for less 'prestigious' schools,²⁴² adding credence to the notion that local tuition hikes prompt these students to conduct a cost-benefit analysis and change their plans.

That is not to say financial aid plays no role at all. Between 2000 and 2019, Canada's federal non-repayable aid budget grew from \$82.9 million to \$1.6 billion, and the budget for loans grew from \$1.55 billion to \$3.6 billion. 243,244 This coincided with enrolment rising across all socioeconomic groups from 2001 to 2018. The rate of growth among youth from households in the lowest income quintile (+11.9 percentage points) outpaced enrolment among youth from the highest income quintile (+6 percentage points). Still, while financial aid is important, it is not the only factor considered by prospective students. Many low-income students are still willing to take on a reasonable level of debt if they believe the return on investment is worthwhile. Alberta must therefore consider whether its PSIs offer a level of value that justifies the cost of attendance.

An Albertan education is a diminishing advantage

When assessing whether students deem Alberta's PSIs to be value for money, we must note that, since 2007, Alberta has lost more students to other provinces than it gains.²⁴⁷ 14,000 left Alberta in 2018/19²⁴⁸—equivalent to 89% of Mount Royal's total enrolment for the 2023/24 academic year²⁴⁹—of which 4,000 went to British Columbia and 5,000 went to Ontario.²⁵⁰ This pattern cannot be solely attributed to cost, for, as we have shown, expense is not always a deterrent. This phenomenon is unlikely to come down to availability either. Alberta has almost the same number of colleges as British Columbia, and two colleges became universities at the same time Alberta shifted from being a net importer of PSE students to net exporter.²⁵¹

Rather, we suspect that many of these students concluded that the grass is greener elsewhere. As discussed earlier, Alberta's universities do not enjoy the same prestige as those in the provinces poaching its students. U.S. surveys suggest that two-thirds of college students across all income brackets evaluate how PSIs fare in national rankings when deciding where to study.²⁵² This can deter not only strategically minded lower- and middle-income students, but high-income students as well. This demographic may be the least sensitive to tuition hikes, but they are the most sensitive to reputation.²⁵³ While fewer rankings in the vein of *Maclean's* or *Times Higher Education* are dedicated to colleges, we need only consider that, while British Columbia has

just one more public college than Alberta (10 to 11²⁵⁴), it has over 32,000 more college students as of 2022/23,²⁵⁵ suggesting that other student types are also voting with their feet.

One might expect that where Alberta loses on prestige, it should be winning on affordability. Yet its undergraduates pay 7% more than the national average and 20% more than in British Columbia. While college fees are not centrally tracked, we can see how prices have changed at the college level by looking to one of Alberta's largest, SAIT. A first-year welding technician who would have paid \$5,059 in tuition in 2017 will pay \$8,100 as of 2024. Had the 2017 cost followed inflation, they would have been charged \$6,194.

While Ontario's universities are 7% costlier than Alberta's, the province still has a wider variety of choice to capture budget-conscious students. Indeed, one study of prospective Ontario university enrolees found that out-of-province students were nearly twice as sensitive to tuition prices as Ontarian high school students. Polling from 2024 found that 63% of Albertans were influenced by the price tag when selecting their school and program. Its PSE system also enjoys a stronger perception of prestige, which can capture students less concerned with cost. Other potentially relevant factors include Ontario's wider 'brand recognition' and its colleges being based in vibrant urban centres at a time when more Albertans are looking to move to cities.

Higher tuition squeezes Albertan students in the middle...

The question remains as to why tuition hikes seemingly have a more chilling effect on middle-income enrolees than their lower-income peers. Greater availability of non-repayable student aid is no doubt a factor. Between 2001 and 2019, federal aid budgets grew alongside PSE enrolment rates nationally,²⁶² and Table 10 shows that Alberta was no exception.²⁶³ Our province saw particular enrolment growth in this time from the 40% of households in the province with the lowest income. Between 2019 and 2022, however, enrolment rates fell slightly among youth from all but the bottom and fourth income quintiles.²⁶⁴ Operating funding cuts that began in 2019—and the subsequent rise in tuition—may be one of the reasons for this reversal, but it will not be the only one. PSE enrolment nationally began declining in 2019,²⁶⁵ suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic played a larger part in deterring prospective enrolees.

Table 10. Post-secondary enrolment rates of 19-year-old Albertans by income quintile in 2001, 2019, and 2022 – Statistics Canada							
	Income quintile and enrolment rate						
Year	Bottom	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth		
2001	29.4%	38.3%	45.6%	54.0%	66.8%		
2019	31.4%	42.8%	48.6%	55.6%	67.6%		
2022	31.5%	42.0%	48.2%	56.3%	66.2%		

However, crediting this decline to temporary pressures does not necessarily absolve Alberta's tuition model. If economic challenges associated with the pandemic, such as large and frequent price hikes, ²⁶⁶ did cause a modest drop in national enrolment, Alberta's post-2019 tuition model is uniquely positioned to continue deterring students on the grounds of cost. We refer to our earlier finding that Albertan undergraduates will pay more than the national average as of the 2024/25 academic year, and that that the cost of Albertan colleges and universities broadly outpaced inflation even during the pandemic years. We then consider Table 11, which shows that PSE engagement among Alberta's youth of all socioeconomic backgrounds was lower than in other provinces and the national average, even during the country-wide PSE 'boom' from 2001 to 2019. ²⁶⁷

Table 11. Post-secondary enrolment rates of young Canadians by location (2001, 2019, 2022) – Statistics Canada							
	Location and enrolment rate						
Year	Ontario	Quebec	British Columbia	Alberta	Canada		
2001	51.6%	39.0%	49.2%	44.6%	46.7%		
2019	67.3%	57.9%	56.3%	49.5%	59.5%		
2022	65.3%	57.5%	56.5%	48.8%	58.3%		

Alberta's enrolment rate rose only 5 percentage points during this time, then dropped 0.7 points between 2019 and 2022. By comparison, Ontario and Quebec saw much larger enrolment increases of 16 and 19 points during the pre-2019 era, making their enrolment declines of below 2 points between 2019 and 2022 far less consequential on a provincial level than the change seen in Alberta. British Columbia did not see a fall in enrolment after 2019. That is to say, every lost student is more serious for Alberta than for other parts of

Canada. It is possible that Alberta saw a drop in enrolment among youth from middle-income backgrounds not only because these Albertans experienced post-pandemic economic pressures, but because they were successively deterred by a mismatch between the perceived value of local PSIs and their tuition rates, which would require these students to take on sizeable debts. This would explain Alberta's slow PSE growth generally and why 2019 was a 'last straw.'

Given the evidence that middle-income students are more sensitive to tuition hikes under certain circumstances, it appears that these students are being increasingly pushed into a 'squeezed middle.' A phrase popularized in Britain in 2011,²⁶⁸ the term has come to describe a socioeconomic group whose income is too low to comfortably maintain them, but not so low that they qualify for social assistance.²⁶⁹ Occupying the squeezed middle can uniquely affect how Albertans experience provincial and national student aid programs. Dependent students applying for federal aid will find that their parents' earnings decide their eligibility for grants or loans,²⁷⁰ and while Alberta Student Aid "does not expect" that a student's parents will help pay for their education by default, undergraduates are disqualified from most provincial grants.²⁷¹ Given that 63% of Alberta's domestic students are undergraduates,²⁷² any provincial aid received by the average middle-class Albertan will be a loan that eventually comes due with interest.²⁷³

Middle-income prospective students therefore have one of three options in Alberta: decline to enrol at all; enrol, and accept mounting debts, often at the beginning of their professional lives; or enrol, and—if they are fortunate enough to do so—ask their family for help.

...but Albertan families are being squeezed by tuition hikes, too

Traditionally, students who are fortunate enough to rely on familial help to offset the cost of their education would have done so. Polls of Canadian parents conducted in 2010 and 2024 found that over 80% intended to help their child pay for higher education. However, reviewing the finances of middle-income Canadians indicates that the Bank of Mom and Dad may be unable to offer the generous lines of credit it once did.

Where aid programs tie a student's eligibility to parental income, their family's other fiscal obligations are not considered, even though Canadian households owe \$1.85 in debt to every dollar of disposable income—higher than the G7 average of \$1.25.²⁷⁶ 52% of Albertans are living paycheque to paycheque compared to 47% of Canadians; 38% of Albertans describe their finances as poor.²⁷⁷ The result is that ordinary families are ill-prepared for, and often misjudge, the modern cost of PSE. Although 82% of Albertan parents feel PSE is costlier now than it was when they left high school,²⁷⁸ 31% did not feel informed enough to try guessing the inclusive cost of a four-year program in a 2024 poll.²⁷⁹ Those who did reached an average estimate of \$69,000,²⁸⁰ \$9,000 shy of Alberta's \$78,000 forecast.²⁸¹

As of 2020, 31% of Canadian youth under 17 years of age had no savings put aside for their PSE, partly because 12% of parents expect they will be able to pay "when the time comes." We cannot say if this 12% includes high earners with enough liquidity to pay once their child enrols, but Table 12 illustrates that even parents earning \$150,000 or more who maintained a Registered Education Savings Plan (RESP) as of the end of 2019 had saved an average \$24,034, under a third of the \$78,000 forecast. 283

Table 12. Percentage of Canadian youth under 17 with savings put aside for their higher education; percentage of youth with savings who have those savings in a RESP; and average value of their RESP, all as of the end of 2019 – Statistics Canada

Child's household income bracket	With any savings	Savers with RESP	Average RESP value as of end of 2019
<\$39,999	48.4%	75.0%	\$8,454
<i>\$45,000-\$75,</i> 999	60.8%	78.7%	\$8,560
<i>\$76,000-\$104,</i> 999	70.0%	85.5%	\$11,662
\$105,000-\$149,999	80.2%	87.1%	\$15,027
\$150,000+	86.6%	91.0%	\$24,034

In any case, even families with realistic expectations may struggle to meet them. Real estate comprises 55% of the average Canadian family's wealth and mortgages constitute their largest debt, limiting their liquidity.²⁸⁴ While households saved considerably during the first years of the pandemic, this owed to reduced consumer

spending that did not endure into the post-pandemic economy.²⁸⁵ Between 2019 and 2024, the grocery bill for a family of four rose 26%²⁸⁶ and the average rent for an apartment rose 31%,²⁸⁷ so it is little wonder that households in all but the two highest income quintiles experienced negative net savings in 2023 and 2024.²⁸⁸

As PSE's debt burden spreads across families, so does the mental impact. Just as 70% of Canadian students feel anxious at the prospect of checking their bank balance, 289 70% of parents worry about the amount of debt their child will incur. 290 64% report feeling as though they will have failed as a parent if their child graduates with sizeable debts. 291 Table 13 provides further insight into parents' views nationally and provincially, 292 and students are aware of the impact their education has on their loved ones. 81% of Canadian and Albertan students polled by Embark in 2024 agree they are "forever grateful" for their parents' help, 293 and nearly half of the respondents to a 2020 *Macleans'* student survey identified their relationship with a parent as the most important in their life. 294 (Relentless cynics among us may suspect that repolling would result in an even higher sweep for parents, as 28% of respondents awarded this title to romantic partners. 295)

Table 13. Percentage of parents (Canadian and Albertan) who agreed with PSE-related remarks – Embark, 2024							
	Canadian	Albertan					
It's harder now for students to afford PSE than when I was a child.	82%	87%					
I had to stop saving for my child's PSE due to the cost of living.	46%	58%					
I do not believe my child would be able to afford their education without my help.	70%	73%					
Saving for my child's education can be overwhelming.	68%	79%					
I would postpone my retirement in order to help my child pay for their PSE.	66%	69%					

Would increasing loan limits help?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, students globally respond better to non-repayable student aid. The introduction of needs-based grants improved PSE participation by a respective 4 and 5 percentage points in the United Kingdom (among students receiving a £1,000 grant)²⁹⁶ and France (among students receiving a €1,500 grant).²⁹⁷ In the United States, full merit-based scholarships improved retention rates in the state of Nebraska by 13%²⁹⁸ and a \$1,000 merit-based grant increased PSE participation among middle- to high-income students in Georgia by 4%.²⁹⁹ In contrast, research from Japan³⁰⁰ and the U.S.³⁰¹ found that increasing loan limits moved enrolment rates by below a percentage point—but the American study estimated that cutting tuition by \$1,500, equivalent to the introduction of a grant, boosted enrolment by 6 points.³⁰²

Yet it is not only enrolment that is negatively impacted by how much debt a student must take on to receive a post-secondary education. As we shall address in the following subsections, student debt has a negative effect on all of the below, in order of their immediate consequences:

For students... For the province...

Graduation rates Post-graduation stability Public debt burden Economic diversification

How student debt harms graduation rates: broke students don't make it

The literature suggests that students remain conscious of their financial situation throughout their studies, and those who enrol after receiving aid are equally sensitive to losing it. A 2018 meta-analysis of 42 studies on the effects of grants on persistence found that receiving aid improved the probability of completion by up to 3 percentage points, and an additional \$1,000 offered in aid improved year-to-year persistence by 1.2 percentage points.³⁰³ Further illustrating this principle is the case study of the HOPE scholarship, a merit-based grant offered by the states of Georgia and Tennessee. The scholarship is designed to be easier to earn than keep,³⁰⁴ and it is mainly utilized by higher- and middle-income students, because eligible low-income students must exhaust other avenues of aid first.³⁰⁵ In Georgia, enrolment rose 4% among students who received it;³⁰⁶ in Tennessee, students who lost the grant were 7% less likely to stay enrolled.³⁰⁷

Our second example concerns the findings of a 2008 analysis of American college enrolments, which compared states that began offering merit-based scholarships with states that offered none. Starting from a graduation rate of 27%, the introduction of merit-based grants improved degree attainment by an average 4%, rising to 7% among students from racial minority backgrounds. Where scholarship recipients had already intended to go to college, persistence rose between 5% and 11%, suggesting that financial stability becomes more important to students the longer their studies continue. Other research supports the idea that students consider their individual fiscal outlook strategically when deciding whether to further their education. A 2022

study of high-achieving Italian youth found they were less likely to enrol in PSE during a period of economic stagnation despite qualifying for generous aid packages,³⁰⁹ echoing a Canadian study from 2010 which identified that students from low-income backgrounds retain their sensitivity to tuition even when they are academic high achievers.³¹⁰

How student debt harms graduate stability: four-year degrees, lifetime of repayment

Most students who take loans borrow from government sources, affording us an understanding of how much debt Albertans bear. We first consider federal student loan disbursements to Albertan students, for which the most recent data available is from 2022/23. Table 14 shows the estimated number of domestic students enrolled, on provincial and national levels,³¹¹ as well as how many students in each province received disbursements from the Canada Student Loans program and Canada Student Grants program.³¹²

Table 14. Canada Student Loans and Grants disbursements for the 2022/23 academic year, by number of domestic students and as a percentage of total estimated domestic student enrolment – *Statistics Canada*

	Number of Canada Student Loans or Grants recipients	Number of Canada Student Loans (CSL) recipients	Canada Student Grants (CSG) Recipients	Estimated enrolment for 2022/23 academic year	Percentage of estimated enrolment in receipt of CSL	Percentage of estimated enrolment in receipt of CSG
Alberta	140,597	125,030	116,637	175,698	71.2%	66.4%
Canada	681,815	565,848	557,684	1,738,095	32.5%	32%
B.C.	65,106	57,763	52,065	215,835	26.7%	24%
Ontario	393,825	310,924	321,520	679,452	45.7%	47.3%

Statistics Canada's PSE enrolment numbers are likely conservative; however, just as there were likely to be more enrolments in Alberta than reported for the 2022/23 academic year, so were there more likely to be more enrolments everywhere. This table can still be taken to suggest that an outsized number of Albertan students rely on federal aid compared to their national counterparts and in two provinces similar to Alberta.

An outsized reliance on federal student aid translates into an outsized debt burden. The average debt owed to the federal government by Albertans at the point of graduation was \$12,076 in 2018/19 and \$14,906 in 2022/23—an increase of 23.4% in just four years.³¹³ The national average grew 13% in this time, below the 11% growth seen in both British Columbia and Ontario.³¹⁴ Overall, Albertan students took out \$842.6 million in loans from the federal government in 2022/23, up from \$503.3 million in 2018/19.³¹⁵ This represents a 67% rise in demand, even though estimated enrolment for domestic students in Alberta *declined* 2% in this time.³¹⁶

We now consider provincial loan disbursements, and how a rising number of Albertans are supplementing their federal loans via Alberta Student Aid. Provincial loans, unlike federal ones, accrue interest, 317 meaning they are more impactful to a graduate's long-term fiscal stability. Table 15 summarizes some pertinent data from Alberta Student Aid's annual reports, spanning the fiscal years of 2011/12 up to 2021/22. 318

Table 15. Comparative datasets from Alberta Student Aid's Statistical Profiles reports								
		repay loar	time required to ns (in years) as of t fiscal years	Alberta Student Loan default rate by fiscal year		Median annual income of borrowers two years after graduation by class		
Fiscal year	Number of full-time learners	Fiscal year	Average time to repay (years) as of fiscal year	Fiscal year	Percentage of outstanding loan dollars in default	Graduating class	Median annual income	
2015/16	68,613	2015/16	9.4	2015/16	5.8%	2011/12	\$65,285	
2018/19	84,681	2018/19	9.6	2018/19	5.3%	2015/16	\$61,340	
2021/22	105,067	2021/22	10.1	2021/22	7.9%	2019/20	\$58,656	

As the table shows, despite estimated domestic enrolment in Alberta falling by 2% between 2018/19 and 2022/23,³¹⁹ the number of full-time learners applying for provincial aid grew by 24%. As applicant numbers grew, so did the percentage of owed dollars in default. The average number of years an outstanding loan would take to pay off rose by only 2% between 2015/16 and 2018/19, then grew by 5.2% between 2018/19 and 2021/22. Almost concurrently, the median annual income that student borrowers could expect to receive two years after graduation declined by 4.3%—meaning that Albertan students were taking out larger loans while their future earnings capacity, and thus the speed with which they can repay their debt, diminished.

Student debt hurts a graduate's fiscal health long after their studies are done. While we cannot say to what extent student loans played a part, it is interesting to note that the share of provincial loan dollars in default rising by 2.6 percentage points between 2018/19 and 2021/22 coincided with the share of Albertans under the age of 30 filing for insolvency rising from 9% to 10.43%. 320,321 The longer student debt factors into a graduate's fiscal planning, the longer their economic participation is paralyzed. One 2017 poll of graduates across Canada found that 77% of Albertans regretted taking out student loans, and they were also likelier than the national average to delay marrying, saving for emergencies, or preparing for retirement due to their debt. Albertans were the likeliest of all to cut back on discretionary spending, with 66% sacrificing on retail and recreation compared to 53% of Canadians. A more recent poll (2020) found that 85% of Prairies-based respondents expressed regret over taking out student loans.

Beyond their fiscal health, student debt impacts a graduate's personal wellbeing. The results of one study suggest that simply owing student debt is positively correlated to increased stress across all socioeconomic groups, and the greater a graduate's sense of socioeconomic instability, the more their having debt correlates with depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Another analysis found that people with student debt had higher risks of heart disease and inflammation even after accounting for variables including education, income, and having other debts. Some evidence suggests student debt may even correlate negatively with sleep duration, even after controlling for other socioeconomic factors. From an economic standpoint, unhealthy workers are not productive ones, and there are negative implications for unnecessary burdens on Alberta's public healthcare services.

As per our earlier review of the literature, students make choices about PSE strategically in the context of their individual outlook. Complicating this decision is that PSE will no longer seem optional for many: 79% of Albertan students feel completing PSE has become necessary to do "anything," and a rising share of employers seem to agree. Anywhere between 50% to 75% of job openings in Alberta, Ontario and British Columbia will soon expect credentialled candidates. 29,330,331 Canadian employers therefore seem to share the views of their counterparts south of the border. 80% of American employers value any type of PSE, as having a qualification can telegraph that an applicant possesses additional transferable skills. Choosing to pursue or decline a higher education is therefore no longer a simple matter of preference for Alberta's future economic actors, but adding insult to injury is that, as Table 15 suggests, the debt students must take on to attend PSE no longer translates neatly into favourable labour market outcomes.

How student debt harms the province: an unnecessary dimension of public debt

In this submission, we have explored how cuts to Alberta's PSE spending since 2019 prompted PSIs to plug the holes in their budgets almost entirely by raising prices for students. The result is that Alberta's students are some of Canada's most indebted, largely due to a reliance on loans, including loans from the provincial government itself. This, we argue, introduces an entirely avoidable dimension of public debt risk.

Offering a greater number of loans increases the likelihood of defaults where funding PSIs directly would eliminate the involvement of students as a conduit for post-secondary funding. Indeed, we showed in Figure 19 that the share of outstanding Alberta Student Aid dollars in default has risen with the number of applicants. The Government of Alberta may profit from the interest it charges student debtors in the short term, but the province will assume more long-term financial liability than it would by simply redirecting its ballooning student aid budget into PSI operating budgets. Instead, the province is effectively using these funds to support its PSIs anyway, as Alberta Student Aid loans end up in those institutions' coffers—but after passing these dollars through students first, indebting plenty of Alberta's youth at the beginning of their professional lives.

That is, of course, if Albertans stay in the province at all. Alberta's PSE system is smaller than those of similar provinces, and Alberta can expect to lose more students than it attracts. Alberta therefore may not see a return on the cumulative millions spent on infrastructure, public health initiatives and K-12 education to support these Albertans growing up. As of 2021, 70.4% of working-aged Canadians were living in their province of study while only 59.5% of working-aged Albertans had earned their qualification locally. This suggests that Alberta disproportionately 'imports' talent as it is less capable of nurturing its own, meaning our province will be forced to rely on poaching talent from other parts of Canada and the world.

Attracting talent in the middle of their careers—rather than providing young Albertans with a reason to stay—limits the lifetime tax revenue the provincial government can expect to receive. This is significant, given that PSE graduates pay the lion's share of Canada's tax revenue.³³⁴ Albertans who stay in the province, but decline

to pursue PSE due to the cost despite otherwise being capable, present an increased likelihood of requiring more support from public services over their lifetime.³³⁵ By contrast, PSE graduates are less likely to need as much support from social assistance programs or public health services, and could also be expected to have fewer interactions with the justice system in their lifetime.³³⁶

How student debt harms the province: a mono-economy is on the cards

While Alberta has a more diversified economy than is commonly believed, the oil and gas industry retains outsized importance to the province's financial health.³³⁷ Though the sector accounts for a declining share of employment, it constitutes the largest share of GDP.³³⁸ Other sectors have seen only modest growth since 2014, with none growing enough to make up the employment difference. 5 industries account for over 50% of Alberta's economic output: energy; real estate; commercial services; retail and wholesale; and construction.³³⁹

On purchasing power alone, PSE graduates generally still earn more than those with high school credentials, 340 meaning most of Alberta's industries would ordinarily rely on this demographic to spend the most on their services. If 66% of the province's graduates continue to cut back on spending to service their loans, 341 all while the time it takes them to repay increases, 342 this bodes ill for non-energy businesses and sectors. We therefore expect Alberta's smaller sectors will keep struggling to fill gaps left by the energy sector, slowing the economy's march to diversification. Nurturing emergent industries is always important for the long-term prosperity of a province historically associated with sales of a non-renewable product; it is even more serious at a time when tense relations with the United States have placed strain on the energy sector through the threat of tariffs 343 and a realized reduction in capital spending by American partners. 344

Furthermore, the risk of debt alone influences the career choices that prospective students will make before they so much as open a textbook, spelling trouble for Alberta's skills base down the line. 55% of Canadians chose their school or program due to the costs of education, rising to 63% in Alberta. Once enrolled, half of Canadian and Albertan students will not consider changing their program because of financial concerns, and more than 40% will consider graduating early due to the cost that acquiring additional education would incur. The result is that many students choose to study in fields they believe will translate into better job prospects later, even if the number of jobs available is disproportionate to the number of graduates, and they will opt to forego acquiring additional skills if the cost of entry is prohibitive.

This carries through to their behaviour once they graduate. A quarter of Canadian graduates will delay finding work in their field of study due to debt obligations, ³⁴⁷ suggesting that even students who select a program according to their strengths will put security over fully applying what they learned. Student debt leads to the saturation of a few select industries at the expense of students utilizing their skills. Indebted graduates tend towards jobs in finance, healthcare and technology, regardless of their field of study. ^{348,349} They are especially unlikely to take public sector or non-profit work, notably in public health ³⁵⁰ and education. ³⁵¹ Conversely, graduates with no student debt are likelier to accept lower-paid, public interest jobs, suggesting that the absence of student debt alone is enough to change a worker's priorities in ways that benefit their community. ³⁵² Funding Alberta's PSIs to the extent that students graduate with smaller debt burdens could therefore provide students with the flexibility in the work they choose—of which Alberta's emerging industries are in dire need.

How—and why—Alberta would pay for all those PSIs again

We appreciate that any recommendation to restore investment in Alberta's PSE sector to pre-2019 levels is easier said than done. Money that has been repurposed cannot be returned overnight, particularly as Alberta enters a period of uncertainty due to developments in the United States. Due to its reliance on narrow revenue streams, the Government of Alberta is vulnerable to the threat of tariffs set by an unpredictable U.S. administration and the uncertainty instilled in commercial partners as a result. State in 2023, natural resources constituted 25% of Alberta's GDP and 26% of the province's revenue the form of royalties. Even a \$1 drop in the price Alberta charges for a gallon of oil can deprive the provincial purse of \$600 million, shich would have wider implications for the province's tax revenue. Further restricting Alberta's options is its current fiscal framework, introduced in 2023, which provides that Alberta must balance its books each year except in cases of a) disasters or emergencies as determined by Cabinet, or b) a sharp decline in provincial revenue, defined as a deviation of \$500 million or more from expectations. Taxpayer protections introduced that same year mandate that the province can only raise or introduce certain taxes by referendum.

are notably an issue for Alberta because nominal government spending has risen from \$58.4 billion in the 2018/19 fiscal year³⁵⁹ to \$70.4 billion in 2023/24³⁶⁰ in sectors outside PSE.

We recognize, then, that reinvesting in Alberta's PSIs would require a quantifiable return on investment. As we shall now outline, there is evidence of the potential for plenty. Crafting a PSE ecosystem that is well-resourced enough to take full advantage of the human capital at its disposal can help solve many of the problems Alberta faces not just now, but for the foreseeable future. We also do not suggest that returning anywhere close to the 2019 levels of funding could or should happen overnight. We instead propose gradual renewal, affording time to reallocate and reassess, particularly as doing so may require deviation from guardrails put in place during a time of relative economic optimism.

What do PSIs give back to Alberta?

The most obvious economic benefits of PSIs are the roles they play in fostering human capital. Global research has identified that graduates certainly represent a worthy return on investment. Analysis spanning 15 countries, including Canada, found that workforce productivity scaled in each according to the number of graduates active in the labour market.³⁶¹ A 0.5% bump in productivity could be directly attributed to a 1% increase in graduate skills in the workforce, with graduate skills accumulation contributing to 20% of the U.K.'s GDP growth between 1982 and 2005.³⁶² The Conference Board of Canada estimates that Canada's economy lost \$49 billion between 2018 and 2021 by failing to produce workers with skills that are easily embedded into, and acquired through, all manners of PSE, such as communication, critical thinking, or problem solving.³⁶³

The presence of a PSI positively impacts the number of papers published and patents registered in a region, as one Italian study identified.³⁶⁴ Though this was largely due to academic activity, less easily explained was the increase in a region's innovative activity outside the academic sector.³⁶⁵ This suggests that mere proximity to a PSI indirectly benefited a locale's economy, an effect that was similarly observed in a study of 242 Swedish start-ups. This analysis found that proximity to a university was more significantly related to early growth than proximity to any other potentially relevant actors, such as venture capital firms or even customers.³⁶⁶ This could be partly due to the same principles underpinning a Spanish study examining the part Doctors of Philosophy play in bridging the gap between university talent and for-profit industries. It found that PhDs are crucial for innovation that furthers both commercial and public interests.³⁶⁷

Work has been done to quantify the return on investment presented by PSIs across the world. In Canada, the Government of Ontario reports that every \$1 invested in PSE sees an average return of \$1.36,³⁶⁸ while the U.S. Congress reports that every \$1 invested in PSE returns \$4.50 to state governments in tax revenue and reduced demand for government assistance.³⁶⁹ An assessment from the U.K. concluded that returns from PSE were even higher, with £14 generated by every £1 spent on higher education.³⁷⁰ Analysis of a university in New York found that each graduate could be expected to contribute over \$200,000 to the public purse in their lifetime, a figure encompassing added tax revenue, public savings on health expenditure, and a reduced likelihood of interaction with justice and welfare systems.³⁷¹ What, then, is the return on investment for Alberta? Table 16 provides an overview of what our PSIs have done for our province.

Table 16. Economic impact overview for select Albertan PSIs.								
For every \$1 invested in NAIT, the province receives a 32% annual return ³⁷²	For every \$1 the University of Calgary spends, Alberta gets at least \$3 back ³⁷³	NorQuest College grads can earn \$15,000 more annually than high school graduates ³⁷⁴	For every \$1 invested in the <i>University of</i> <i>Alberta</i> , Alberta sees a total return of \$5 ³⁷⁵					
Medicine Hat College gives the public purse a 16.3% annual return via graduate income tax ³⁷⁶	Each \$1 spent on Portage College returns \$6.80 on tax revenue and reduced public service demand ³⁷⁷	Compared to the energy sector, <i>AUArts grads</i> are 4.4x likelier to work in their field, diversifying our economy ³⁷⁸	For every \$1 spent by the <i>University of Lethbridge</i> , Alberta's economy receives up to \$12 ³⁷⁹					

Using the University of Calgary as a case study, we note that the ratio in Table 16 derives from combining the University's direct economic activity (spending on wages and operations) with induced economic activity (local spending influenced by its activities). This calculation likely understates UCalgary's actual impact, as it is impossible to untangle the economic activity of alumni from their time at the institution. We can be confident

that this figure would be significant: the University was identified as Canada's leading start-up creator for three years running, beating investment firms and national laboratories.³⁸⁰ One success story originating from the University is Parvus Therapeutics, a medical research outfit specializing in autoimmune diseases that went on to secure a \$1 billion deal to develop new treatments.³⁸¹ An individual example from the University's wider alumni network is Garrett Camp, co-founder of ride-hailing service Uber.³⁸² The company added an estimated \$6.5 billion to Canada's economy in 2020,³⁸³ and \$8.8 billion in 2022.³⁸⁴

Outside of its influence in the field of commerce, the 380 athletic, cultural and community events held or facilitated by the University in 2019 generated \$250 million in tourism for Calgary's economy. 389 The University supports over 22,000 jobs, and its graduates enjoy an estimated total \$4.7 billion more employment income than they would have without their qualifications. 390 If the Expert Panel is not yet convinced, we note that the Graduate Students' Association of the

UCalgary by the numbers

901+ patents³⁸⁵
\$8.2 billion economic impact from research³⁸⁶
3,500+ research papers³⁸⁷

360+ inventions and innovations388

University of Alberta calculates that the return on investment for public funding of their University exceeds 47%, outperforming the 41% return from Alberta's energy, agriculture, and construction sectors.³⁹¹

Analysis

With regards to the guidelines surrounding tuition and additional fees, we advance that the existing guidance around how Albertan post-secondaries can raise these charges do not provide students with the transparency required to assess the value for money or necessity of any proposed increases. However, for the students we represent, addressing these gaps in the guidelines is dwarfed in urgency by the climbing cost of tuition that has stemmed from sweeping cuts made to the operating budgets of Alberta's PSIs since 2019.

Delegating the responsibility of funding Alberta's public PSIs to its students will have diminishing returns. Put plainly, Alberta's PSIs have neither the prestige nor the affordability to broadly appeal to students from all backgrounds. Albertans are already voting with their feet; the province has lost more students than it gains since 2007. Enrolment has been particularly stagnant among students from middle-income backgrounds, as Alberta Student Aid largely runs on debt. The students who do decide to enrol in Alberta will find themselves graduating with more debt than the national average to diminishing labour market outcomes. The province will suffer long-term from the loss of their participation in the economy as they choose to service their student debt instead. Alberta can also expect further homogenization of its labour market as graduates opt for higher-paying jobs over public interest work or even work in their fields. Worse still is that the debt burden does not end with any one graduate. Student debt is already having negative fiscal and emotional impacts on ordinary Albertan families, more so than the average Canadian family.

Furthermore, by leaving its PSIs to fend for themselves with regards to funding, the province will lose out on many of the billion-dollar economic returns its institutions are well-positioned to provide. We have no way of knowing if among the students leaving Alberta is the future founder of the next Uber or Parvus Therapeutics. The ability of PSIs to serve as a cultural hub or coordinator of community services and commerce is also diminished, which likely has even largely ramifications for rural communities.

We therefore advance that Alberta has three options. The first is to <u>stick to the road.</u> Its current tuition model, stemming from the 2019 cuts, will see PSIs continuing to raise prices fees as they try to make up for the sustainable funding source that was the provincial grant. After all, a drop in enrolment does not immediately mean a drop in revenue. As one analysis points out, losing a handful of price-sensitive students can be more than compensated by another tuition hike, with students from higher-income backgrounds making up the difference. Still, given the weight these students place on institutional reputation, Alberta's PSIs may not be prestigious enough to retain those who are better equipped to absorb progressive tuition hikes for long. This model is also unsustainable if the intent is to make Alberta's PSE system both accessible and competitive. Over time, as PSE becomes the domain of the affluent, we expect Alberta will continue to lose talent from lower income brackets to other provinces. Once these students leave, they do not always return.

The second course of action is to offer <u>more grants for middle-earners and undergraduates.</u> The province expressed an intent to do so in *Alberta 2030* that has yet to be realized. These grants should be designed to provide immediate relief to Albertans in the 'squeezed middle,' and the province's largest student demographic in general. Given that the literature suggests tuition subsidies or reductions have larger impacts on enrolment

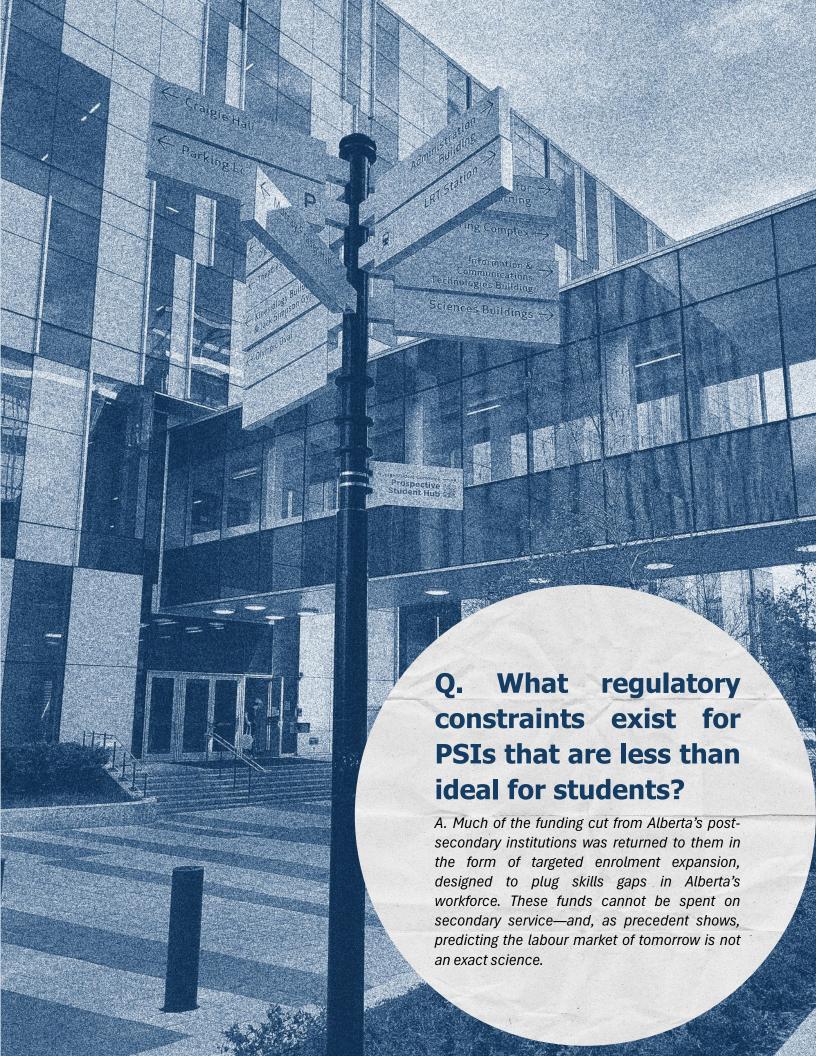
rates than loan availability, we would expect Alberta to see fast returns in the form of student retention. However, disbursing grants means taking a risk with public funds. It is entirely possible that students who receive a grant—from any economic background, and for any reason—may still drop out. Here, there is no guarantee that the province will see its money returned like-for-like as it would with a loan. Furthermore, under some funding models, every grant recipient who drops out means a space taken from another candidate who may have persisted.

We therefore advance that <u>a meaningful restoration of funding to Alberta's post-secondaries</u> leads to the most advantageous tuition model option for students and Alberta alike. It is reasonable to ask students to pay into their PSE: while it must be noted that the wage premium earned on higher education has declined in recent years, it is a better return for students than foregoing PSE completely.³⁹³ As our review of the literature shows, incurring a reasonable amount of debt is not necessarily a dealbreaker for those who otherwise see the benefits to PSE or show academic potential. On the other side of the coin, asking students to pay at the point of entry increases the likelihood that enrollees who are less serious about completing a program will take a place from students who are more committed. While a \$1,000 grant is just as effective in bolstering student attraction and retention as an equivalent drop in tuition, only the latter mitigates damage to the public purse. Restoring operating funding to Alberta's PSIs would allow them to lower tuition—which the provincial government could mandate they must do in proportion with increased investment—and, thus, elevate the ability of more prospective students to pay.

The key component of this strategy is that tuition prices must be <u>reasonable</u>. Given that Albertan graduates are among Canada's most indebted, we cannot describe the current rates of tuition as reasonable. While we appreciate that the provincial government instituted a 2% annual cap on tuition increases, the damage had already been done. Costs at many PSIs have outpaced inflation; the cap cuts off another revenue stream for PSIs. PSIs must therefore receive meaningful investment to remove the inequitable funding burden from students, most of whom are young Albertans at the beginning of their professional lives, while maintaining the ability of PSIs to provide a certain standard of education.

This is not to say that Alberta Student Aid's loans-to-grants ratio needs no revisitation. 16% of Albertans under the age of 18 live in poverty, 394 and Alberta ranks fourth nationally in terms of how many of its residents visited food banks in 2024. 395 In any model, Alberta Student Aid should still expand its grant base, particularly to undergraduates with the greatest need for financial support. Just as we believe it is not unfair to ask students to chip in to supporting public PSIs, it is unreasonable for students to be subsidized by the taxpayer when they decide to attend a for-profit institution. The funding that is currently made available for students at private career colleges through Alberta Student Aid could be repurposed into needs-based undergraduate grants. 396

In summation, we suggest that there should be renewed provincial investment in the base operating funding of Alberta's public post-secondary institutions, such that tuition can be lowered enough that the debt burden is manageable for students. This should be bolstered by the provision of provincial grants and incentives, particularly for undergraduates and students with the most financial need. Not only will this reduce the province's public debt burden, but it will ensure that Alberta's higher education ecosystem is truly affordable and accessible, to the eventual benefit of the province's economy.



What is targeted enrolment expansion, and has it been successful in Canada before?

Targeted enrolment expansion (TEE) is an initiative launched by the Government of Alberta in 2022 that aims to fill gaps in Alberta's workforce by investing in more seats for "high-demand" programs that will produce graduates ready to work in "key" economic sectors. TEE as a funding model is not a partisan, or even new, creation. "Targeted funding envelopes" were introduced by various provincial governments in the 1990s. Still, Alberta's current TEE model is more granular than similar efforts in recent history. Health and business programs received the lion's share of seats funded by this current incarnation of targeted funding, likely because jobs in these areas remain some of the most represented on Alberta's occupation shortage list as of early 2025. The third-most represented field is that of technology and aviation, followed by public interest fields such as social work and early childhood education.

TEE in its current form effectively replaced much of the base operating grant for some institutions. To use the University of Calgary as an example, we note that the Government of Alberta cut funding to the University by over \$100 million between 2019 and 2023. 402 By 2026, the University will have received a fair amount of this back—\$73.2 million in total—to create 1,700 seats in programs selected by the province as most in need of the investment. The difference is that these funds are now subject to restrictions. TEE funds are primarily used by PSIs to hire more program-specific instructors, 403,404 but they can also be spent on tailored learning spaces and specialist equipment. However they are allocated by a PSI, they cannot be spent on things like oncampus services that provide general support to students of all programs.

Past targeted funding initiatives have had mixed results. Writing in 2005 for the Canadian Policy Research Networks, education consultant Ken Snowdon examined funding models used by various provincial systems of higher education in then-recent decades. In the early 1990s, Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta introduced "targeted funding envelopes" aimed at encouraging enrolment growth for certain in-demand fields, such as medicine or teaching. By the mid-1990s, these were the only new government monies available for PSIs, with little effort made to ensure that other-purpose funding streams kept pace with inflation. 408

Snowdon found that supplanting operating funding for targeted funding this way did not produce the desired results. Enrolment growth was "marginal" in Alberta and Ontario between 1997 and 2000⁴⁰⁹ and participation rates were effectively static, suggesting that this enrolment growth was just the inevitable result of population growth.⁴¹⁰ Targeted grants had done little to move the needle, partly because PSIs had more incentive to recruit learners who may need less support over learners who could cost more. Snowdon referred to a 2004 paper by Universities UK which estimated that providing services to recruit and retain students from lower-income backgrounds cost an average 31% more than providing these services for higher-income students.⁴¹¹ As Snowdon identified, any savings that provincial governments made by reducing funding for these services were likely at the expense of greater returns later.⁴¹² Canadian graduates contribute more tax revenue over the course of their lives and will not need as much social assistance as those with lower attainment levels.⁴¹³

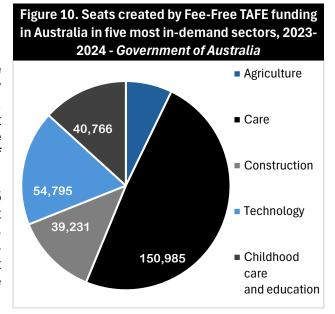
Targeted funding also introduced uncertainty as to which programs would remain fully funded and which may have funding redirected to a different government priority in the next Budget. This led to—as Snowdon describes it—"chaos," undercutting the ability of PSIs to engage in long-term planning.⁴¹⁴ Furthermore, PSIs were forced to accommodate new layers of bureaucracy in the form of additional reporting requirements, as the provinces expected PSIs to track increasing complex metrics and frequently provide updates.⁴¹⁵ This was largely because program-specific funding did not cover mounting costs felt by all other essential parts of a PSI, forcing them to decline students—even those seeking targeted seats—if their tuition dollars would not sufficiently make up the shortfall in general-purpose operating funding required to support those students.⁴¹⁶

Targeted grants were soon phased out nationally, as PSIs required a return to broad public funding to accommodate demand across the board. This funding allowed PSIs to increase physical and operating capacity according to their actual needs, rather than market desires. Snowdon concluded that, if provincial governments had recognized the need for greater public investment earlier... there is little question that access – in terms of absolute numbers and participation rates – would have improved. 419

Has TEE worked to fill labour gaps in other markets?

In January 2023, the Government of Australia—much like the Government of Alberta—identified that the country required more skilled workers in technology, agriculture, care, and childhood education. The Government therefore partnered with territorial governments to fund free technical and further education (TAFE) places in "areas of national priority."

By the end of 2026, Australia will have disbursed \$1.5 billion AUD (\$1.3 billion CAD⁴²²) to create 500,000 student seats. Uptake for the "Fee-Free TAFE" program was quick. The scheme exceeded its goal by September 2024 with 568,451 students enrolling nationally. Enrolment numbers for the top five most in-demand sectors can be found in Figure 10. 425



While Fee-Free TAFE has received criticism for its graduation rates, it is somewhat premature. Although only 100,000 of the near-600,000 enrolled students had completed their courses by April 2025, 426 this is to be expected, as 90% of the programs funded by the initiative can take multiple years to complete. 427 Australia's national educational data custodian reports finalized completion rates 4 years after a program commences, meaning a full picture of Fee-Free TAFE's effect, successful or otherwise, will not be understood until 2027. 428 It is also important to note that Fee-Free TAFE funding prioritized students from underrepresented demographics, 429 such as First Nations Australians and learners with a disability. 430 Longer completion times are not abnormal for students from these groups. 431,432 Given the foregoing, there are grounds to be cautiously optimistic about Fee-Free TAFE's efficacy in addressing labour shortages.

Whether this means the same can be said for TEE is not so straightforward. To begin with, Australia's program makes education in in-demand fields free; most Albertan students hoping to fill a TEE seat will still acquire some degree of debt. As we noted earlier, student debt cannot be separated from labour market outcomes, as this variable directly influences which fields graduates go on to work in. Every \$10,000 owed can reduce the likelihood that a graduate accepts jobs in education or the public interest by up to 6 percentage points. A study of graduates from 126 Canadian universities and colleges found that even those who are highly motivated to pursue public interest work tend towards higher-paying private sector jobs, with this effect being more pronounced the larger their debt. Indebted graduates especially eschew public interest jobs—or jobs at all—in the fields of public health and education and education of study due to student debts.

Albertan PSIs could therefore expect to attract students for in-demand fields through TEE, but only Albertan employers in the healthcare and technology sectors are more likely to see applications from graduates with relevant skills. Also This is, of course, predicated on whether students graduate at all. TEE funds can be spent on instruction and expenses in the selected programs only. PSIs cannot spend these investments on secondary supports which are, as we shall now examine, important for carrying students through to graduation.

The role of secondary services in helping students succeed

As we outlined above, TEE funds are restricted from going towards secondary supports that are not tied to specific courses of study, such as administrative support or on-campus health services. While some secondary services are undoubtedly less crucial than others to a student's success, a review of the literature suggests it may be more difficult to identify common on-campus services that do not improve academic outcomes than those that do.

Advising

Two studies conducted at separate U.S. universities found that 83% of students identified access to programspecific advising as highly important for their academic success.^{439,440}

Poor mental health is predictive of lower grades or dropping out.⁴⁴³ Oncampus counselling centres can not only reverse an affected students' declining grades but hasten their academic recovery.⁴⁴⁴

Canadian students who lived in residence during their first year at one university were 10% likelier to graduate than those who did not; international students were 7% likelier. 447 This was mirrored by...

Indigenous students with access to on-campus Indigenous cultural centres report higher academic engagement and experiencing a sense of belonging that can contribute to retention. 450

The perception of an ombuds office as fair and informative can be more important to students than their complaint's outcome, even if the resolution was not in their favour.⁴⁵³

Limited access to informed academic advising was found to be predictive of higher rates of student attrition in Saudi Arabia, particularly among engineering students with complex courseloads.⁴⁴¹

Safety and wellbeing

Access to mental health services and interactions with efficient administrative staff was predictive of student satisfaction in 49 Canadian universities, thereby improving persistence.445

Housing and recreation

...a study of five other Canadian universities, which found that students who lived in on-campus housing for their first year were likelier to persist, graduate, and achieve slightly higher grades.⁴⁴⁸

Personalized support

Students at high risk of academic failure see marked improvements in their grades and retention rates when they can access learning support services such as tutoring or supplemental instruction. 451

Program-neutral resource

A U.K. study found that students who used writing centres had notably higher grades than their peers. ⁴⁵⁴ A U.S. study found these centres improved persistence. ⁴⁵⁵

Students at Qatar University who utilized support services like academic advising or skills workshops were 35% likelier to improve their grades and persist than those who did not.⁴⁴²

Prospective students, especially women, are likelier to apply to PSIs with in-house campus security measures compared to PSIs without, as these institutions are perceived to be safer.⁴⁴⁶

First-years students who use campus recreation centres are up to 8 percentage points likelier to persist in their studies, even after controlling for students who would have used them anyway.⁴⁴⁹

A U.S. study found enrolment increased by 8% where families received personalized financial help applying for student aid, 452 suggesting on-campus advisors can positively impact retention.

Studies from Canada, China, the U.S. and U.K. found that access to a well-resourced library with study spaces predicts higher grades and persistence. 456,457,458,459,460

Student Supports Case Study #1: Reflections from New York

While all the above services are valuable, we recognize that they also represent additional expense. In order to estimate the return on investment in dollars represented by these services, we look to analysis conducted between 2015 and 2019 of the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) pathway, available to students at community college campuses run by the City University of New York (CUNY). He ambition of participating students is to attain an associate's degree, usually within two years. In the U.S.'s system of PSE, these qualifications are typically offered by community colleges, which can be cheaper alternatives to public colleges. Associate's degrees can also serve as a cost-saving pathway to a bachelor's. We therefore posit that reviewing ASAP's outcomes may be most relevant to Alberta's colleges, while still retaining implications for universities.

The ASAP pathway not only provides additional financial aid to full-time students but also furnishes them with an array of academic and non-academic supports. These services range from mandatory tutoring to periodic meetings with advisors, as well as help with groceries and transportation. ⁴⁶⁴ At the time of its launch, ASAP's yearly cost of program delivery was higher than program delivery for the general community college population by 54%. In dollar amounts, the direct costs of program delivery for one year of ASAP cost \$4,700 USD, compared to around \$3,050 USD for ordinary-track students. ⁴⁶⁵ As the number of ASAP participants grew, economies of scale allowed CUNY to reduce the one-year direct cost from \$4,700 USD to \$3,450 USD.

Even if the price did not eventually drop, this \$1,650 difference seems worthwhile when we consider ASAP's long-term outcomes. ASAP students enjoyed a graduation rate 18 percentage points higher than other students at the three-year mark, and a rate 10 percentage points higher at the six-year mark. ASAP graduates also attained a richer skillset by earning an average 8.7 credits more than their peers outside the program. Some were able to leverage the pathway into higher learning: ASAP participants who decided to

go on to pursue a bachelor's degree completed it quicker than peers outside the program. Participating students and staff attributed much of ASAP's success to access to robust administrative support. ASAP students were likelier to graduate than other cohorts even after both student types acquired the necessary credits to graduate. This suggests that advisors were crucial in either helping students to identify the right combination of credits to complete a program, or helping them to complete the administrative steps required to finalize their degree.

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not mention that by producing more graduates overall, the initial cost of funding ASAP is soon returned to the taxpayer. Each additional ASAP graduate could be expected to contribute an average of \$205,500 to the public purse in lifetime benefits: a figure encompassing their added tax revenue, public savings on health expenditure, and reduced likelihood of interaction with justice and welfare systems.⁴⁷¹

Student Supports Case Study #2: Student Supports from a Students' Union

Students' associations in Alberta provide a range of secondary supports. As the Students' Union of the University of Calgary, we are well-positioned to speak to their importance, particularly because these are not new. While they may appear, at first glance, to be peripheral to the academic mission of a PSI, we draw examples from our long history of providing these services to show that they have always been a facet of Albertan campus life.

Our first example is that of mental health provision, which the UCSU has provided for students since funding a counselling hotline in the 1970s. In 2008, the UCSU funded the launch of the SU Wellness Centre, which remains the on-campus provider of counselling and other healthcare services. Such has the demand been for mental health services in recent years that, in 2023, the UCSU introduced a mental health bursary to provide 700 students with \$1,000 for wellbeing services. View Given the realities of student life and the demands of academia, we are not surprised that mental health has presented as a recurring barrier to student success through the decades—particularly in recent years. A quarter of undergraduates at the University of Calgary described their mental health as poor in 2023 A75 and 2024.

Another service offered by UCSU that has seen renewed interest since 2019 is that of the Campus Food Bank. Initially introduced to campus as a depot of Calgary's Interfaith Food Bank in 1993, the UCSU assumed management of the initiative in 1995. The Demand for UCSU's Campus Food Bank reached a record high in the 2023/24 academic year, with usage up 132% compared to the 2022/23 academic year only for records to again be outdone in 2024/25.

Thirdly, although we are living through a period in which financial stressors are more pronounced, they have always been a reality of campus life. The UCSU introduced its first scholarship in 1969, which is still disbursed today. As the price of tuition has risen alongside the cost of living, student need for additional financial assistance has only risen. The UCSU now offers 15 bursaries and scholarships, ranging in value from \$500 to \$6,000. But We also maintain a hardship fund for students who demonstrate financial need at a point of last resort, with consistent demand since its establishment in 1991. By 2016, the UCSU was distributing over \$1 million in student awards annually.

Finally, some of our services have several functions beyond their immediate purpose. The UCSU first partnered with the Calgary Bar Association to introduce a campus legal aid program in 1971,⁴⁸⁴ which evolved over the years into the Student Legal Assistance clinic. This clinic receives SU funding to provide free or low-cost advice to low-income students and Calgarians alike.⁴⁸⁵ We would not expect the presence of this clinic to significantly influence graduation rates, as few of the students who need it are in such legal jeopardy they are considering dropping out. Yet the clinic provides important working experience to law students, who use this to begin their professional lives with a head-start, benefiting their profession and those they go on to help.

Do the province's targeted enrolment students need secondary supports?

While one of TEE's stated aims is to ensure that Alberta's PSIs produce enough graduates with the skills needed to meet the province's labour market needs, it is also intended to invest in programs that are struggling to accommodate the number of students hoping to enrol in them. Table 17 reproduces the number of seats the University of Calgary will have added by 2026, and total funding provided by the Government of Alberta to facilitate their creation. 486

We note that 20% of the funding has been provided for the benefit of nursing programs. Nursing as a profession appears to be an ideal candidate for an initiative

Table 17. Seats created at the University of Calgary through targeted enrolment expansion (TEE) – Government of Alberta				
	Funding	Seats		
Bachelor of Commerce	\$5,940,000	275		
Veterinary Medicine	\$8,413,589	15		
Master of Physician Assistant	\$6,845,274	40		
Bachelor of Nursing	\$5,331,372	96		
Nursing, Masters	\$2,463,000	120		
Bachelor of Nursing - Rural and Indigenous	\$6,330,000	72		
Route				
Bachelor of Science (BSc), Data Science	\$7,065,000	175		
BSc, Computer Science	\$11,585,000	270		
BSc Electrical/Mechanical (Minor in Aerospace)	\$1,980,000	60		
BSc Software Engineering	\$6,930,000	210		
Data Science and Analytics, Masters	\$4,300,000	105		
Information Security and Privacy, Masters	\$1,965,000	37		
Master of Software Engineering	\$2,700,000	150		
Quantum Computing, Masters	\$1,360,000	48		
Totals	\$73,208,235	1,673		

such as TEE. It has been well-publicized that the University of Calgary has been unable to meet student demand, ⁴⁸⁷ and the province of Alberta is also undergoing a period of struggling to attract and retain nurses. For every 100 nurses under the age of 35 who entered the profession in Alberta in 2022, 50 left, making Alberta poorer at retaining practitioners than the national average. ⁴⁸⁸ Given that Canada is on track to experience a shortage of more than 117,000 nurses by 2030, ⁴⁸⁹ the 288 additional nursing places created by TEE have come at a time when Alberta needed them most.

However, while TEE will help provide more nursing instruction, the fund's applications end there. The volume of nursing students will scale while the University's ability to support them outside the classroom stagnates, which is potentially consequential for whether or not they stay in their chosen career. A January 2025 survey found that a quarter of Canadian nursing students will consider quitting their program due to mounting costs. ⁴⁹⁰ There is no requirement for nursing placements in Alberta to be paid, meaning students effectively pay their institution for the pleasure of undergoing hours of clinical work. ⁴⁹¹

Against a backdrop of global inflationary pressures, this story is not unique to Canada. As of 2024, 46% of nursing students in the U.K. have considered dropping out, with most identifying financial difficulties as their primary stressor, and 58% have reconsidered their career after interacting with qualified nurses experiencing burnout or low morale.⁴⁹²

There is every reason to believe this represents a sign of things to come in Alberta. While working nurses can receive up to \$30,000 in loan forgiveness on their Canada Student Loan, they must be in the profession for five years to realize the full benefit,⁴⁹³ and there is no path to forgiveness for Alberta Student Aid loans. Subsequently, TEE is unlikely to address Alberta's shortage in the long-term to the same degree as Australia's Fee-Free TAFE program. Program availability is important, but when student debt becomes prohibitive to practicing in in-demand fields, there is no guarantee that higher enrolment volume will translate into market gains. TEE does not eliminate the significant stressor that is student debt, meaning Albertan nursing students will be faced with intensive unpaid work and mounting loans—all while campus services that may have ameliorated their circumstances, such as advisors and mental health provision, diminish.

How accurately can we predict future labour market needs?

While we have explored the ways that Alberta's economy is diversifying, it remains narrower than its potential, with many industries orbiting the energy sector. Alberta also received a D-grade for innovation from the

Conference Board of Canada in 2021, placing behind Quebec and British Columbia. 494 Our province, then, is not one with a fully optimized economy, meaning that identifying which gaps in the workforce will be as relevant tomorrow as they are today is not an exact science. This is not least of all because it is impossible to know where the next breakthrough may come from: innovation requires new ideas. By tailoring its PSE system to select industries, Alberta may miss out on students driving change in unexpected ways.

To illustrate the dangers of tailoring higher education to current labour market trends, we refer to the dotcom bubble of the late 1990s. In 1998, optimistic investors began anticipating big returns from the newfangled concept of e-commerce, and this speculation inflated the stock prices of internet-based companies. This bubble would burst in 2000, but before it did, many North American undergraduates decided to take advantage by studying computer science. After 2000, enrolment in these programs fell 10%. Schools reeled, with one American university noting that overinvestment had transformed computer science from one of its most cost-effective departments to one of its least.

Snowdon's analysis of the bubble in relation to targeted funding policies of the 1990s offers additional insight into what happens when TEE gets it wrong. As the dotcom boom "fuelled... targeted enrolment expansion in programs such as computer science," Canadian PSIs "responded to expansion incentives" by investing in new technology and faculty. Ontarian PSIs leveraged their receipt of targeted computer science funding to attract donations from corporate contributors, who hoped to benefit from the graduates these programs would produce. Indeed, private donations to Ontario's universities suddenly shot up between the fiscal years of 1995/96 and 2001/02, only to level off as the dotcom mania faded.

As part of a wider analysis in 2015, the Council of Canadian Academies (CCA) referenced the dotcom bubble when cautioning against gearing education towards short-term labour requirements, as these can shift quickly, especially on a local level. ⁵⁰² CCA observed that molding PSE to specific market trends may produce students who are "unable to meet changes in demand... at the cost of not investing in other skills." ⁵⁰³

TEE is therefore counteractive to its aim of meeting market needs: by effectively converting operating funding into TEE, the province limits the abilities of its PSIs to pivot or adapt. An investment in computer science in 2003, for example, may have proven short-sighted by 2004.

Are STEM graduates at the heart of productivity and innovation?

52% of TEE funding afforded to the University of Calgary was for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programs. If we include medicine, the share of TEE funding received by the University for STEM subjects raises to over 90%. From the province's perspective, these likely represent a worthy return on investment while also addressing student demand, as STEM fields are often associated with enhanced economic benefits—namely, innovation and productivity. The latter is broadly defined as a measure of how efficient a workforce is at producing goods or services relative to resources used.⁵⁰⁴

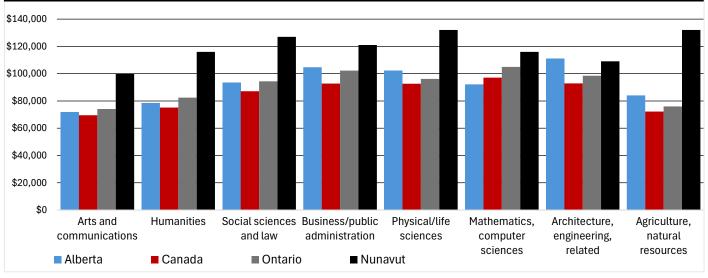
We distil the CCA's productivity framework below,⁵⁰⁵ which provides insight into why STEM fields are so readily associated with these benefits. STEM graduates receive technical training that represents desirable human capital; they contribute to constructing physical capital; they engage in data-driven activity to address inefficiencies or conduct research necessary for new developments.

Table 18. Productivity framework - Council of Canadian Academies			
PRODUCTIVITY			
The amount of output generated per unit of input, or, the amount of goods and services produced per work hour, as facilitated by			
HUMAN CAPITAL	PHYSICAL CAPITAL	INNOVATION	
Skill, ability and knowledge in people.	Investment in equipment or infrastructure	The source of new or improved products,	
Some are innate; others are acquirable	allowing workers to produce more and	methods, or processes that streamline	
through training, learning and experience.	higher-quality output per work hour.	production or social progress.	

Yet the degree to which STEM fields drive innovation and productivity is not as clear-cut. We first consider labour market trends. It stands to reason that, if STEM skills were especially desirable on the free market, possessing a STEM credential would command a large salary everywhere. Figure 11 explores the market realities for STEM graduates by reviewing the average employment income of Albertans aged 35 to 44 with a PSE credential, sorted by field of study, who worked full-time in 2020.⁵⁰⁶ We compare their salaries to the

Canadian average, as well as in Ontario and Nunavut. While we are certainly not suggesting that Nunavut and Alberta's economies are directly comparable, we shall expound on the reason for its inclusion shortly.

Figure 11. Average employment income of full-time workers with a post-secondary credential aged 35-44 as of 2020, sorted by field of study and geography (Alberta, Ontario, Nunavut, Canada) – *Statistics Canada*



Reviewing just Ontario, Alberta, and Canada, we find that arts graduates could expect higher salaries than the national average in Ontario and Alberta. Architecture and engineering graduates are better paid in Alberta than Ontario by around \$20,000. Furthermore, architects and engineers earn less nationally than mathematicians and computer scientists, though in Ontario, mathematicians and engineers have comparable earnings to business or public administration graduates. Mathematicians and computer scientists also earned an average \$1,300 less than social scientists in Alberta. Pay for agriculture or natural resource graduates is substantially higher in Alberta than in Ontario or nationally. Finally, although STEM graduates command higher salaries across all three categories than other disciplines, the differences are not exceptional in Alberta. The average engineering graduate earned \$6,400 more than a business or public administration graduate.

We include the average salaries of PSE graduates in Nunavut to further illustrate that any one discipline is not a shorthand for productivity. Figure 11 provides that arts and communication graduates in Nunavut earn almost \$30,000 more on average than their Albertan counterparts. This is undoubtedly because Nunavut offers some of Canada's highest salaries, owing to the territory's efforts to attract workers to remote communities. Still, the figure shows that the earning potential of engineers in Nunavut is dwarfed by graduates of humanities, social sciences, law, business, and public administration. If STEM skills were a guaranteed shortcut to innovation, one would expect them to command the highest salaries in an economy even more homogenous than Alberta's: Nunavut owes 44% of its GDP to non-renewable resources.

To further explore the relationship between STEM activity and productivity, we look to the European Union (EU) and datasets maintained by its statistical office Eurostat. Table 19 compiles Eurostat's reporting on the percentage of the EU's labour force made up of PSE graduates, including those working in science and technology,⁵⁰⁹ and annual labour productivity.⁵¹⁰

Table 19. Annual labour productivity per hour worked in the EU, indexed to 2015, and the percentage of the EU's labour force made up of PSE graduates working in science and technology (two-year intervals 2015-2023, and 2024) - Eurostat

,					
Annual labour productivity per hour worked, indexed to 2015					
2015	2017	2019	2021	2023	2024
100.000	102.104	103.604	105.292	105.803	105.871
Percentage of labour force made up of persons with a post-secondary education working in science and technology					
2015	2017	2019	2021	2023	2024
8.4%	9.3%	10.5%	11.8%	12.5%	12.7%

Although the share of the labour force with a STEM education rose from 8.4% to 12.7%, a relative increase of 51.2%, productivity only saw modest growth of 5.9%. This suggests that the EU's productivity growth was

not disproportionately caused by a greater representation of STEM skills in the workforce. All this to say, while STEM skills are certainly contributors to prosperity, they are but one component of a healthy economy. A larger share of graduates working in science and technology did not correlate to significant jumps in the EU's productivity, a bloc that represents 15% of global GDP.⁵¹¹ The CCA's attempt to establish a causal relationship between average productivity growth rates in Canadian industries between 2009 and 2013 and the proportion of workers in those industries with a STEM credential similarly found either weak or no correlations.⁵¹²

Canada's productivity woes are not due to STEM shortages

The Conference Board of Canada assessed in late 2024 that, for the foreseeable future, Canada will see a skills shortage in the construction sector above all other fields, with mining in second place.⁵¹³ Though the Board noted that skills shortages in construction and mining have "historically been volatile," these shortages are due to persist over the next decade, as current construction workers reach retirement age and Canada's housing shortage drives demand.⁵¹⁴ Using a range of labour market indicators to identify Canada's skills gaps—like wage growth or an increase in average hours expected per week—the Board concluded that the specific skills most required in Canada are technical ones: equipment set-up, maintenance, repairs, product design of structures and engineering systems, and operational equipment monitoring.⁵¹⁵

Albertan PSIs already offer programs that could address these gaps. The University of Calgary administers continuing education programs in construction management, ⁵¹⁶ as does the University of Alberta. ⁵¹⁷ SAIT goes further by offering the only four-year undergraduate science degree in Canada for the same discipline. ⁵¹⁸ NAIT offers a diploma in Construction Engineering Technology, ⁵¹⁹ and students can acquire a Heavy Equipment Operator Certificate from Olds College. ⁵²⁰ None of these programs receive TEE funds. ⁵²¹

Furthermore, while the Conference Board concluded that technical skills are currently the scarcest in Canada, its report emphasizes that "skills demanded by the knowledge-

Skills identified by the Conference Board of Canada as beneficial to most industries			
Literacy and numeracy,	Decision-making and		
including digital literacy perceptiveness			
Critical thinking and	Learning, teaching, and		
evaluation	instructing		
Communication:	Negotiation and ability to		
listening, speaking and	persuade		
comprehending			
Management: finances,	Coordination and time		
resources, and personnel	management		

based services sector tend to be skills that are generally required across all sectors," albeit to varying degrees. Nor are technical skills "generally... required on a day-to-day basis" even in technical industries with labour shortages. Many knowledge-based skills assessed by the Board to have evergreen economic benefits (right) were also recognized by the CCA as broadly imparted by all forms of PSE: 524

"Fundamental skills are necessary to acquire knowledge in any field or discipline, and to be informed responsible members of an increasingly complex and sophisticated technological society. [These skills include] basic literacy, effective written and oral communication, numeracy, inquiry, critical reading and thinking, problem solving, effective collaboration, and information literacy. Other competencies may also be included in this category, including socioemotional skills, political literacy, and capacities for creativity and innovation... [These] are fundamental to all disciplines [and] can be learned and practiced [in] all school subjects (e.g., numeracy could be part of a history course in the same way that basic literacy could feature in a mathematics course)..."

Employers tend to agree that technical skills are not always determinative of success. A quarter of Canadian employers surveyed in 2024 were struggling to find candidates with soft skills.⁵²⁵ A survey that same year of small- and medium-sized employers in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the U.K. found that half were willing to invest in upskilling and training existing staff, suggesting that they do not necessarily rule out candidates whose technical knowledge is greener.⁵²⁶ A 2013 a survey of U.S. business leaders found that 74% believed "creative thinkers [and] communicators" were in short supply and felt that an education in the liberal arts produced a more "dynamic worker."⁵²⁷ Two founders of leading artificial intelligence companies expressed a preference for hiring humanities graduates.^{528,529}

All manner of post-secondary education can be valuable to employers, as these credentials signal that graduates have desirable aptitudes associated with higher education. Responding to a 2023 survey, 80% of U.S. employers felt that graduates are prepared to enter the workforce, even if there is room for improvement in their technical skills. These employers further reported a preference for hiring college graduates to other demographics, second only to college graduates with an additional micro-credential. This implies that multidisciplinary learning may be more conducive to strong market outcomes than TEE-prescribed disciplines.

As an example, the University of Calgary offers embedded certificates and minors that can supplement a main discipline. We consider a hypothetical computer science undergraduate whose seat was funded through TEE. This student, while technically proficient, struggles to explain aspects of their field to people with no prior subject knowledge. They realize that being unable to show an understanding of their discipline will harm not just their grades, but their ability to transmit information efficiently once they begin working. They learn that the University offers Writing Support Services, sand that students can augment their résumé with a certificate in creative writing. At the student finds these services are overwhelmed: UCalgary's Faculty of Arts is regrouping from a 25% cut to its budget, and instructors feel beset by their workload in the wake of staffing reductions. The TEE funding model that served to generously benefit the computer science student's program of instruction is the same model now limiting their ability to optimize their time in PSE.

Graduates of other programs are the most adaptable on the labour market

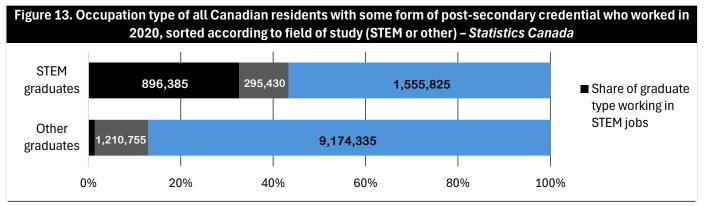
The more specialized a program, the likelier its graduates will enter a related job. This is especially true for health-related disciplines. The 2021 census identified that 90% of female nursing graduates and 85% of male graduates will go on to work as nurses or in related positions, such as nursing administration and research. More than 80% of all pharmaceutical sciences and administration graduates will go on to work in pharmacy settings. Graduates of teacher training programs were the third-likeliest to go on to work in teaching in some capacity, with more than 80% of female students and 75% of male ones entering the profession. Sale

The employment patterns of graduates from other non-STEM programs are not so clear-cut. Figure 12 reviews the career outcomes of PSE graduates between the ages of 25 and 64 who worked in the year 2020. After sorting workers according to their highest level of education and field of study, we reviewed the twenty most common jobs worked by each graduate type. We provide a sample of three of each, showing that some of the most common occupations performed by non-STEM graduates are only tangentially related to their field of study; some are not related at all. College graduates with a music credential are represented in carpentry, and enough masters of geography graduates have pivoted to logistics management that this field is now one of the twentieth most common post-graduation professions for students in this program.

Figure 12. Sample of most common jobs worked by graduates aged 25 to 64, in relation to graduates' discipline and level of study (undergraduate, master's, and college program graduates) – 2021 Census			
Included in the 20 most common job titles for graduates of			
a college program in philosophy:	Agricultural management – Early childhood educator – Nursing aide		
a college program in English literature:	Bookkeeper – Technical writer – Shipper and receiver		
a college program in music:	Carpenter – Audiovisual technician – Material handler		
a college program in graphic communications:	Manufacturing manager – Printing press operator – Advertiser/marketer		
a bachelor's degree in history:	Teacher - Financial advisor - Commissioned officer of the Armed Forces		
a bachelor's degree in criminology:	Counsellor – Probation officer – Immigration officer		
a bachelor's degree in journalism:	Graphic designer - Real estate agent - Public relations manager		
a bachelor's degree in public policy:	Financial auditor - Executive assistant - Business consultant		
a bachelor's degree in urban studies:	Banking/investment advisor - Geomatics technician - Assessor/appraiser		
a master's in geography:	College teacher- Security professional - Transportation manager		
a master's in public health:	Social worker – Statistician/actuaries – Nutritionist and dietician		
a master's in anthropology:	Business development professional – Correctional officer - Market analyst		

Is there a skills shortage—or a training shortage?

Figure 13 looks at the career outcomes of graduates with some level of PSE, sorted by their field of study, as of the 2021 census. ⁵⁴⁰ The figure also derives its program definitions from the census. ⁵⁴¹ We see that, while a third of STEM graduates who worked in 2020 did so in STEM jobs and another 10.5% held STEM-related jobs, the majority worked outside their field of study. While only 1.5% of all graduates in other fields held STEM fields, a greater share of 'other' graduates (11.5%) held STEM-related jobs than STEM graduates did.1.2 million other-field graduates worked in STEM-related jobs, while 1.5 million STEM graduates worked outside of STEM. This suggests that the technical skills gained from STEM credentials may certainly be crucial for technical roles, but STEM graduates are not necessarily more attractive to employers than any graduate type.



STEM graduates attained PSE credentials in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, including computer science and physical sciences. Other graduates attained PSE credentials in business, humanities, health, arts, social science, legal studies, trades, services, natural resources, and conservation. STEM jobs are which create "advancements [and] innovations through the application of knowledge and expertise from one or more [STEM fields] as a central function of the occupation." STEM-related jobs are those "requiring the application of knowledge and expertise from [STEM fields] to perform central functions related to the occupation." Non-STEM jobs are "occupations requiring knowledge and competencies in one or more areas... other than STEM to complete central functions of a job... [though] STEM knowledge may be used to varying degrees to support tasks."

Furthermore, a rising number of STEM students transition into graduates every year in Canada. The share of domestic students enrolling in some kind of STEM program was 24% higher in 2022 than 2010; the rate of non-STEM enrolments rose by just 10%. 542 Alberta especially saw a spike in STEM enrolments versus other fields. There were 11.5% more STEM enrolments in Albertan PSIs in 2022 than 2010, while enrolments in all other programs decreased by 2%. 543 In other words, there does not appear to have been a departure from the CCA's 2018 conclusion that "no evidence" existed to suggest an "imbalance" between STEM graduates and the number of STEM jobs available in Canada. 544 Supporting the CCA's finding was its review of the employment rates of Canadian STEM and non-STEM graduates between 1985 and 2005, which presented no overall differences. 545

Why, then, might it appear that Alberta's PSIs are failing to produce enough of the STEM skills to the extent that recalibrating the University of Calgary's funding to a TEE system was necessary? The likeliest answer is that STEM graduates encounter an unfavourable labour market. Analysis by the C. D. Howe Institute in 2022 found that, while job vacancies for computer and information systems professionals increased 77% between 2020 and 2021, the average hourly wage for vacant positions grew by just 4.6%, lagging inflation. ⁵⁴⁶ Between 1997 and 2016, most new openings in Canada were low paid, with part-time jobs constituting 90% of all new jobs created in Canada during 2016. ⁵⁴⁷ This is set to continue. With uncertain U.S.-Canada relations looming overhead, Canada's job vacancy rate fell to the lowest level since 2017 in February 2025, marking the worst job prospects in the past 7 years for graduates of any stripe. ⁵⁴⁸ Compared to the national average, unemployment is particularly high in Alberta. ⁵⁴⁹

Adding to the problem is that Canadian employers are less willing to train employees compared to other countries. Just 44% of Canadian workers receive training provided by their employer as of 2023,⁵⁵⁰ compared to 71% in the United States⁵⁵¹ and 60% in the United Kingdom.⁵⁵² The cause of any skills shortage, real or perceived, may therefore be more self-imposed by employers than created by innate failings of PSIs to produce work-ready graduates. Rather, the flexibility of all graduate types shown in Figure 27 suggests that PSIs are already able to equip graduates with the tools they need to learn on the job; employers need only build upon that foundation.

It is for this reason that we echo the Conference Board of Canada's assessment that it is the responsibility of industry, not just provincial governments, to identify solutions to skills shortages.⁵⁵³ Employers are perfectly capable of training their workforce rather than outsourcing disproportionate responsibility to the province's public PSIs, and thus, the taxpayer. After all, every business has its own preferences or expectations. There is value to recognizing that Alberta's PSIs will not be able to neatly meet each of these demands, nor should their purpose be to sacrifice playing to their own strengths to serve shifting expectations of the market.

TEE prevents PSIs from playing to their own strengths

Earlier, we advanced that the construction industry needs more workers than TEE's current priorities would suggest. Instead, TEE appears to focus on serving industries that have traditionally benefited Alberta at the expense of capitalizing on emerging markets. Given the pitfalls of targeted funding as explored above, we do not suggest that TEE need only recalibrate its investments to the 'right' programs to be effective. Rather, not every skills shortage can be remedied in a classroom. Interdisciplinary learning is a strong foundation for further learning and development, but the attainment of high-quality PSE itself can be sufficient to prepare graduates to adapt to labour market needs once they enter the workforce itself. Alberta is fortunate to have PSIs that have historically punched above their weight as innovators in their own right:

shortage, SAIT initiated Canada's only Bachelor of Science in Construction Project Management, showing that Alberta's PSIs can trailblaze when enabled. Its School of Hospitality and Tourism has also been recognized as one of the top 20 globally.554

The University of Alberta opened Canada's first computer science school in 1964 and became an early Al research pioneer in the 1980s.⁵⁵⁸ This led to Google's Al subsidiary choosing Edmonton as the location for its first international office 30 years later. 559

Calgary's School of Public Policy have the most citations of any Canadian policy school as of 2025.555 The University was also the first research institution in Canada to declare child health research a priority, creating a framework that the U15 adopted. 556

Students at Medicine Hat College who are conscious about contributing to the province's economic prosperity while minimizing any harm the to environment can pursue a 2-year diploma in sustainable innovation, the first of its kind in Canada. 560

In 2011, before the construction skills Papers published by the University of Red Deer Polytechnic became the first Canadian PSI to house a digital light processing 3D printer in 2022, earning recognition for its Centre for Innovation in Manufacturing as an early adopter of large-scale 3D printing production.⁵⁵⁷ The printer is being used to develop new medical equipment.

> Lethbridge College launched a spatial technologies and applied research centre in 2023, partnering with Albertabased industries to apply cutting-edge technology to real-world problems. At launch, its on-campus VR treadmill was the only one in Canada.561

A particularly concerning example of what we stand to lose if PSI funding cuts continue made headlines in May 2025. Citing financial difficulties, NAIT announced its intention to pause, review and potentially terminate 18 programs, one being its captioning and court reporting program. ⁵⁶² This is the only program of its kind in Western Canada, respected in both Canada and the United States. 563,564 If the program is cancelled, not only will Alberta lose a unique program that could attract more interprovincial students, but Albertans hoping to enter this line of work will join the long line of Albertans leaving to study in Ontario. 565

Analysis

We have reviewed how the conversion of operating grants into targeted enrolment expansion funding may not produce the solutions the provincial government hopes to see. Firstly, TEE funding cannot go towards secondary services that play an important role in seeing students through to graduation. Secondly, historical attempts by provincial governments to predict where the market will have its next labour shortage have produced mixed results. Recalibrating post-secondaries to produce graduates with market-ready skills is not an exact science, particularly because these so-called 'skills shortages' appear to have more to do with labour market conditions than post-secondaries producing too few 'desirable' graduates.

Furthermore, evidence from similar initiatives in the 1990s found that TEE has the unintended consequence of restricting access to higher education for students who would be perceived as too 'expensive' to support outside of their immediate program of instruction. While this saves the province on post-secondary funding at the point of enrolment, the province loses the benefits of promoting socioeconomic mobility: namely, that graduates contribute larger lifetime tax revenues and tend to require fewer interactions with public services.

Allocating funding to specific programs at the expense of institutional discretion undermines the ability of our post-secondaries to strategically and flexibly respond to evolving needs, whether those are the needs of students, the market, or the communities around them. It also undermines their ability to foster innovation wherever it may occur, as they are instead incentivized to focus on developments in narrow fields at the expense of programs deemed by the province to be less 'desirable' economically. We have explored that any form of PSE can be valuable, and that graduates outside of STEM and healthcare fields are some of the most adaptable on the market, including within STEM and healthcare industries themselves. For this reason, we recommend that the provincial government discontinues TEE—for many of the same reasons that the initiative was discontinued across Canada in the early 2000s.



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Q. What impact have current funding mechanisms had on the student experience and quality of teaching?

A. Since 2019, changes to the quality of education have ranged from the elimination of staff and programming to reduced access to secondary supports. Students also put up with unsafe facilities because institutions can't pay for maintenance.

THERE'S ALLAND
A RAINBOW
OF THE EMD

A Case Study: The Faculty of Arts at the University of Calgary

Arts have been a facet of the University of Calgary since it was established as the Calgary Normal School, a teacher-training institute, in 1906. The Normal School's 1911 yearbook speaks of a student choir; by the 1920s, students could participate in a staff-led theatre society, orchestra, and supplement their programs of instruction with literature classes. After the Normal School was absorbed by the University of Alberta in 1945, it was only through students pushing for formal arts and sciences programs to come to Calgary that the school became a full University Branch in 1951—the first step towards our institution's eventual independence.

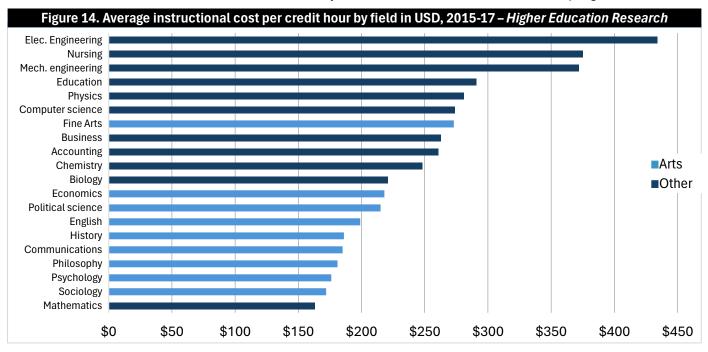
The Faculty of Arts is not only integral to the history of the University. It has been the largest faculty for some time, with 22% of all current enrolments at the University of Calgary. (The next largest faculties are Science and Engineering.) This is partly because the Faculty of Arts is responsible for housing many disciplines: 567

Archaeology and Anthropology	Languages and Cultures	Creative and Performing Arts	Classics and Religion	Communication, Media and Film
Art and Art History	Economics	English	Political science	History
Geography	Philosophy	Political science	Psychology	Sociology

Arts programs are cheaper to run—which puts them at risk

Research from the U.S. provides that arts programs are some of the cheapest to run. A 2022 study of the results of the National Study of Instructional Costs and Productivity revealed how much PSIs spent on direct instructional costs per credit hour. The amounts in Figure 14 were calculated by pooling instructor salaries and benefits, but also program operational costs like supplies, equipment, and administrative support. The supplies is a supplier of the cheapest to run. A 2022 study of the results of the National Study of Instructional Costs and Productivity revealed how much PSIs spent on direct instructional costs per credit hour. The supplier is a supplier of the National Study of Instructional Costs and Productivity revealed how much PSIs spent on direct instructional costs per credit hour. The supplier is a supplier of the National Study of Instructional Costs and Productivity revealed how much PSIs spent on direct instructional costs per credit hour. The supplier is a supplier of the National Costs and Productivity revealed how much PSIs spent on direct instructional costs per credit hour. The supplier is a supplier of the National Costs and Productivity revealed how much PSIs spent on direct instructional costs are supplier in the National Costs and Productivity revealed how much PSIs spent on direct instructional Costs and PsIs supplier in the National Costs and PsIs supplie

Apart from the outlier programs of fine arts and mathematics, all arts programs are cheaper for universities to run operationally than other fields. The most expensive programs are electrical engineering, nursing, and mechanical engineering. Equipment costs go towards raising the price of disciplines that require laboratories and specialist equipment, such as biology and chemistry; other disciplines, such as engineering, are costlier due to comparatively higher instructor salaries that even larger class sizes are unable to offset. Whatever the reasons, tuition from art students can effectively subsidize more resource-intensive programs.



The relatively lower operational costs of arts programs have made them particularly vulnerable to budget cuts. Reflecting on proposed changes to PSE funding in Britain in 2017, Professor John Last of the Norwich University of the Arts cautioned that not all arts programs can be taught well at a discount. Providing examples such as film production and studio-based disciplines, he noted that "design and media courses are far from the cheapest to provide" if the aim is not to sacrifice a student's quality of education. ⁵⁷¹ Still, it is generally true

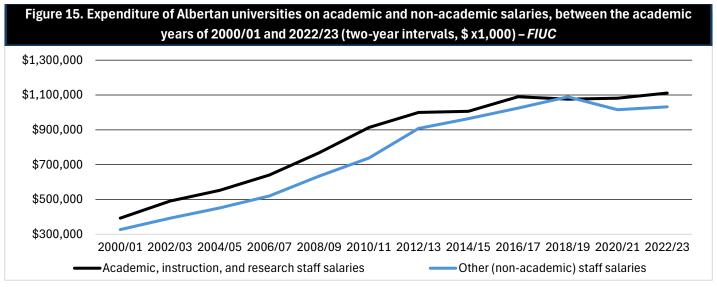
that many arts programs require fewer resources outside of immediate instruction and textbooks. This is observable in disciplines outside the arts that have similar operating requirements, such as mathematics.

The theory that arts programs are therefore better equipped to absorb budget cuts is playing out in practice at the University of Calgary. The Faculty of Arts lost 25% of its budget in the wake of 2019, ⁵⁷² as the University either redirected funds or found itself bound to the terms of targeted enrolment investments. Independent experts performed a unit review of the Faculty of Arts in April 2024, which found that the Faculty had responded to its fiscal misfortune primarily by reducing the number of administrative employees. ⁵⁷³

Administrative bloat: overstated or underestimated?

Much has been said about administrative bloat causing the financial woes of post-secondaries worldwide. In a 2011 publication, American political scientist Benjamin Ginsberg criticized growth of non-academic staff at PSIs since the 1970s.⁵⁷⁴ Ginsberg's primary concern was that PSIs had moved resources "away from teaching and research" in order to hire more administrators.⁵⁷⁵

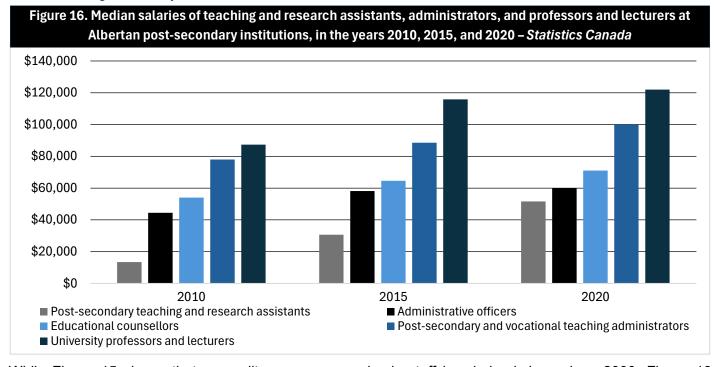
To discern whether this is a problem in Alberta, and to what extent, we look to the findings of the Financial Information of Universities and Colleges (FIUC) survey, which has universities report on, among other things, how much of their yearly spending went to academic and non-academic salaries.⁵⁷⁶ In Figure 15, we use the survey's definitions⁵⁷⁷ to group as one category the salaries of academic staff (including deans and professors) and the salaries of staff engaged in instruction and research (such as teaching assistants). In the second category we group the wages of all other staff, including technicians, clerical workers, and managerial staff.



This figure shows that both academic and non-academic wage spending increased over two decades. Of the sampled years, spending on academic salaries was only eclipsed by administrative ones in 2018/19. Even so, since 2000/01, spending on non-academic salaries grew by 215% overall while spending on academic salaries grew 183%. While we find that Alberta's universities are expanding their administrative bases, this must be considered in the context of changes to salaries. No central source exists on how many non-teaching academics (such as deans) are employed at Albertan universities compared to faculty, teaching assistants, or administrative support staff such as advisors. Therefore, we cannot take the totals in Figure 15 and neatly divide them by the number of staff in each category currently in Alberta. However, we can look to median salary data to get a better understanding of how much universities in Alberta 'value' certain types of staff.

The definitions and data used to create Figure 16 below derive from the National Household Survey in 2011⁵⁷⁸ and the last two censuses.^{579,580} We use definitions from the National Occupational Classification, a taxonomy of all occupations in the Canadian workforce as maintained by the federal government. Therefore, 'university professors and lecturers' refers to university-level teaching staff.⁵⁸¹ 'Post-secondary teaching and research assistants' include such professions as laboratory supervisors to graduate students who are employed to aid in teaching and research.⁵⁸² 'Post-secondary and vocational teaching administrators,' as defined by the Government of Canada, is a broad category that captures faculty deans, program administrators, and registrars, encompassing staff who manage a university's "academic and related activities" without necessarily

being "senior management." To get a better understanding of the wages non-managerial administrative staff command at Alberta's PSIs, we included 'educational counsellors,' defined as academic or career advisors. We also included 'administrative officers', a category that can apply to a wide range of administrative-based roles, including "university admissions officer." The state of the wages non-managerial administrative staff command at Alberta's PSIs, we included 'educational counsellors,' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages non-managerial administrative staff command at Alberta's PSIs, we included 'educational counsellors,' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages non-managerial administrative staff command at Alberta's PSIs, we included 'educational counsellors,' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages non-managerial administrative staff command at Alberta's PSIs, we included 'educational counsellors,' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages non-managerial administrative staff counsellors, 'academic of the wages non-managerial administrative staff counsellors,' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages non-managerial administrative staff counsellors, 'academic of the wages' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages non-managerial administrative staff counsellors, 'academic of the wages' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages' defined as academic or career advisors. The state of the wages' defined as academic o



While Figure 15 shows that expenditure on non-academic staff has indeed risen since 2000, Figure 16 suggests this is not because Alberta's universities have been hiring more well-compensated middle-and-upper managerial staff; nor have they been giving existing employees in this category dramatic raises. The median salary commanded by post-secondary administrators—such as deans and registrars—rose by 28%. Meanwhile, the median salary for respective median salaries for academic advisors and administrative officers rose by 31% and 35%. Faculty saw their median salary increase by 40%, and teaching and research assistants saw their median salary increase by almost 300%.

Ergo, while spending by Albertan universities on non-academic salaries outpaced that of spending on academic salaries since 2000, the growth of administrative salaries was modest. The lowest-paid staff of Albertan PSIs saw the fastest wage growth, likely to keep pace with the cost of living. Indeed, no employee category saw their median salary trail inflation, but neither did any one employee category enjoy median wage growth above inflation by more than 17.5%.⁵⁸⁶ That is, of course, with the exception of teaching and research assistants. The median salary of these employees eclipsed their inflation-adjusted 2010 salary by 226% in relative terms, representing a substantial improvement in their purchasing power.⁵⁸⁷

Taken together, Figures 15 and 16 paint a picture of Albertan post-secondaries expanding their lower-level administrative capacities and prioritizing the needs of support and teaching staff. We need only look to enrolment numbers to answer why Alberta's universities have required more support with student service delivery and research support without necessarily expanding higher-level administrative roles. University enrolments grew 81% between 2001 and 2022 in Alberta; if we consider only enrolment rates between 2010 and 2020, university enrolments grew by 14%.⁵⁸⁸ That administrative salaries grew modestly in this time indicates that administrative hiring appears to have been demand-driven rather than wasteful. Interestingly, at the University of Calgary, the base salary of the President decreased by 1.5% between the fiscal years of 2013/14 and 2023/24, with overall compensation falling by 26%⁵⁸⁹

We return to the University of Calgary's Faculty of Arts, which responded to losing 25% of its budget primarily by reducing administrative employee numbers. As its 2024 unit review observed, these cuts resulted in departments being forced to share the remaining staff. More has already been expected of instructors. They are tasked with having to teach more often—usually to larger classes than they once did—while also conducting research outside their areas of expertise, all with depleting access to teaching assistants. Their

stress is therefore only compounded by how inconsistent administrative support can be due to understaffing.⁵⁹² Administrative workers who remain with the Faculty can be moved at whim from their "departmental homes" to make up for shortfalls elsewhere, and these administrators must perform additional work from home, outside of regular hours, to finish all the tasks required of them in a given week.⁵⁹³

Rather than being "bloat," it appears to us that the administrative staff the Faculty had to let go formed an important, albeit perhaps unsung, backbone for the Faculty's day-to-day operations. We shall now review how these staffing cuts have impacted the student experience.

Facing larger classes and reduced support, students see less value for money

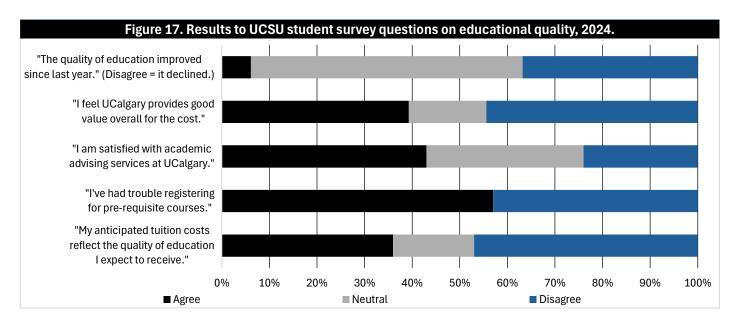
Though the Faculty of Arts has attempted to mitigate challenges, the reality is that budgetary pressures have threatened its ability to meet demand, and the solutions it is able to afford are often unsustainable. One example is that Arts hires more temporary instructors than other Faculties.⁵⁹⁴ In 2013, sessional instructors constituted 23% of the University's academic staff;⁵⁹⁵ as of 2023, they make up 27%.⁵⁹⁶ Of all the sessional instructors working at UCalgary, 26% are employed by the Faculty of Arts,⁵⁹⁷ making Arts the largest employer of temporary academic staff. While many sessional instructors certainly do good work, students who have a negative experience will find little recourse, as these instructors are temporary by nature and subsequently beholden to fewer accountability measures. On the other side of the coin, sessional instructors who excel in their role are likely to move on upon receiving an offer with better security.

The most common student complaint encountered by the unit review team was an inability to meet with not just administrative staff, but teachers. ⁵⁹⁸ In some ways, this is not unique to the Faculty of Arts. The University as a whole has experienced a decline in academic staff numbers since 2019. Between 2018 and 2024, the number of regular academic staff fell by 3%, ⁵⁹⁹ while the study body grew by 12%. ⁶⁰⁰ The Faculty of Arts recorded 362 permanent full-time equivalent academic staff members for the 2021/22 academic year, ⁶⁰¹ and 342.5 as of the 2023/24 academic year. ⁶⁰² While this reduction may seem small, the Faculty had already lost 5% of its permanent academic staff members between 2010/11 and 2021/22, more than any other school at the University of Calgary, while the rest of the University saw a net gain of 109 academic staff. ⁶⁰³

The result is that Arts students are among the most represented in those who seek the UCSU's help in navigating uncertain course availability. While the UCSU only has preliminary data, we are aware that Arts students have struggled to access programs they require to graduate—sometimes delaying their ability to complete their programs on time—to the extent that we ran a survey in April 2025 to identify the full extent of availability constraints. Though the Faculty has tried to ease bottlenecks by doubling class sizes, the University only has 11 learning spaces that can accommodate more than 200 students, the University will be competing to book. That more students are registered into classes large enough to fill these lecture halls likely has much to do with why more students find just speaking with their instructor impossible.

We consider the experience of students now versus that of students prior to the cuts. In 2019, before the full effects could be felt, 76% of undergraduate respondents to a UCSU survey were satisfied with the quality of academic staff at the University and how available instructors were for students. 606 70% were satisfied with the quality of teaching received, 67% were satisfied with their class sizes and access to academic advising, and 66% were satisfied with the work of teaching assistants. 607 We compare these opinions to the answers given to relevant questions posed by our 2024 surveys (Figure 17, overleaf). 608

47% disagreed that the cost of their tuition matched their quality of education; just 43% felt adequately supported by advisors; 60% disagreed or were not sure that UCalgary provided value for money. Despite tuition and fees rising every year since 2019, only 6% of students felt the quality of their education had improved in-line with the increases. Given that these are the collective experiences of students, we expect that Faculty of Arts students will be experiencing the worst of these effects. It is perhaps unsurprising that the Faculty of Arts' 2024 unit review described staff and students alike with sombre words. "Although deeply committed to the Faculty and the University," the reviewers concluded, "there is also a general sense of defeat."



UCalgary is falling apart over budget cuts—literally

By the end of the 2009/2010 fiscal year, the University of Calgary's deferred maintenance balance stood at nearly \$298.7 million.⁶¹⁰ It had successfully reduced its balance from \$361.7 million the previous year, having capitalized on a period of cheaper construction costs.⁶¹¹ Despite these efforts, the University's maintenance balance proceeded to begin growing again, rising year-on-year until it finally reached a valuation of \$518.6 million in 2016/17.⁶¹² It was after this that the University, for the first time since 2010, managed to make a dent in its spiralling repairs risk. With the same help from the provincial government's Infrastructure Maintenance Program that the institution had been receiving every year, the University managed to bring its balance down to \$512.2 million by the end of the 2017/18 cycle.⁶¹³

While this would prove short-lived, as the total valuation of the University's repairs climbed to \$536 million the following year, 614 exacerbating matters was the provincial government's decision to suspend the Infrastructure Maintenance Program in 2019/20, withholding its expected contribution of \$22.5 million. 615 Though this program returned in the next fiscal year, it was not enough to prevent the University's maintenance balance from steadily rising to its current valuation of \$798.6 million. 616

Between 2010 and 2018, the University's deferred maintenance balance grew by 71.4%, at an average rate of 9% each year. Between 2019 and 2024, this balance grew by 49%, equivalent to 12.3% each year. The steep rise in the University's maintenance balance is not simply owing to inflation; had the University's outstanding repairs valuation been adjusted for inflation only from its 2019 value of \$536 million, it would have been reassessed as \$632.5 million as of 2024. Funding cuts since 2019 have forced the University to focus more on plugging operational leaks than physical ones.

How other Faculties have weathered budget cuts

Schulich School of Engineering

We note that, beginning in 2022, TEE funding to the University of Calgary has included generous investments in Engineering. We can consider the impact program-specific investment has had on the University's Schulich School of Engineering by examining its unit review from 2015 and comparing the results to its review from 2022. The reviewers in 2015 observed that, despite its relatively smaller size, the School's budget at the time was "consistent with budgets of other Canadian engineering faculties." The reviewers were impressed by the student leaders they consulted with, describing them as a "happy, proud, articulate and enthusiastic group" that had positive things to say about their administration and the School's Dean.

By 2022, the School had entered a period of strategic cost-cutting. The effects of the University overall seeing an 18% reduction in funding were "noticeable and painful" to the School, with administrative staff "working at capacity." The School had outgrown its facilities, and its renovated spaces had fallen short of serving "modern teaching approaches." In their responding remarks, the School recognized that some of its learning

spaces fell short of being entirely fit for purpose, but "because of financial constraints, renovations [would have to] proceed gradually." Rather than improving the quality of education at the Schulich School of Engineering, TEE funding appears to have stunted the positive trajectory it was on as of 2015.

Cumming School of Medicine

Another Faculty that underwent unit reviews before and after changes to PSE funding instituted in 2019 was the Cumming School of Medicine. Its review in 2017 observed that the unit was "performing at a very high level," with its research capacity in particular remaining "competitive with other Canadian faculties of medicine." Perhaps the most serious criticism in the report was that the basement floor of the School's Health Science Centre required maintenance. Otherwise, the review's recommendations were contextualized as merely intended to help "enhance an already successful reputation."

It should be noted that, if any Faculty was well-positioned to absorb budget cuts, it was the Cumming School: it had received a \$100 million philanthropic gift from business leader Geoff Cumming in 2014, one of the largest ever made to a Canadian university, which was matched by the Government of Alberta. Each of the glowing tone of the 2017 unit review did not continue into the review it received in 2023. Between 2019 and 2023, the School had lost 25 academic staff and was struggling to ensure that salaries kept pace with inflation, let alone salaries offered by other universities for comparable positions.

While the School was able to self-fund about half of its teaching roster, not all of the School's self-generated revenue could be spent freely on academic salaries given the department's other responsibilities, such as research activities. The School was therefore observed to be "operating in a time of fiscal constraint." Furthermore, the School acknowledged that faculty had "major concerns" with the upkeep of the School's facilities, which were described by the reviewers as having reached a "critical stage affecting students [and] staff" alike—with the potential to put "program success and research capacity at risk."

Faculty of Kinesiology

The unit review performed for the Faculty of Kinesiology in 2017 identified that, while the Faculty was generally performing well, budgetary constraints at the time were limiting the Faculty's ability to accommodate rising student demand by hiring more academic staff. Space was also a concern: there was not enough of it. By 2024, the Faculty had begun working towards expanding its physical capacity by building a new Kinesiology Building only with the aid of "remarkable philanthropic support," while older facilities were described as being "held together by love and duct tape." Among one of the more concerning maintenance problems that the Faculty had been unable to address was a "major asbestos abatement project."

Budget cuts did not improve support for students across Alberta

The University of Alberta laid off more than 1,000 staff and cut 30 academic programs in response to post-2019 fiscal challenges,⁶³⁵ and instituted a hiring freeze after its investment for the 2024-25 year remained stagnant where it should have risen 10% to keep pace with inflation.⁶³⁶

Mount Royal University laid off 10 staff in response to the first wave of provincial funding cuts in 2019, ⁶³⁷ and an additional 40 staff in 2020. ⁶³⁸

Continued funding cuts at the University of Lethbridge prompted the institution to lay off 42 staff members following the announcement of Budget 2020. 642 The Ministry of Advanced Education justified the cuts by citing the per-student figure KPMG had calculated for the Blue Ribbon Panel 643—a figure the Ministry would later walk back in 2022. 644

Red Deer Polytechnic was forced to suspend five programs due to a projected \$10 million deficit following Budget 2025. 639 60 students have lost the courses they expected to take, and more than 100 staff members are expected to lose their jobs, including faculty. 640

Budget 2025 prompted Keyano College to lay off at least 17 employees, with staff reporting that total job losses could ultimately climb closer to 100.641

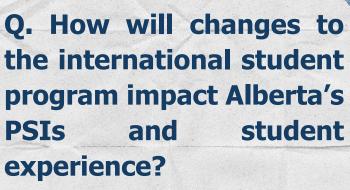
Losing provincial funding forced Alberta's institutions to make up some of the difference via international student fees. Following the introduction of federal caps on study permits, both Lethbridge Polytechnic⁶⁴⁵ and Olds College⁶⁴⁶ were forced to suspend programs, limiting program offerings available for two of Alberta's rural communities.

Analysis

We have considered the impact on students' experience of learning in Alberta in the wake of PSI funding cuts since 2019. Programs have been scaled back or cut entirely, and the sector has been forced to let go of talented academic and non-academic staff alike. Plenty of the staff that were fortunate enough to fit into their institution's budgets are nonetheless overworked, underpaid and demoralized. Adding insult to injury is that they will be expected to conduct their duties in campuses that are, figuratively and literally, falling apart.

Arts programming has particularly suffered under the current provincial funding model—which is curious, as arts students can effectively subsidize students of Faculties that are more expensive to run. While a well-funded and resourced arts department that can attract and accommodate more students should not quite be expected to 'pay for itself,' it appears to us to be fiscally short-sighted to gut these programs entirely. It is no wonder that the majority of students at the University of Calgary feel ambivalent towards their institution and the services it provides. We expect our University will not be the only publicly funded Albertan post-secondary currently experiencing this particular story.

While the University of Calgary still experienced budgetary constraints prior to the implementation of the 2019 funding model, there is a difference between having to get crafty with resources and having no resources at all. By comparing unit reviews preceding and following the cuts, we can track the damage done to our campus. While students we surveyed pre-cuts certainly faced their own set of challenges, we would much prefer to conduct our advocacy from a position of striving for improvements for everyone rather than trying to achieve the bare minimum that is safe classroom infrastructure. We have therefore presented this section to demonstrate that the current funding model has lowered standards across the board for everyone, regardless of whether a student's particular program received targeted investment.



A. With fewer high-paying international students to fall back on, Alberta's post-secondaries stand at a crossroads: following Ontario's lead to financial misfortunes, or taking an opportunity to reassess, raise standards, and capitalize on the brain drain occurring south of the border.



The impact to post-secondary institutions will be difficult

The federal government's January 2024 announcement that it planned to reduce international student enrolment by 35% compared to 2023⁶⁴⁷ had the effect of reducing international enrolment numbers nationally by 45%, meaning 10% of available international study permits went unclaimed.⁶⁴⁸ The cap's introduction preceded a 9% drop in international enrolment at the University of Calgary in 2024,⁶⁴⁹ and up to 80% fewer international students applied to Alberta's colleges and polytechnics for the 2025-26 year.⁶⁵⁰ If the goal of the study caps was to reduce abuse of the system, these effects seem punitive to Alberta, as 9 of the 10 Canadian institutions to be granted the most international study permits in 2023 were Ontarian.⁶⁵¹

Given that an international student might pay up to four or five times as much for the same program as a domestic one, declining international enrolment will prompt institutions to do one of three things. Firstly, they may try to recruit four more domestic students to make up for every lost international student—yet we have presented some of the reasons Alberta's PSIs will struggle to accomplish this, given disadvantages unique to them such as location. Secondly, Alberta's post-secondaries may contemplate raising tuition, but as our earlier analysis has addressed, this may ultimately have diminishing returns. Alberta is already one of Canada's largest net exporter of students to other provinces. Thirdly, PSIs may decide to cut programming, which runs the risk of further economic homogenization for the province.

Still, Alberta has an opportunity on its hands

As a close neighbour of an unpredictable administration, all eyes worldwide are presently on Canada. Caps on international students come at a time when other nations are capitalizing on political uncertainty in the United States that has prompted 75% of U.S.-based scientists to consider seeking work in Europe and Canada. ⁶⁵² In April 2025, French research institution Aix-Marseille Université announced a €3 million initiative (\$4.7 million CAD⁶⁵³) to poach American scientists, and the Research Council of Norway launched a 100 million Norwegian Krone fund (\$13.3 million CAD⁶⁵⁴) for the purposes of hiring foreign researchers. ⁶⁵⁵ Smaller initiatives include Belgian university Vrije Universiteit Brussel opening 12 fully-funded postdoctoral positions for international researchers, with a specific focus on American scholars. ⁶⁵⁶

Alberta is especially vulnerable to deteriorating relations with the United States. While Ontario is the largest Canadian trading partner of the most states (33 in total), Alberta punches above its weight as the most represented Canadian trading partner among the remaining states.⁶⁵⁷ Alberta is the main Canadian trading partner of 8 states; in third place is British Columbia, the main trading partner of 4 states.

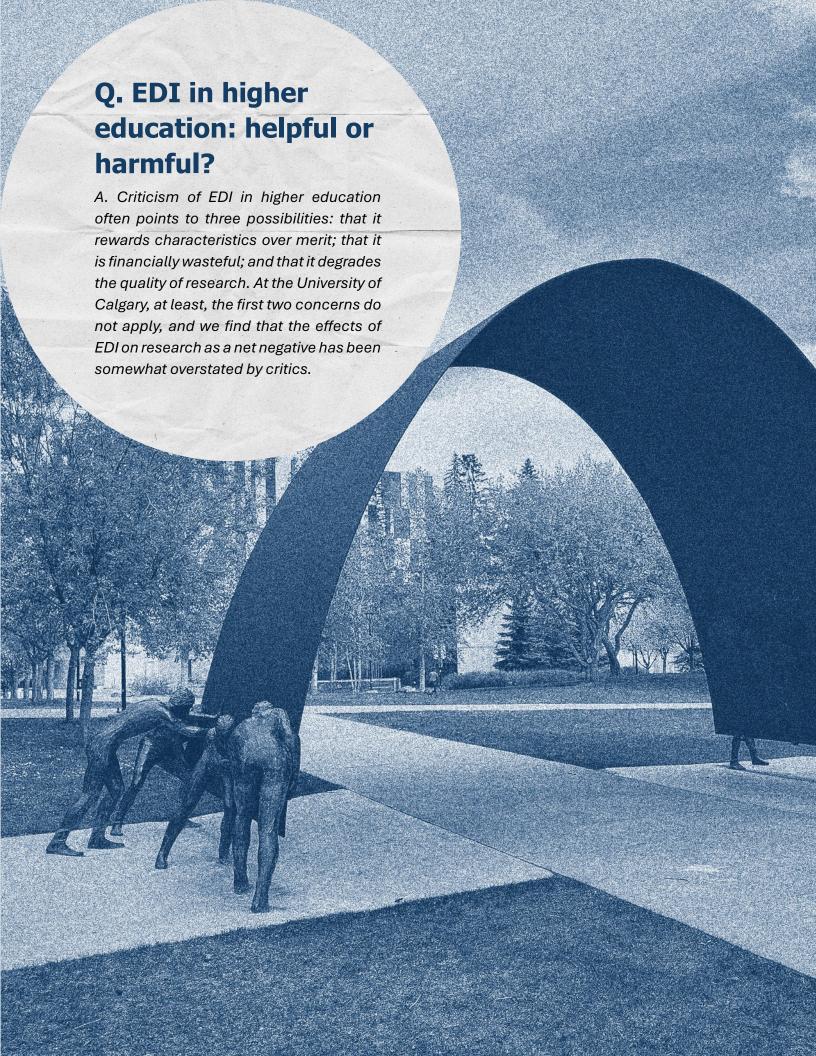
There is a more optimistic side to this coin: Alberta has an opportunity to leverage these existing relationships and welcome American talent searching for a new research environment. By establishing renewed investment in its PSE sector—*Alberta is calling the best of the best*—the province stands to benefit from the knowledge U.S.-based students and academics would bring. PSE-based research and development (R&D) is an important component of Canada's economy. In 2023, universities conducted 35% of all Canada's R&D, for a total value of \$17 billion. 658 Of particular import to Alberta's productivity are graduate students, as they could be expected to generate at least a third of the province's research output, 659 and their contributions to the work of senior researchers positively correlates to heightened productivity. We refer the Expert Panel to the good work of the University of Calgary's Graduate Students' Association on this topic.

Albertan students are already pioneering work in areas that must be strategic priorities if our province hopes to enhance its international standing and diversify its trade partners and diplomatic ties. As Albertans, we recognize that oil and gas has been a boon for our province; we also recognize the importance of innovating our energy sector beyond the production of non-renewables. If the province is looking for innovative work in the field of renewable energy, it need look no further than graduate engineers at the University of Alberta. Some of the answers to the province's high rates of food insecurity could be provided by undergraduate research projects similar to recent work at the University of Calgary. Canadian students have been recognized for their work at the forefront of emerging fields ranging from Al development to alternative avenues of diplomacy, as well as investigating how Canada can expand its soft power through renewed investment in scientific research.

The Business Council of Alberta has explicitly identified that Alberta's economy suffers from a comparatively weaker ability to produce and attract highly educated workers compared to Ontario and British Columbia. 666

Furthermore, by dedicating just 9% of capital spending to research and development, Alberta trails Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec in reaping returns in the form of innovation and growth. 667

Given Alberta's sensitivity to economic uncertainty engendered by the United States, we urge the Expert Panel to recommend that the provincial government should advocate for renewed, meaningful research funding. There is no problem facing the province that our faculty and students cannot address, particularly if we are quick to capitalize on recognized expertise leaving the U.S. in search of new environments. While we understand that the Government of Alberta is limited in its ability to circumvent federal immigration caps, now is an advantageous time for Alberta to invest in research, supporting domestic talent while working to enable the acquisition of much-needed human capital that has been alienated south of the border.



Overview

Many Canadian post-secondaries run Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives. As defined by Physical and Health Education Canada, the purpose of EDI programming is to make "equitable learning environments [where] all students" have an opportunity to learn. The purpose of EDI is not, in principle, to provide "equal treatment for all" students regardless of academic merit, but to account for the learning needs of students with different lived experiences. However, EDI initiatives have been the subject of criticism in recent years, especially in the United States. This culminated in early 2025, when President Donald Trump characterized EDI initiatives as attempts to elevate the value of personal characteristics at the expense of "merit-based" policies, While also being fiscally "wasteful."

Canadian analysts have also expressed concerns with EDI. In 2021, Trent University professor Christopher Dummitt wrote that EDI has created a climate in which a "statistical disparity" in how minorities are represented in certain fields is viewed as "determinative" of discrimination rather than "an invitation to investigate". ⁶⁷² Alberta's former Minister of Advanced Education stated that concerns have arisen around EDI policies for prioritizing the "ideology and immutable characteristics" of potential students over their "merit and abilities."

Federal research funding agencies, especially the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), have received criticism as well. As SSHRC's President acknowledged in early 2025, some perceive the agency to fund research along ideological lines, due to its adoption of some EDI practices. ⁶⁷⁴ Dave Snow, associate professor at the University of Guelph, published critiques of the SSHRC's EDI practices that characterized the SSHRC as "spending millions" on EDI research in ways that encouraged "social justice activism" at the expense of research standards. ^{675,676} In addition, Snow defined 'activist EDI' research as "inherently politicized and ideological" and, therefore, "incompatible with the objective pursuit of truth." ^{677,678}

Because the EDI policies and actions of different Albertan PSIs will be specific to their campuses, we cannot speak to the efficacy—or, even, lack thereof—of EDI policies at PSIs other than the University of Calgary. We refer the Expert Panel to our colleagues with Alberta's other students' associations for further insight into the effects of EDI on their campuses. In this section, we shall use the University of Calgary as a lens through which to address three questions raised by the three most common critiques of EDI in higher education:

- Are EDI initiatives fiscally wasteful?
- Does the University of Calgary ever favour characteristics over merit?
- Do EDI principles threaten the integrity of academic research?

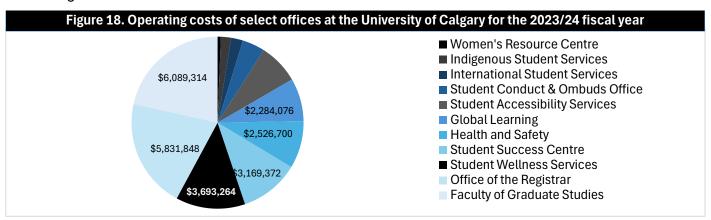
Are EDI initiatives fiscally wasteful?

The University of Calgary runs several EDI-aligned initiatives, ⁶⁷⁹ ranging from online workshops to a data hub that tracks the campus's demography. ^{680,681} Other services that could be described as EDI-aligned include the Office of Indigenous Engagement ⁶⁸² which executes the University's Indigenous Strategy. Established in 2017, this plan centres on attracting more Indigenous students and staff, as well as providing welcoming spaces, such as designated rooms for traditional ceremonies. ⁶⁸³ Elsewhere, the University runs a Faith and Spirituality Centre (FSC) which administers multi-faith spaces for any religious community on campus. ⁶⁸⁴

While we are not privy to the total cost of all EDI programming, we can refer to the University's Mandatory Non-Instructional Fee reports. All students pay a fee to support the operations of Student and Enrolment Services, which houses departments ranging from the Registrar to the on-campus health clinic. Each year, the University reports on how much these offices cost to run.⁶⁸⁵ We have reproduced some of the total costs of offices that could be categorized as aligned with EDI in Figure 18, as well as non-EDI offices for comparison.

For the purposes of the figure, Indigenous Student Services combines the Indigenous Student Access Program, which helps Indigenous students complete bridging requirements, and the Writing Symbols Lodge, a centre that runs cultural programming and advising. The UCSU has also funded some of the Lodge's work. Furthermore, Student Wellness Services refers to both the campus health clinic and the FSC. While the FSC's individual costs are not listed, we would not expect a service that centres on providing prayer spaces to be costlier than similar offices. If we infer that the FSC would cost \$500,000 to operate, akin to the budget for Indigenous student services, total spending on the EDI initiatives in Figure 18 would be \$4.3 million.

At just 0.3% of the University's \$1.6 billion annual budget, the EDI-aligned services in Figure 18 amount to a rounding error in the institution's finances.



Do these services have a return on investment?

We consider, as a case study, the Indigenous student services in Figure 18. Universities Canada writes that Canada's Indigenous population is set to grow by a third by 2041, representing a potential rise in demand for PSE.⁶⁸⁹ As with other demographics, PSE credentials offer positive returns for these students: Indigenous bachelor's graduates are likelier to work in higher-paid professions.⁶⁹⁰ Still, the 2021 census found that half of Indigenous adults had completed a PSE credential, usually a certificate or diploma, compared to 70% of other adults.⁶⁹¹ Furthermore, Indigenous students were especially underrepresented at the undergraduate level. Around 12% had attained a bachelor's, compared to 34% of non-Indigenous graduates.⁶⁹²

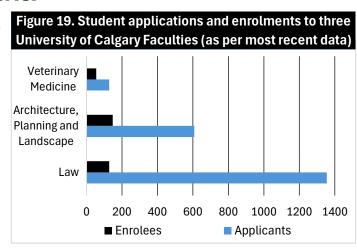
We recall the writing of Christopher Dummitt, who noted that "statistical disparity" is not itself determinative of discrimination. In this case, it is well-documented that Indigenous communities face unique barriers to PSE. Culturally, the legacy of residential schools has given many families reason to distrust Canada's education system. ⁶⁹³ Financially, federal policies have historically reduced paths to economic participation for Indigenous communities. ^{694,695} In Alberta today, Indigenous people in Calgary and Edmonton are twice as likely to live in poverty as other groups ⁶⁹⁶ and the graduation rate of First Nations high schoolers is just over half that of the general population. ⁶⁹⁷ While aspiring Indigenous PSE students can access federal funding via the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), demand has exceeded available funds since 1996. ⁶⁹⁸ As of 2024, only half of PSSSP recipients receive enough to complete a program, ⁶⁹⁹ meaning that these students must choose between self-funding or foregoing PSE.

For those who do reach university, their experience may deter completion. A 2022 University of Alberta report found that 47% of Indigenous students had witnessed or encountered racism in many forms, 700 ranging from inappropriate jokes to racist posters and vandalism of Indigenous spaces. The findings of a 2018 national survey suggest that 45% of Indigenous students will face discrimination on campuses, and a quarter of Indigenous students have felt "unwelcome" at non-Indigenous PSIs. Respondents cited resources such as cultural centres as important for their sense of belonging. Offering services that attract and retain Indigenous students can therefore produce outcomes that benefit not just graduates, but the province overall. The Indigenous Institutes Consortium's 2022 business case for investing in Ontario's Indigenous students calculated that every dollar spent on their PSE would yield a \$3 return in added tax revenue, lowered need for social assistance, and reduced interactions with public health or justice apparatus.

We refer again to Figure 18, and the Indigenous services offered by the University of Calgary. Between 2018 and 2022, Indigenous enrolment rose by 42%.⁷⁰⁶ Indigenous students now constitute 3.5% of our student body,⁷⁰⁷ roughly reflective of Calgary's demography.⁷⁰⁸ The UCSU is proud to have worked with the University towards this outcome. We do not believe the provision of cultural services for these students during their time with us is wasteful: Figure 18 shows that the campus's flagship Indigenous services collectively cost just under \$550,000 in 2023/24, or 0.03% of the University's budget. Our experience is that inclusion is not a zero-sum game, and that these services make our campus a friendlier place. Nor are we aware of any evidence that these programs involve preferential treatment for anyone lacking academic merit, as we shall now review.

Does the University of Calgary ever favour characteristics over merit?

As of 2023/24, students entering the University of Calgary have an average high school grade of 89%. This has risen since 2018/19, when the average grade was from 86.7%. This puts the University of Calgary among Canada's 20 most selective universities. Figure 19 shows this selectivity at work in the acceptance rate of some faculties. All No admissions pathway permits carte blanche admission based on personal characteristics. The University does, however, offer alternative pathways for some applicants who fall slightly short of ordinary admissions standards: the Indigenous Admission Process, and the Equitable and Inclusive Admission Process.



Indigenous Admission Process (IAP)

Indigenous students who meet their desired program's course requirements but attained high school grades below the University's competitive admission average are considered under the IAP. Their average cannot be below 70% and they must be within 10% of the competitive admission average for their preferred program. Table 20 provides the high school averages (themselves averaged by Faculty) required to enrol in certain Faculties at the University. As the table shows, Indigenous students still must earn strong K-12 grades to be considered for admission under the IAP.

Table 20. High school averages required for an offer of admission as of fall 2025 at the University of Calgary, averaged by Faculty				
Arts	Kinesiology	Business	Medicine (Non-MD)	Education (Rural route)
82%	87.4%	84%	82%	75%
Engineering	Science	Education	Nursing	Architecture
90%	88%	85.6%	91%	83%

Given the historical context surrounding Indigenous students' engagement with PSE—which we have only briefly touched upon here—we believe that this relatively modest accommodation is an appropriate recognition of how an Indigenous high schooler's grades on paper may not be entirely reflective of their full potential. In other words, this policy merely recognizes that mitigating factors may have affected Indigenous students whose cases are 'borderline'. If accepted, students will undergo the same academic assessments as the rest of their cohort. Graduation is contingent on achievement; there is no IAP for graduate programs.

Interestingly, Table 20 provides that the University's least competitive program is the Four-Year Community-Based Bachelor of Education.⁷¹⁶ Preference is given to Albertans "in rural and remote areas," as the program is designed to "mitigate" high teacher turnover in these localities by providing a pathway for aspiring teachers who already live there.⁷¹⁷ This program could be described as meeting the principles of equity and inclusion. Albertans who live rurally, regardless of any additional personal characteristics, are likelier to have lower household incomes,⁷¹⁸ experience child poverty,⁷¹⁹ and face challenges accessing public services.⁷²⁰ In the long run, however, introducing more teachers into rural areas is one step towards strengthening them, yielding economic benefits for the province. Therefore, this program and its admissions average—as with the similar policies at the University—serves as a practical investment in future community-building.

Equitable and Inclusive Admission Process (EIAP)

Prospective undergraduates who do not meet the University's usual admissions standards may apply for special consideration under the EIAP if they believe factors beyond their control "impacted [their] success, opportunities, and ability to succeed." They can make a case for their suitability to a reviewing committee, outlining their achievements despite obstacles they may have encountered. The committee is not obligated to accept anyone and applicants who are refused cannot appeal. Aspiring students still need to meet a set

of academic criteria to apply: they must have completed prerequisites for their chosen program, including English.⁷²⁴ Some bachelor's programs do not accept EIAP applications and no graduate programs accept them.⁷²⁵ Therefore, successful students need to pass the same academic assessments as everyone else in order to graduate, and meet the same expectations if they wish to complete a master's or doctorate.

While the University states that this pathway is ordinarily utilized by students from "minority groups" such as racialized minorities or LGBT+ students, there is no rule that applicants must belong to a demographic that has faced historical barriers to PSE.⁷²⁶ On the face of it, a white, male student from a middle-income family may not appear to ordinarily qualify. However, it is possible that his academic attainment was stunted by a learning disability such as dyslexia that went undiagnosed for many years; perhaps his grades suffered due to a bereavement around the time of his Grade 12 examinations.

We recall the Minister of Advanced Education stating that applicants "should be evaluated based on their merit and abilities" instead of immutable characteristics. The UCSU does not believe policies like the EIAP contradict this view. While high school grades are certainly one measure of a student's ability, the hypotheticals we provided show that exceptional circumstances can impact a student's K-12 attainment in ways that do not fully reflect their aptitude. Resilience in the face of hardship is, itself, an 'ability' that may demonstrate a student's suitability for PSE. If the Expert Panel is looking for a sensible, practical application of EDI principles that is open to anyone who may need it, we believe that the University of Calgary's approach is one that could lead by example.

Do EDI initiatives threaten the integrity of academic research?

As the Council of Canadian Academies observed in 2024, EDI practices in PSE are commonly associated with the humanities and social sciences. In Canada, the federal agency responsible for funding research in the humanities and social sciences is the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). As Table 21 illustrates, the SSHRC broadly offers funding through three streams (all of which have sub-streams): Research Training and Talent Development, Insight Research, and Research Partnerships.

Table 21. Umbrellas administered by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council			
Funding umbrellas and their definitions			
Research Training and Talent Insight Research Research Partnerships			
Development			
Supports research into, and	Supports research designed to build	Supports research into the co-	
development of, research skills in the	knowledge and understanding about	creation and exchange of knowledge	
social sciences and humanities.	people, societies and the world.	across disciplines and sectors.	

We recall that SSHRC has been perceived by some as funding research along ideological lines.⁷³¹ Professor Dave Snow characterized the agency as "spending millions" on EDI research to the effect of encouraging "social justice activism" at the expense of research standards.⁷³² In addition, Snow defined 'activist EDI' research as "inherently politicized and ideological" and, therefore, "incompatible with the objective pursuit of truth."^{733,734} We will refer to Snow's work throughout this section because it serves as an effective shorthand for the most common critiques of EDI in Canadian higher education. His views on EDI in research have been discussed in the media^{735,736} and were presented to the federal government's Standing Committee on Science and Research in December 2024.⁷³⁷ It is also helpful to refer to Snow's work as it expresses concerns through data, which allows for more direct analysis.

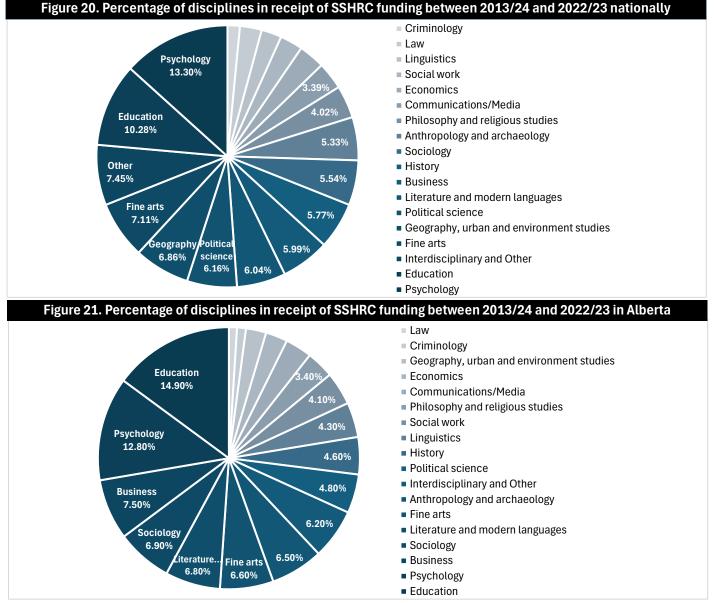
How much federal money is spent on EDI research?

Overall, Snow found two non-permanent grants offered by the SSHRC had fostered the most 'activist' research. The first was the 2023 installment of the Knowledge Synthesis Grant, which funded thirty projects at a total cost of \$900,000 on privilege and marginalization. The second was the Race, Gender and Diversity Initiative, under which applicants could apply for \$450,000, disbursed over three years, for research focusing on underrepresented groups. The projects were funded under this stream at a cost of \$19.2 million. The Having reviewed the titles of the winning projects, Snow concluded that 63% were "activist" in nature. Still, he was less critical of research produced by the SSHRC's other funding streams, assessing that less than 10% of their funded output could be characterized as "activist" in tone.

As Snow acknowledges, the two SSHRC grants that produced the most 'activist' research at the time of his 2025 critique were not permanent. The Race, Gender and Diversity Initiative was a one-time competition in 2021⁷⁴⁴ and the Knowledge Synthesis Grant on 'privilege and marginalization' was the 2023 entry into an ongoing yearly series. Previous topics in the series included public transit⁷⁴⁵ and the digital economy.⁷⁴⁶

We first consider the cost of these grants. The Knowledge Synthesis Grant disbursed a total of \$900,000, or 0.09% of the SSHRC's \$1.06 billion total spending that year. The Race, Gender and Diversity Initiative cost \$19.2 million over three years, beginning in 2021/22. The SSHRC's core budget between 2021/22 and 2023/24 was \$3.24 billion, this initiative constituted just 0.6%. While Snow was technically correct to say that "millions" of federal funding went to EDI-aligned research through these temporary projects, it is important context that they nonetheless took up under a percentage point of the SSHRC's overall spending.

To get a better idea of the type of projects that receive SSHRC funding, we look to an analysis performed by two graduate students from the University of Alberta, who reviewed 35,828 projects funded by the SSHRC's major permanent funding streams between the fiscal years of 2013/14 and 2022/23.⁷⁴⁹ They also looked at the 2,535 Albertan projects that received funding.⁷⁵⁰ Overall, their sample size constitutes 76% of the 47,000 disbursements made by SSHRC in this time.⁷⁵¹ We reproduce their findings in Figures 20 and 21.



The category of "Interdisciplinary and other" refers to research in the fields of interdisciplinary studies, as well as research in an unspecified field. For ease of reference, we also include in this category disciplines that received less than a percentage point of total funding, which are as follows: folklore, industrial relations, archival sciences, classics/classical languages, demography, library/information sciences, medical sciences, medieval sciences, natural sciences, engineering.

As the figures provide, the two disciplines in receipt of most SSHRC funding, nationally and provincially, are education and psychology. These fields received 24% of all funding in Canada and 28% of all funding in Alberta. In Alberta specifically, these disciplines plus business received 35% of all funding. With this in mind, we consider how much of this research would conceivably be harmfully 'activist' under Snow's definition.

Ostensibly, academics who are wary of EDI practices in research are concerned that the work will be done with preordained conclusions in mind. In other words, 'activist' research prioritizes non-empirical evidence (what a researcher surmises *ought* to be true) over evidence-based epistemology (what is *measurably* true). While no discipline is immune from unfalsifiable claims, the structures of education, psychology and business

as academic disciplines centre on the achievement and maintenance of objective metrics. These include the grades attained by learners, patients' wellness outcomes, or commercial fiscal benchmarks. As such, these disciplines do not lend themselves as easily to normative work as, for example, the more interpretative disciplines of fine arts or literature. Additionally, as Figure 22 shows, the disciplines in receipt of the most funding in Alberta roughly correlate to the size of those disciplines as a share of all arts and humanities enrolments in Albertan universities. Therefore, SSHRC's funding patterns are more suggestive of supply and demand than ideology.

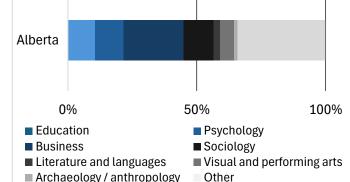


Figure 22. University enrolments by arts and humanities

disciplines in Alberta, Fall 2022/23 - Statistics Canada

How influential are EDI principles over which projects gets funding?

In 2018, the federal Tri-Agencies responsible for funding research conducted by Canadian PSIs launched an EDI Action Plan. The plan's stated aim was to introduce EDI principles into the research ecosystem, although the agencies did not embark on systemic reforms to achieve these outcomes. Rather, the agencies modified existing guidelines to meet a pair of objectives, the first being to improve participation in research from underrepresented groups. This is executed through SSHRC guidelines on EDI best practices, which encourage researchers to 'consider' forming diverse research groups, or ensuring that sample sizes are more representative of the population. These suggestions are not mandatory, nor are applicants directed to change anything about their work. The SSHRC also does not make unsubstantiated claims that certain groups are less represented in research due to discrimination rather than mere statistical disparity: the agency's guidelines contain links to empirical research that informed its practices.

The second objective was to make access to Tri-Agency support fairer.⁷⁵⁸ In practice, this saw SSHRC introduce a thirty-minute training video on unconscious bias that proposal reviewers must view before they can assess applications.⁷⁵⁹ Otherwise, merit reviewers are not directed to place any weight on the presence or absence of EDI principles within applications.⁷⁶⁰ As for applicants, there is no mention of EDI in the eligibility criteria for one of SSHRC's major funding streams, Insight Grants,⁷⁶¹ or its application instructions.⁷⁶² While applicants for doctoral awards and Partnership Grants are encouraged to incorporate EDI practices "as appropriate," what this means is left to their discretion, and there is no penalty for declining to include any.^{763,764}

We shall briefly take a closer look at the practice of unconscious bias training. As a concept, unconscious bias derives from the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which purports to measure which traits people automatically associate with one group over another. The IAT is not universally accepted: one literature review observed that IAT-led research lacks a common definition of which implicit processes the test is trying to measure, thus calling findings around the test into question. While the catalyst of unconscious bias research may be worthy of critique, empirical evidence of the phenomenon has been obtained via other means. A 2004 study found that candidates with stereotypically white names attracted more callbacks from recruiters than résumés with stereotypically African American names. This study was replicated in 2011, This 2012, This are 2012, This and 2016. This another example is a 2012 study that tracked how a sample of professors judged two equally qualified job candidates, one male and one female. All deemed the male candidate to be more competent, regardless of whether the professor had expressed explicitly negative views about women.

Therefore, rather than deriving from unfounded or 'activist' practices, the SSHRC's primary EDI practice in merit reviews appears to have empirical foundations. It is also important to consider the effects of the single session on unconscious bias that SSHRC merit reviewers undertake. In 2018, a review conducted for the United Kingdom's government found that, while one session of unconscious bias training may be effective for raising short-term awareness, it is unlikely to impact behaviour long-term. From this, we posit that SSHRC's EDI practices with regards to training merit reviewers cannot be described as intended to further an ideology. They are unintrusive and serve the narrow, specific purpose of demonstrating a commitment to all applicants receiving a fair chance. Overall, SSHRC notes that it has seen little deviation from its procedures since 2008, when an International Blue Ribbon Panel concluded that SSHRC's peer-review process was conducted according to the "highest international standards."

Is EDI-aligned research incompatible with the scientific method?

We refer again to Dave Snow's critique of EDI practices in research, which he describes as "incompatible with the creation of objective, falsifiable knowledge." He characterizes this work as intended to "dismantle" existing institutions "rather than merely improving the representation of underrepresented groups within them." To calculate how much research funded by SSHRC fit this definition, he reviewed the titles of SSHRC-funded projects and found two streams were particularly associated with 'activist' language in project titles, one being the 2023 entry of the Knowledge Synthesis Grant.

We note that the premise of this argument relies on accepting that any research which strongly criticizes existing institutions could only have been innately unscientific. However, all SSHRC applications are assessed for merit by reviewers who are experts with a research track record. The SSHRC does not publish papers, finished articles must still undergo the peer review processes of academic journals if the researchers wish to publish. Furthermore, Snow acknowledges that his categorization of projects as 'activist' was a "subjective exercise" derived from identifying titles that "clearly adopted language associated with EDI". We caution that any criterion for what makes language "clearly" unacademic reflects only a critic's opinion. For example, consider a reader who is of the opinion that bicycles are preferable to buses. They could interpret a SSHRC-funded project about "place-based transit solutions" for rural Canada a activism for suggesting that transit is necessary at all. Dismissing EDI-aligned research as innately unmeritorious risks conflating findings a critic personally does not like for findings reached erroneously. This is an important distinction to make, as leaving it unchallenged imperils the principle of academic freedom.

We also consider the view that EDI practices are incompatible with "objective" knowledge. This, too, is a matter of opinion: SSHRC has taken the position that infusing EDI practices into research *reduces* subjective or incomplete work. SHHRC's EDI guidelines provide the agency's reasoning. Asking researchers to consider factors such as unconscious bias while crafting a proposal can reveal "implicit assumptions... that may otherwise [have gone] unnoticed and unchallenged."⁷⁸¹ Encouraging teams to approach their work and findings with nuance where appropriate prevents "overgeneralizations of findings that can be harmful or misleading."⁷⁸² SSHRC's promotion of EDI principles seems to us to have more to do with finances than any ideology. Incorporating more segments of the population into research has the effect of expanding that research's real-world applications⁷⁸³—which, in turn, represents more value for money to the funding body.

One example of how failing to conduct inclusive research can lead to harm is in the field of health. In the United States, pre-menopausal women were excluded from participating in health research until 1993.⁷⁸⁴ Given that the U.S.'s National Institutes of Health oversees the world's largest biomedical science research apparatus,⁷⁸⁵ this damaged science's understanding of women's health. Women continue to be underrepresented in health research, even in areas of medicine where they constitute the majority of real-world patients,⁷⁸⁶ and women from racial minority backgrounds are some of the least represented.⁷⁸⁷ Researchers are now working to understand how symptoms manifestly differently between male and female patients in a range of conditions from cardiovascular disease⁷⁸⁸ to osteoarthritis.⁷⁸⁹ Uncertainty around how these conditions present differently based on sex has been suggested as one of the reasons why women receive diagnoses an average of two years later than men for the same diseases.⁷⁹⁰

We further warn that dismissals of certain practices as 'bad science' should, themselves, be evaluated critically. Although not focused on EDI directly, psychology provides a cautionary tale. In 2015, the discipline attracted media scrutiny in Canada^{791,792} and beyond^{793,794,795} when the Center for Open Science reported the results of its attempt to replicate 100 published psychology experiments. Their conclusion, which has been

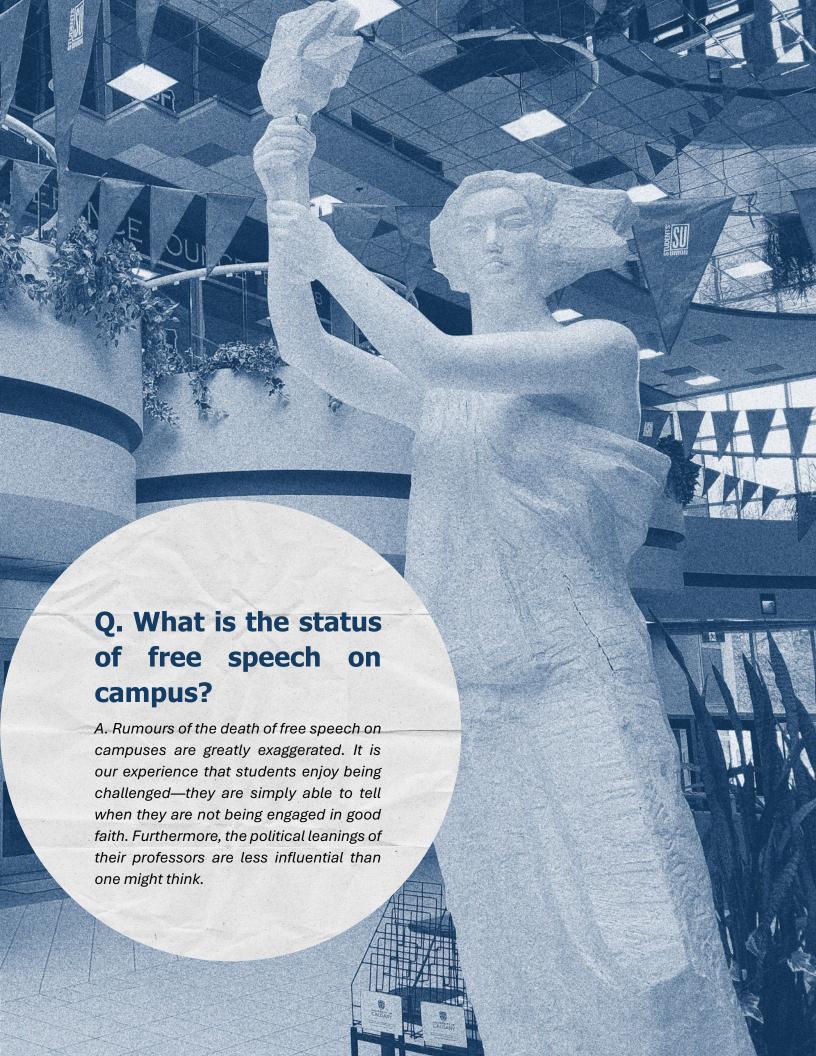
cited over 10,000 times as of May 2025,⁷⁹⁶ was that just 47% could be repeated.⁷⁹⁷ A year later, the Center's study was assessed to contain errors itself by a team from the Universities of Harvard and Virginia.⁷⁹⁸ The studies had been replicated only once, and under different enough conditions that they were essentially new experiments: a study that originally involved asking Israeli participants to imagine the effects of military service was changed to asking Americans the same of honeymoons.⁷⁹⁹ When some of the experiments were repeated more faithfully by the Many Labs Project, and repeated over 30 times each to produce a wider pool of results, 85% could be replicated—a better crop of falsifiable research than the Center for Open Science claimed.^{800,801}

Analysis

When considering the expense of EDI programming at the University of Calgary, these services appear to cost very little compared to the return on investment they yield in the form of attracting learners who may have been traditionally less interested in pursuing higher education. These initiatives can therefore represent a strategic investment that has economic returns for Alberta later.

While the University of Calgary provides certain admissions accommodations for learners, these provide for equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes. All students will still be judged on their own academic merits, thus maintaining the integrity of what a degree is worth.

Finally, in the area of research, EDI practices are at worst of modest influence, and can at best lead to important improvements in data quality. Far from compromising on the integrity of research standards, these initiatives serve to challenge researchers to broaden the scope of their inquiry in ways they may not have considered.



Overview

In 2019, Alberta's post-secondary institutions (PSIs) were tasked by the Ministry of Advanced Education to adapt into policy the Chicago Principles, 802,803 a set of guiding principles intended to foster and protect free speech on campuses. 804 Summarized from the original 2014 draft by the University of Chicago, these are: 805

- latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn.
- 2. A PSI should respect and support the freedom of its community to discuss any problem, unless limitations are necessary to the institution's functioning.
- 3. Debate cannot be suppressed if ideas are considered by some or most of the PSI's community to be offensive, wrong-headed or immoral.
- 4. It is not the role of a PSI to shield individuals from disagreeable or offensive ideas. Concerns about civility and respect do not justify closing off discussion.

- 1. A PSI should afford its community the broadest possible 5. It is up to members of a PSI's community, not the PSI, to protest ideas they oppose; they must be enabled to do so.
 - **6**. Members are subsequently free to protest speakers, including speakers invited to campus, provided they do not obstruct the freedom to discuss views.
 - 7. Freedom to express or debate does not mean individuals can say whatever they wish anywhere. Institutions can reasonably limit the time, place and manner of expression.
 - 8. Post-secondaries can restrict expression that violates law, invades privacy, threatens or harasses, defames a specific person, or interferes with the institution's function.

Free speech in Albertan higher education would next made headlines in 2023, when the Ministry of Advanced Education announced that PSIs would be required to report annually to the government on their efforts to protect free speech on campuses, such as whether any events were cancelled or complaints were received. 806 This was announced after students and staff at the University of Lethbridge protested talks due to be given by controversial academic Frances Widdowson.⁸⁰⁷ This epitomized a recent trend in North American student protests, especially in the United States, in which students on several campuses "shut down speakers they disagreed with."808 This characterization comes from 2023 reporting by Inside Higher Ed.809

Free speech proponents could find merit to the perspectives of both the speakers, PSIs, and protestors within the context of the Chicago Principles. Students have the right to lawfully protest, even if they are not civil and respectful as they do so. Speakers, even those met with protests, have the right to discuss their views without obstruction. Institutions, too, can limit the mode and manner of expression for operational purposes. Within this framework, we consider the state of free speech on campuses, and when protest constitutes censorship.

Controversial speakers: the line between protest and censorship

Free speech derives from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which enshrines a right to freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression. This right may be subject to "reasonable limits" that can be justified within the context of a "free and democratic society." PSIs hold a unique place in this balance. A university's core purpose, as described in the case of R v Whatcott [2013], is to provide "learning opportunities" and to take no unnecessary action to prevent these opportunities.811

In what circumstances can expression on a campus be lawfully limited? Inciting violence contrary to the Criminal Code is one obvious scenario,812 but for other cases, the Supreme Court of Canada established a test in R v Oakes [1986]813 to assess when limiting Charter rights may be lawful. Although intended for government bodies, the test has been applied to the actions of Albertan PSIs. 814 Under Oakes, a body seeking to limit speech or expression must satisfy the following (adapted from the annotated source):815

- the exercise of a Charter right must be limitation imposed impairs the Charter limiting action must demonstrate that pressing and substantial and the right as little as possible or is within a limiting action taken must be rationally range of reasonably supportable connected to the reason.
- 1. The reason why a body seeks to limit 2. The body must demonstrate that the 3. The body seeking to conduct the alternatives.
 - the beneficial effects of the action are not outweighed by negative effects to the Charter right.

The University of Calgary itself was judged to have violated the Oakes test in R v Whatcott,816 a case concerning its decision to trespass an activist who was distributing flyers that some found offensive. The court held that the University had no pressing reason to remove a peaceful activist. In any case, engaging trespass legislation was an unreasonable response that amounted to "denial of a learning opportunity."817 This can be compared to the events at the University of Lethbridge that led to the creation of more free speech policies.

Much has been written about the substance of Widdowson's views, including by the UCSU,818 so we shall not revisit them here. As for the events, most reporting agrees that Widdowson was invited by a professor to give at least two talks: one in class and one in a public atrium. B19,820 Backlash from the campus community ensued, and, after consulting with outside experts, the University decided not to secure a public stage for Widdowson, but it would also not interfere with the classroom lecture. Widdowson gave the in-class lecture without incident, taking questions from interested students throughout. S23 She returned the next day to engage with anyone gathered in the public atrium. Ale by both protestors and supporters, she was ultimately escorted away from campus on safety grounds. Ale by both protestors and supporters.

While the events on campus were emotionally charged for some, nothing was necessarily denied to Widdowson that was due under the Chicago Principles. Indeed, these Principles primarily establish duties between a PSI and its academic community; they say little about guests attending outside of a learning capacity. ULethbridge did not interfere with its professor's right to incorporate a speaker of their choosing. It only declined to procure this guest a stage once their capacity was that of an independent speaker in a public gathering-place. Under the Principles, external persons are not entitled to receive a protected platform from a PSI, nor can a PSI compel members of its community to be respectful to speakers whose views, rightly or wrongly, they do not respect, especially when that speaker engages them in a non-learning environment.

So what is the difference between engaging students in a classroom to engaging them in an atrium? After all, it can be said that restricting controversial views to a classroom defeats the purpose of a university being a place for all learning opportunities. Certainly, peaceful speakers should not be barred from talking to students on campuses if they wish; in fact, Widdowson did so two days in a row.

To illustrate the UCSU's understanding of student protests as a competitive interest to speakers exercising free speech, we apply the *Whatcott* ruling to a hypothetical activist who lawfully expresses controversial views. Most would likely agree that trespassing this activist if they simply share views on a campus does not warrant any *Oakes* limitations. What, then, if this activist entered a class mid-lecture and usurped a professor? We expect most would agree that the rights of students to receive the education they actually paid for could outweigh the right of an activist to impose an alternative learning opportunity. This would hold true even if most students in the classroom happened to agree with the activist and a minority did not.

With this in mind, the debate around free speech on campuses often omits one critical dimension. Are speakers with whom students decline to engage truly there to provide students with a learning opportunity, or are they engaging in bad faith? It is our experience that students can tell the difference. To use the events at Lethbridge as an example, we note that the speaker's planned talk was entitled *How 'Woke-ism' Threatens Academic Freedom.*⁸²⁷ Whether the speaker intended it or not, this is the sort of divisive language that prompts some students to evaluate whether a speaker has legitimate academic interests. In this case, when the speaker sought their attention, students gave it: they simply did so with as much respect as they felt they themselves were shown. This could explain the difference in responses Widdowson received inside a classroom and outside it.

After all, we do not often receive complaints from students whose professors challenged their views. In fact, professors who defy, disagree with, and differ from students ideologically are often the professors that students like most. Below are reviews of different University of Calgary faculty members that are the highest rated (4 points out of 5 or above) on Rate My Professors, a website that allows students to anonymously evaluate their instructors. 828 Sorted by faculty, each quotation pertains to a different instructor.

Philosophy

"[A] remarkable professor. He creates a safe environment for critical and thought provoking discussion."

"[The] best university class I have taken so far. There was a lot of class discussion and debate."

Communications

"He doesn't expect you to... regurgitate his opinion; as long as you can back up your claims he will mark you well."

Political Science

"A great choice... very approachable [and] lets students disagree with her own points of view."

Kinesiology

"She's very open-minded and encourages discussion, even of opinions that may not necessarily be politically correct."

Δrí

"One of my favourite profs. Very open to out of the box ideas and respects you as long as you respect the class."

Business

"This class is a must-take... [He] will challenge your opinions."

Archaeology

"[While] his lectures cover some (often) contentious topics, he was always super respectful of every opinion and welcomed dissent."

"Unbiased. You can have an opinion and not be scolded for it - in fact, he encourages a very open discussion."

Art History

"She knows her stuff... but [is] open to changes to her thinking."

English

"Values arguments that you actually argue for, and from what I can tell likes originality or a unique voice."

"Everyone's opinion is valid, so long as you can back it up. She doesn't let her opinions affect your grade."

Spanish

"[An] amazing prof. She is engaging and wants you to think for yourself instead of taking her opinions..."

Social Work

"[He] pushes boundaries in all aspects and encourages free critical thinking."

Anthropology

"Engaging lectures with interesting content and readings. She has an open mind and is interested in hearing others' opinions."

Psychology

"Amazing prof... Ask him any question and he [will] back his argument up, while also giving you opposing opinions."

"Students are... required to read and think, discuss articles and express their opinions. I would strongly encourage [taking] this course."

Law

"Amazing professor [who is] open and accepting of all opinions."

Education

"I was actually quite sad when our course was over. Lectures are very thought provoking and she's very respectful of everyone's opinions."

History

"Best class I have ever taken... [The professor] was very good at encouraging classroom discussion and open to diverse viewpoints."

Engineering

"[She] encourages questions [and] also gives and receives feedback and honesty."

Canadian Studies

"[He] encourages student participation in class. He seems genuinely interested in what you have to say."

As we shall show later in this section, protests that involve students shouting over anyone are rare, at least in Alberta. It is our experience that the few students who do protest in this way see their actions as the opposite of censorship: their protests often provide publicity for speakers and invite condemnations of the protestors themselves for being radical or hostile to free speech. Students are fully aware that their protest will likely yield this outcome and that they are unlikely to win many hearts and minds. However, rightly or wrongly, they see these speakers' views as genuinely dangerous to the wellbeing of their communities or friends, because they are often quite well-informed about the speaker and the topics that will be raised. These students reach the conclusion that the speaker is not there to provide a learning opportunity.

This is not a judgement of whose provocation is morally 'better.' Although we are aware that students' associations receive criticism for themselves being ideologically driven, we suspect this view may derive more from our colleagues outside Alberta. The UCSU has received recognition for being non-partisan, including during elections, ⁸²⁹ and our student leaders decline to elevate their personal views in the media. ⁸³⁰ We provide services to all political student clubs that register with us from across the spectrum. ⁸³¹ These clubs with conflicting ideologies participate in events such as Clubs Week together every year, wherein students set up booths without incident or malice. ⁸³² (This is something many elected parliamentarians of all stripes around the world fail to do; our students could teach them how it is done.)

Thus, when the UCSU issues statements that appear to cast moral judgement on a controversy's substance, we do so because our duty is not to represent the speaker. They have often demonstrated they are quite capable of going against the grain themselves. Rather, our responsibility is to our students. Sometimes a student's conclusions will be unrefined; they are, after all, students, who have already conceded they have more to learn by virtue of pursuing further education. In other cases, their activism will be vindicated in time. Indeed, outside the UCSU office stands the Goddess of Democracy statue, which commemorates students who died in the defence of free speech during the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations.⁸³³

Yet whether a speaker's views are unlawful is one for the courts; what the UCSU is concerned about is how safe and welcome undergraduates of any background feel on their campus. We consider only whether a speaker's conduct seems to be impeding the ability of students we represent to fully engage with and benefit from the education they pay a great deal for. It is the UCSU's experience that the undergraduates we represent truly enjoy having their views challenged in ways that help their personal growth. They do not like feeling as though they are being provoked for the satisfaction of bad-faith actors who wish to make a point.

In sum, universities should of course ensure the full academic freedom of faculty. Members of a PSI's community should be given all the support required to teach as they see fit, even if some students do not like the viewpoint or perspective presented, and even if their decisions are unpopular. At the same time, the UCSU supports the rights of our students to give as much respect as they are shown by speakers who are not genuinely interested in educating them; their right to feel welcome and comfortable on their campus; and their right to reject any suggestion that every "learning opportunity" is equal. As Table 22 shows, the reports on the

status of free speech issued by Albertan PSIs should be read with optimism, and our institutions should be commended: all these concepts are currently coexisting very well on our campuses.

Table 22. Mandatory free speech reporting by Albertan post-secondaries for the 2023-24 fiscal year				
No events were cancelled due to free speech and no formal complaints were received related to free speech or expression.	University of Alberta ⁸³⁴ University of Lethbridge ⁸³⁵ Mount Royal University ⁸³⁶ Olds College ⁸³⁷ NAIT ⁸³⁸ Red Deer Polytechnic ⁸³⁹	SAIT ⁸⁴¹ Medicine Hat College ⁸⁴² Bow Valley College ⁸⁴³ Ambrose University ⁸⁴⁴ Northern Lakes College ⁸⁴⁵ Lethbridge Polytechnic ⁸⁴⁶	MacEwan University ⁸⁴⁹ Athabasca University ⁸⁵⁰ Lakeland College ⁸⁵¹ Burman University ⁸⁵² NorQuest College ⁸⁵³ St. Mary's University ⁸⁵⁴	
	Concordia University of Edmonton ⁸⁴⁰	Portage College ⁸⁴⁷ The Banff Centre ⁸⁴⁸	The King's University ⁸⁵⁵ Keyano College ⁸⁵⁶	
No events were cancelled; one formal complaint related to free speech was received.	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·	University of Calgary ⁸⁵⁷ f member removed political posters were reinstated, and the show went	•	

Do university instructors advance freedom of speech and political opinion?

Of course, the above is moot if we accept reports that Canadian faculty are politically homogenous and unlikely to teach opposing views. A 2021 survey of Canadian faculty conducted for the MacDonald-Laurier Institute (MLI) found that 88% of professors identified themselves as somewhat or very left-leaning. This could, as the report described it, deprive students of "the best and most varied knowledge." Its findings were amplified by the media and presented to the Standing Committee on Science and Research.

However, it is important to state that this survey received 1,043 responses,⁸⁶² representing just 4% of the 26,218 professors contacted.⁸⁶³ This by itself is informative, as research suggests people with left-leaning views are likelier to participate in surveys or research than those with right-leaning views.^{864,865,866} In fact, the more partisan a left-wing participant, the likelier they are to answer a survey.⁸⁶⁷ People with right-leaning views can also be likelier to experience 'survey fatigue.'⁸⁶⁸ We note that the survey was conducted in March 2022, six months after a federal election⁸⁶⁹ and four months before elections in Canada's most-populated province.⁸⁷⁰ It is possible that the MLI report reflects only that motivated left-leaning voters are more likely to answer surveys, and pollsters should not expect representative samples just after elections.

Furthermore, it is unclear how the survey acquired its statistical sample. The authors describe acquiring the emails of 26,218 professors by consulting uniRank, a website that lists universities by various criteria, such as their reputation, social media presence, or alphabetical name order.⁸⁷¹ The authors do not say which list they used or if the pollsters emailed every professor they could find at a given institution. Still, there were 52,215 people working as university professors in Canada as of the end of 2020, just over a year before the survey occurred.⁸⁷² This means the pollsters contacted roughly half of all professors in Canada, of which their sample of 1,043 respondents represents just 2%. Despite this, the report claims to provide "robust and concrete evidence of the current situation at Canadian universities."

It would also be useful to know in which provinces the faculty respondents voted. The report states that 76% voted for either the Liberal or New Democratic Party (NDP) in the 2021 general election, 874 without a breakdown of party affiliation by province. It does, however, present the results of a similar poll of the general public, including participation rates by province. 875 This poll's results are mostly representative of the 2021 election results. 876 Without knowing which provinces the faculty respondents voted in as well, we cannot draw conclusions about faculty nationwide. It could be that professors in Nova Scotia, where the Liberals and NDP received 64% of the vote, were overrepresented. 877 Had the survey received responses only from professors in Alberta, where those parties received 34.6%, 878 the report might warrant further investigation.

Still, even if we accept that professors are likelier to lean left, the question becomes whether these professors would impose their beliefs on their students. To privately hold certain views is one thing; to banish opposing views from their classroom is quite another. This is something that the MLI investigation considered. The surveyed professors, as well as a sample of the public, were asked to rank three aspects of a professor's job from most to least important, 879 the results of which are reproduced in Table 23 below.

1st

(45% ranked it first)

Table 23. The most common results of a survey asking professors and members of the general public to rank three				
aspects of a professor's job, according to their importance – Ledger survey (2021)				
Aspect of professor's job	Ranking by professors	Ranking by public		
Teach and conduct research that aims to advance knowledge of and	1 st	1 st		
improve our understanding of the world.	(75% ranked it first)	(45% ranked it first)		
Teach and conduct research that aims to shape and change society.	2 nd	3rd		
	(53% ranked it second)	(56% ranked it first)		

3rd

(67% ranked it third)

The report interprets Table 23 as meaning that the public believes professors should improve students' career prospects, while professors place more value on "other matters including... changing society".880 As such, the report concluded that the society-shaping aspirations of faculty could curtail their openness "to all points of view."881 Yet Table 23 could be read as showing the opposite, in that the public placed greater importance on subjective ideals. They were likelier to agree that professors should create workers with "good career prospects," but what makes a good worker likely depends on one's beliefs about which skills are valuable. Interestingly, a 2015 survey for Universities Canada found that 65% of Canadians believe a university's main job should be to help students become "good contributors to society," while only 35% believed it should be to help students meet "economic goals." In any case, in MLI's investigation, the public sample was less likely to believe that the main role of a professor is simply to "advance knowledge," which is arguably the most politically agnostic of the three statements.

Professors, meanwhile, were nearly twice as likely to believe their main purpose is to "advance knowledge." The professors' answers may have also been influenced by the wording of the statements put to them. The statements referred not just to their teaching, but their teaching and research. It is possible that professors believed their research may lead to societal change in some way, but they had no aspirations of executing societal change in the classroom. With this in mind, we refer again to reviews made by University of Calgary students on certain faculty members. Below is another sample of Rate My Professor reviews, sharing the thoughts of students on faculty who had discussed their personal politics. 883

"[A] great teacher. He is conservative, but he presents material in an unbiased manner."

Teach and conduct research that aims to help students find good

career prospects.

"While I don't agree with [all of his] political opinions, I appreciated that he poked fun at all political parties."

"Very compassionate and genuinely nice... Certainly left leaning, but what does it matter."

"I am the biggest socialist ever, and his conservative tendencies didn't irk me because he had logical arguments..."

"Well organized, methodical and personable. Left wing for sure but highly respectful of others' views."

"Would take again... Hilarious lecturer [who] does go on little political rants."

"I found him very warm and approachable... his class was really unbiased even towards his own [beliefs]."

"[She] does have some strong opinions [but] as someone that disagreed with some... her class was still amazing."

"I don't agree with his politics [but] he is an excellent teacher who respects opposing views. He's pretty cool for a rightwinger."

"[He] is very knowledgeable and has his opinions but presents the material in a rather unbiased way."

While this sample is anecdotal, we consider these reviews alongside our earlier sample of reviews from some of the University's highest-rated professors. Together, the picture painted of the University's teaching culture is that students enjoy teachers who challenge them constructively. When they do not agree with a professor's opinion, students are capable of respecting one that is well-reasoned, or at the very least overlooking it.

This should be considered in the context of commentary by some Canadian political figures in recent years who characterized Canadian university professors as "agents of left-wing indoctrination." 884 This would require students to place outsized importance on the beliefs of their professors over every other influence in their life, and for PSIs to overwhelmingly produce left-wing graduates. Yet this is not borne out by research:

changing between enrolment and graduation. Other factors did have an influence, such as a student's socioeconomic status and whether they attended a religious school.885

A 2008 American study found that the political leanings of 2023 research from the United Kingdom found that most faculty was not predictive of a student's own views left-leaning students held their political views at the point of enrolment; institutions did not influence the students but rather, this demographic was likelier to enrol in PSE in the first place.886

These findings mirrored a 1971 survey of Canadian students, which concluded that experiences prior to enrolment were more predictive of political leanings. Relevant factors included the student's religiosity, their family's political beliefs, and whether they already planned to go on to graduate studies.⁸⁸⁷

A 2011 survey of British youth found a link between family wealth and political engagement in general.⁸⁸⁸

Another Canadian study in 1996 found that students who personally interacted often with a professor who had strong political views were no likelier to adopt their views than students in the class who rarely interacted with them.⁸⁸⁹

More U.S.-based research in 2009 found that not only were changes to students' political leanings over the course of one academic year unrelated to their professors' beliefs, but most students were also unaware of the views of their most "strongly partisan" professors.⁸⁹⁰

A 2022 study of American students found they became slightly more conservative in their first year, and they were more influenced by their roommates than faculty.⁸⁹¹

A 1936 experiment conducted to gauge influences on the views of U.S. students ahead of the Roosevelt-Landon presidential election found that students with strongly Republican fathers were likely to be as well.⁸⁹²

Furthermore, many articles have been penned on the relationship between political views and level of education, particularly in the United States. A university education has been described as a significant predictor of left-wing views. 893 Yet this association is likely not formed in the classroom. A 2022 analysis of the political attitudes of British students between 1994 and 2020 found that controlling for family background reduced the correlation between higher education and cultural attitudes by at least 70%. 894 Personal characteristics such as race, gender, or sexual orientation are larger influences on who students vote for, as they select candidates with policies more favourable to their demographic. 895

Indeed, the recent Canadian general election suggests the relationship between education and political opinion is less important than some critics believe. More Canadians under the age of 30—those likeliest to be in PSE or to have recently graduated—supported the Conservative Party than Canadians aged 60 and over. Believe In the 2025 general election, Conservative candidates received 41% of the vote; the winning Liberal Party received 44% of the vote. Party A post-election poll on federal voting intention by level of education found that 33% of university-educated Canadians would vote Conservative in the next election, compared to 43% of high school graduates and 44% of college graduates. Sellower that Canada has one of the world's best-educated populations, we would expect to see a much larger skew towards the Liberal Party if higher education did indeed 'indoctrinate' graduates. College-educated Canadians were likelier than high-school educated Canadians to vote Conservative, further suggesting the attainment of a post-secondary credential itself is not a significant influence on a graduate's political views.

As a final note, we wonder if whether students are exposed to a diversity of views may have more to do with the employment status of their instructor. In 2013, sessional instructors constituted 23% of the University of Calgary's academic staff;⁹⁰¹ as of 2023, they make up 27%.⁹⁰² The number of permanent academic staff fell by 0.3% between 2018/19 and 2023/24 despite the study body growing 12%.⁹⁰³ Reliance on temporary instructors can suggest financial struggles: of all the sessional staff working at UCalgary, 26% are employed by the Faculty of Arts,⁹⁰⁴ one of the Faculties most affected by budget cuts.⁹⁰⁵ Sessional instructors can be excellent teachers, but it is also a reality that their tenuous status means PSIs are less likely to invest in their professional development.⁹⁰⁶ It is not difficult to imagine that temporary instructors may not have received the training required to learn ways to effectively incorporate a variety of perspectives into their classroom beyond the bare minimum material. Permanent professors, on the other hand, can eventually qualify for tenure, which protects professors from termination for exercising their right to academic freedom.⁹⁰⁷ This, too, is a matter of educational quality that again comes back to underfunding.

Analysis

As the most recent free speech reports issued by Alberta's post-secondaries demonstrate, free speech is alive and well on Alberta's campuses. Students at the University of Calgary appreciate being exposed to a well-rounded and diverse range of viewpoints that challenge them intellectually—and, as we can find no compelling evidence that Albertan professors overwhelmingly lean left, there is no reason to believe they are not hearing those perspectives. The limited data in MLI's report suggests that, even if most faculty members did tend to hold certain views in common, they would be likelier than the average Canadian to value the objective pursuit of knowledge. Even if they didn't, the studies we have provided suggest that students would not be influenced by them much regardless.

Contact and credits

Commissioned and authorized by

Naomie Bakana

UCSU President, 83rd Students' Legislative Council supres@ucalgary.ca

Compiled by

Nathan Ross, Manager of Communications and Government Relations

nathan.ross@ucalgary.ca

Cara Clifford | UCSU Advocacy Coordinator

Additional credits

Photography files by Gene Baines and Slavi Ugoric. Additional resources from Freepik.

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