
February 25th 2025

Letter to Minister Sawhney *regarding*
America-Focused Research Group in Advanced Education

Subject: involving students in the United States-focused research body within the Ministry.

Dear Minister Sawhney,

We, the Graduate Students' Association (GSA) and Students' Union (SU) of the University of Calgary, write further to your February 5th announcement that the Ministry of Advanced Education intends to establish a research body focused on policy regarding the United States from an Albertan perspective.¹ As representatives of the more than 38,000 students enrolled at Alberta's second-largest comprehensive academic and research university, of which over 7,700 are graduate students, we welcomed this announcement with enthusiasm.

Like all Albertans, students are anxious about the possibility of trade disputes with our largest, and historically closest, international partner. We also recognize that tariffs, no matter how small or limited in scope, could create serious budgetary challenges for the Government of Alberta.

As noted by the Premier, a \$1 increase in the price differential between West Texas Intermediate and Western Canada Select would cost the government \$600 million in lost royalties.² We calculate that a shift of just \$2.40 in favour of the West Texas Intermediate price would be enough to create a provincial deficit. Should this come to pass, there is little room for either deficit spending or tax increases within the fiscal guardrails introduced by Budget 2023, and changes to the Alberta Taxpayer Protection Act.

We recognize, then, that any deterioration in ties between Canada and the United States has the potential to uniquely impact Alberta. As such, we view the creation of a research body within your Ministry as a positive step towards ensuring that the post-secondary sector can adapt to changes in Canada-U.S. relations. In a time of uncertainty, this body could provide important advice to other government units on how to address economic, political, and cultural challenges.

We therefore wish to highlight Alberta's student population as an untapped source of interdisciplinary knowledge, the very kind that any research body interested in the United States would require.

Graduate students participate in the majority of any given university's research activities, either through their own projects or by assisting faculty in theirs. Given that graduate students could be expected to contribute to a third of a province's published research output,³ their role becomes even more critical when we consider that post-secondaries account for 35% of all research and development expenditures in Canada.⁴ When the Ministry's proposed

research unit turns its attention to filling its roster, graduate students can be depended upon to provide a foundation of skills and knowledge.

The Ministry's announcement also comes at a time when the University of Calgary is, fortuitously, bolstering its efforts to foster undergraduate research,⁵ thus expanding the pool of available talent. A wide range of disciplines were represented among the undergraduate researchers honoured by the SU's annual Undergraduate Research Symposium last year.⁶

It is with this in mind that we offer our assistance as graduate student and student associations to craft the mission of this research unit and participate in the recruitment of graduate and undergraduate researchers. The students we represent encompass a rich array of fields and perspectives, meaning they are well-positioned to conduct interdisciplinary work with applications that are both far-reaching and localized. We also offer our assistance in the dissemination and communication of the unit's activities and findings to Albertan stakeholders, where relevant and as required.

To conclude, we would like to reiterate that we believe the proposed research unit within the Ministry of Advanced Education is an excellent idea, with great potential for strengthening our province's ability to weather uncertain times. We look forward to further announcements as the initiative progresses.

Signed,

Saaka Sulemana Saaka

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of the University of Calgary

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Footnotes.

¹ CBC News. Calgary is Canada's second most vulnerable city to U.S. tariffs, says report. (February 2025) <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/calgary-tariff-vulnerability-1.7456561>>

² Calgary Herald. *Varcoe: Brace for bigger discount on Canadian oil — and potential Alberta deficit — with U.S. tariffs on the way.* (January 2025) <<https://calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/varcoe-bigger-discount-canadian-oil-potential-alberta-deficit-us-tariffs>>

³ Vincent Larivière. *On the shoulders of students? The contribution of PhD students to the advancement of knowledge.* (2012) *Scientometrics*, Springer, vol. 90(2).

⁴ Statistics Canada. *The Daily: Funding and performing expenditures on research and development by sector, 2021.* (2023) <<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/231222/cg-b001-eng.htm>>

⁵ University of Calgary. *Research and Innovation Plan.* (2023) <<https://www.ucalgary.ca/sites/default/files/teams/10/23-OPR-400878-Strat-Plan-Implementation-ResearchPlan-v14.0.pdf>>

⁶ Students' Union. *Undergraduate Research Symposium – Winners 2024.* (<<https://www.su.ucalgary.ca/programs-services/academic-research/undergrad-research-symposium/>>