“Keep Athabasca in Athabasca University” Sample Letter #2 (long)

*(Insert your name, address and contact info)*

*(Personalize the letter)*

*(Date)*

Office of the Premier

307 Legislature Building

10800 - 97 Ave

Edmonton, AB, T5K 2B6

Dear Premier Kenney,

The community of Athabasca recently learned that the Athabasca University (AU) Board of Governors plans to effectively close the campus in Athabasca by the end of this year. If this plan it carried out, it will destroy the economy of the Athabasca region.

I am extraordinarily concerned about these plans, as…. (describe your concerns and stories.)

In March 2017, AU was the biggest, best-paying employer in the Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock riding with 409 employees including 25 executives and senior managers. Under the guidance of the past president, Neil Fassina, and the current board, 140 of those jobs, mostly executives, professionals and senior managers, have left Athabasca and some jobs have even gone out-of-province. By 2021, according to the Board of Governors’ “near-virtual” scheme, less than 40 employees will be left working at the Athabasca campus and other urban offices. Athabasca will lose about $37 million in annual wages resulting in well over $100 million in economic loss to the region per year.

The depopulation of the region will have a dramatic impact on the local economy: schools will close, businesses will fail, housing prices will shrink, and the local tax base will suffer, leading to reduced services in a region already suffering from the long-tern downturn in oil and gas services. And perhaps even more tragic is the loss of social capital as bright young people and families move away.

The Athabasca campus has over $118 million in government-funded capital assets. The AU Board of Governors has no idea what will become of this infrastructure after they’ve abandoned the campus, other than some vague notion of “leasing it.” To whom do they expect to lease $120 million in office space in a ghost town?

The Board of Governor’s “near-virtual” plan for AU is based on untested social theories and big-city biases. The pandemic has proven that home offices are not effective long-term. Major corporations are bringing their people back to offices as fast as possible, as informal communication and creativity are suffering and training of virtual staff, particularly informal training, is very difficult. The board’s dodgy experiment poses great risk to the long-term viability of AU in our community and province.

The pandemic has also laid to rest the fiction qualified people cannot be attracted to work in rural communities. As workers around the world were forced to work away from offices, workers have migrated by the millions to small towns, rural settings and cottage country—an exact description of the Athabasca region. In fact, Athabasca has attracted many PhDs and professionals to move and stay in Athabasca. Lately, AU has made no real attempts to recruit to Athabasca.

The Lougheed government moved AU to Athabasca to enhance rural development, and it worked. Neither the past president nor the current board has the authority to reverse that decision, a political decision firmly supported by the provincial government and the people of Alberta.

AU is one of Alberta’s greatest success stories. AU is Alberta’s biggest university in terms of student numbers, over 45,000. AU is open, anyone can take AU courses; 70% of AU grads are the first in their families to complete a post-secondary degree. AU is inexpensive; taxpayers pay only 30% of AU’s costs, students pay the rest. In Alberta’s conventional universities, it’s the other way around, taxpayers pay 70%. Just what is the AU Board of Governors trying to fix? Why is it risking this success with a dodgy experiment in an unproven, unprecedented, unnecessary and expensive adventure?

The near-virtual plan must be reversed to ensure AU survives and thrives. Further, as a presidential search is underway, the new president needs to bring the University operations back to earth, work in Athabasca and focus on rejuvenation of the Athabasca campus.

I urge your government to take control of this maverick board before they destroy one of Alberta’s greatest institutions.

Yours truly,

(Your name)

cc: Glenn Van Dijken, MLA for Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock

503A Legislature Building,

10800 - 97 Avenue NW
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Honourable Demetrios Nicolaides, Minister of Advanced Education

403 Legislature Building

10800 - 97 Avenue

Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Honourable Ric McIver, Minister of Municipal Affairs

132 Legislature Building

10800 - 97 Avenue

Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Your MLA

Another affected MLA(s)