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*ACIFA, the Alberta Colleges and Institutes Faculties Association, is a representative professional organization which acts as the provincial voice for the more than 6,000 members of the academic staff associations at fifteen public colleges and technical institutes across Alberta.*

*ACIFA promotes the professional and economic well being of faculty in the interest of fostering quality post-secondary education in this province.*

ACIFA, the Alberta Colleges and Institutes Faculties Association, agrees with the government on the need to put in place a comprehensive strategy to meet the demands and challenges of the growing economy. Overall, the draft *Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce* strategy expresses the right sentiments under the themes inform, attract, develop, and retain. The appropriate emphasis is placed on the role post-secondary education must play to help realize success in the execution of this strategy.

However, ACIFA is concerned about the wholesale omission of funding commitments that are necessary to put the draft strategy in place. In the absence of new, substantial funding commitments, ACIFA warns that the draft workforce strategy could not be employed without, at the very least, casting doubt upon the quality and sustainability of Alberta's post-secondary education system.

ACIFA has, therefore, devised four key recommendations, which further considers issues arising from access to post-secondary education, public funding to institutional base operation grants, faculty attraction and retention, and pension portability.

**ACIFA advises the government to invest heavily in a province-wide and ongoing information campaign to promote the inherent economic and social benefits to be gained through post-secondary education. In particular, it is essential that Aboriginal communities, rural communities and disabled persons be at the centre of such an information campaign.**

**ACIFA advises the government to substantially increase base operation grants to the post-secondary education institutions to better reflect rising cost pressures and the policy demands, relative to growth in total learning opportunities, being placed on the system.**

**ACIFA advises the government to adopt the Working Group on Faculty Attraction and Retention, 2002, recommendation that the Ministry should collaborate with the post-secondary education institutions to develop a detailed forecast of supply and demand for faculty in the university, college, and technical institute sectors in Alberta over the next 15 years.**

**ACIFA advises the government to adopt the Working Group on Faculty Attraction and Retention recommendation that to help with recruitment in the college and technical institute sector, Alberta Advanced Education work with Alberta Finance to improve portability among the Alberta group of pension plans.**

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ACIFA agrees with the government on the need to put in place a comprehensive strategy to prepare the province to meet the demands and challenges of the growing, new economy. ACIFA thanks Alberta Human Resources and Employment and Alberta Advanced Education for leading the development of this important cross-ministry strategy and for inviting both comments and suggestions from stakeholders and the public.

### Access

ACIFA recognizes the importance of increasing the capacity of the post-secondary education system. Demand on many post-secondary education programs is greater than available space. In addition to meeting demand pressures, Alberta has come to realize that in order to safeguard our future well being, educational attainment rates and participation rates must also improve. Alberta's high school graduation rate and our post-secondary education participation rate are not competitive relative to other provinces and leading international jurisdictions. As Alberta moves into the new economy, which demands an abundant supply of highly skilled, educated individuals, our low educational attainment rate must be seen as a significant impediment to realizing our full economic and social potential.

The Alberta government must work hard to better understand why our young people are not taking full advantage of our education system, particularly post-secondary education opportunities. ACIFA is pleased to see such a commitment in the 2006 Alberta Speech From the Throne. Embarking on a process to learn more about how and why our young people make academic and career choices should not prevent the province from taking immediate action to address our low educational attainment rate, as some of the reasons for our low attainment rate are already understood.

Results from Alberta Advanced Education's Accessibility Study indicate that rural Albertans demonstrate less awareness of post-secondary educational opportunities than is the case for their urban counterparts. Rural Albertans are less likely to be aware that student financial aid is available to help with the costs of pursuing post-secondary education studies. Finally, only 68% of rural Albertans agree that the benefits of advanced education outweigh the costs; by contrast, 82% of urban Albertans agree.

We must assume that, in Alberta, we have a perception and an awareness problem surrounding post-secondary education. It is troubling to see that there is an awareness deficit surrounding the economic and social benefits of investing in post-secondary education. Such problems are not easy to combat as they are embedded in culture. This reality is problematic because rural communities are particularly susceptible to the skills shortage, which, if this is to be addressed, demands urgent action. It must be the goal of the

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Alberta government to ensure that every Albertan has available all of the information required to make better, informed choices about post-secondary education pathways and career options.

**ACIFA advises the government to invest heavily in a province-wide and ongoing information campaign to promote the inherent economic and social benefits to be gained through post-secondary education. In particular, it is essential that Aboriginal communities, rural communities and disabled persons be at the centre of such an information campaign.**

The government has described increased participation in the post-secondary education system as a policy goal. In so doing, the government has committed to adding 60,000 new spaces to the post-secondary education system by 2020. The draft workforce strategy reinforces this commitment and indeed outlines that the first 30,000 new learning opportunities be in place by 2010-11.

ACIFA applauds the government for its commitment to expand greatly the post-secondary education system relative to learning opportunities; however, ACIFA advises that a system expansion at the magnitude proposed necessitates a significant adjustment to the level of base operation grants awarded to public post-secondary education institutions. The current commitment to increase base operation grants by 6% for this year and next will not adequately support the proposed growth of the system. In fact, that 6% increase to core operating budgets only maintains the status quo. The system is under pressure because of operating cost increases, particularly energy costs, and because the system is already growing in the absence of sufficient funding to support that growth. If the pace of system growth to realize 30,000 new learning opportunities by 2010-11 is implemented without a significantly increased, long term financial commitment from the government, the institutions will not be able to sustain current operations and their ability to promote innovation, excellence and quality will be greatly reduced.

**ACIFA advises the government to substantially increase base operation grants to the post-secondary education institutions to better reflect rising cost pressures and the policy demands, relative to growth in total learning opportunities, being placed on the system.**

#### **Faculty Attraction and Retention**

While the government has already committed to expanding the post-secondary education system by 60,000 learning opportunities by 2020, it has not yet articulated a plan to ensure that faculty numbers are to grow appreciably so to safeguard the excellence and quality of the system.

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Competition to secure academic staff is expected to be fierce in the next five to ten years as large numbers of academic staff in the 50 to 60 age cohort are poised to retire. There are warning signs apparent now that indicate attracting and retaining faculty is an imminent problem. Canada's graduate and postdoctoral participation rates pale relative to rates in other leading international countries – quite simply, we are falling behind. The importance of having a healthy pool of individuals with graduate and doctoral credentials to satisfy demands for academic staff cannot be overstated.

Post-secondary education institutions will compete with the private sector, private research firms, public research centres, and other post-secondary education institutions, both at home and abroad, for the best and the brightest. Competition will be equally as fierce to lure instructors from private industry to teach technologies, trades, and skills training.

The draft workforce strategy identifies these key challenges for Alberta in the next ten years: strong economic growth in a tightening labour market; increased urbanization causing labour and skills shortages in rural areas; rising education requirements for many jobs and a population that is falling behind other provinces in post-secondary education attainment and participation; and a changing and competitive global landscape when overall population is aging.

It is difficult to understand how the *Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce* strategy can be successful at meeting the aforementioned challenges without the province making absolutely certain that the post-secondary education institutions are well positioned to attract and retain the best and brightest to teach tomorrow's workforce in Alberta's classrooms today. It is apparent that the draft workforce strategy necessitates that a long term, system-wide strategy for attracting and retaining high quality faculty be put in place now.

The relative lack of hard data on future faculty requirements continues to represent one of the largest challenges in attempting to devise a long-term investment scenario for the post-secondary education system. The government and stakeholders, faculty groups among them, need to work together to address this problem.

**ACIFA advises the government to adopt the Working Group on Faculty Attraction and Retention, 2002, recommendation that the Ministry should collaborate with the post-secondary education institutions to develop a detailed forecast of supply and demand for faculty in the university, college, and technical institute sectors in Alberta over the next 15 years.**

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## Pension Portability

The four former Alberta vocational colleges participate in either the Public Service Pension Plan (PSPP) or the Management Employees Pension Plan (MEPP), while the majority of academic staff in the college and technical institute system participate in the Local Authorities Pension Plan (LAPP). The universities also have their own separate pension plan.

Having four pension plans in Alberta's academic community create a barrier to seamless workplace transferability. Academic staff persons that transfer from one post-secondary education institution to another, where different pension plans exist between them, cannot also transfer their pension plan. The reality is that a workplace transfer that also involves a change in pension plan will affect both the pension contribution and pension benefit to the transferee's financial detriment.

The Alberta government's Working Group on Faculty Attraction and Retention found that transferring from one pension plan to another may involve an individual removing the commuted value of pension, that is both the employer contribution and the employee contribution, to another plan. The receiving plan, however, requires the actuarial reserve amount be transferred into the plan. The actuarial reserve includes the full future liability of the plan. The full actuarial amount is greater than the commuted value of the terminating plan; the transferring member must make up the difference, which can be a substantial cost, or be credited with less pensionable service. Alternatively, individuals who must participate in a new pension plan, without removing the commuted value of the former plan, will have two or more plans with a lesser pensionable value than if they were able to maintain a single plan throughout.

Pension portability also affects faculty attraction, particularly for the former Alberta vocational colleges, which are unable to offer the same level of workplace transferability options as the majority of other public colleges and technical institutes. In times where individuals will experience many workplaces and careers over their lifetime – and the academic profession is no different – this problem places the former Alberta vocational colleges at somewhat of a disadvantage because their unique pension is shared among so few of the institutions that comprise the college and technical institute system.

**ACIFA advises the government to adopt the Working Group on Faculty Attraction and Retention recommendation that to help with recruitment in the college and technical institute sector, Alberta Advanced Education work with Alberta Finance to improve portability among the Alberta group of pension plans.**

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## General Comments

Overall, the draft workforce strategy expresses the right sentiments under the themes inform, attract, develop, and retain. The appropriate emphasis is placed on the role post-secondary education must play to help realize success in the execution of this strategy. It is deserving of this province's full resources and resolve, and ACIFA is in full support, for Aboriginal, rural, and disabled persons to have a key role in the new economy, via increased representation in the post-secondary education system. ACIFA is pleased to see increased emphasis on efforts to set right this long inequality in our society: provincial wealth and community supports juxtaposed with individuals and communities that share in neither.

Throughout, ACIFA has made reference to the omission of any specifics on public funding commitments to support the policy initiatives in the draft workforce strategy. It is difficult to fully understand the scope of a draft initiative in the absence of context that only an accompanying funding commitment can provide. ACIFA has tried to provide that context. The government must, therefore, resolve the funding questions, which arise from the draft strategy. In the absence of expanding current funding commitments through new, considerable investments, this draft strategy could not be employed without, at the very least, casting doubt upon the quality and sustainability of Alberta's post-secondary education system.