

Ministry of Advanced Education
Office of the Minister
Advanced Education
403 Legislature Building
10800-97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB. T5K 2B6

April 19, 2021

Attn: The Honourable Minister Demetrios Nicolaides

Re: Proposed Exceptional Tuition Increase at University of Alberta Faculty of Law

Dear Honourable Minister Nicolaides,

The University of Alberta Faculty of Law has recently proposed an exceptional tuition increase. The proposal raises tuition an additional 45% above and beyond current tuition. The proposal is available at the Faculty of Law website [1].

As the Executive team of the Digital Law & Innovation Society, a student group at the University of Alberta Faculty of Law, we write to ask you to not approve the proposed exceptional tuition increase.

The Digital Law & Innovation Society promotes familiarity with digital law topics and the responsible and effective use of technology and innovation in the law. Innovation relies on the intentional inclusion of diverse participants, which requires attention to excellent group processes.

With this in mind, given the process and information available from the Faculty of Law to date, we strongly oppose this proposed increase. And yet, saying "no" to the proposed increase is not the end of the story - it is only the beginning.

To this end, we attach a recent letter to Dean Billingsley that calls for a practical, inspiring way forward for our Faculty of Law and its partners, including the Government of Alberta [2].

It is worth coming together to support public post-secondary education. To provide space to find a good way forward, we ask that you do not approve the proposed exceptional tuition increase.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Best regards,

The Digital Law & Innovation Society Executive Team

Hero Laird
President

Nick Asquin
Vice President

Andrew Cisna
Vice President

Melissa Erickson
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Justin Hjlesvold
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Raj Oberoi
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[1] <https://www.ualberta.ca/law/tuition.html>

[2] The contents of the letter to Dean Billingsley begin on page three below.

cc:

Critic for Advanced Education and Member of the Legislative Assembly for Edmonton-North West – Attn: Honourable Minister David Eggen via e-mail
(Edmonton.Northwest@assembly.ab.ca)

University of Alberta – Attn: President and Vice Chancellor Bill Flanagan, via e-mail
(president@ualberta.ca)

University of Alberta Students' Union – Attn: President Joel Agarwal, via e-mail
(president@su.ualberta.ca)

University of Alberta Faculty of Law – Attn: Dean Barbara Billingsley and Vice Dean Adams, via e-mail (lawdean@ualberta.ca; eric.adams@ualberta.ca)

University of Alberta Law Students' Association – Attn: President Mia Bottos, via e-mail
(lsapres@ualberta.ca)

Law Society of Alberta – Attn: President Darlene W. Scott, QC and Chief Executive Officer & Executive Director Elizabeth Osler (darlene.scott@dentons.com; Elizabeth.osler@lawsociety.ab.ca), via e-mail

April 19, 2021

RE: A practical, inspiring way forward from the proposed tuition increase?

Dear Dean Billingsley,

The Digital Law & Innovation Society Executive writes this letter to you after some thoughtful dialogue. We hope you are doing well during this stressful time. The proposal for a tuition increase has added stress onto many already-full plates, and we suspect that includes the plates of you and your Faculty colleagues.

We would like to add a voice in favour of finding practical, inspiring ways forward together. We strongly oppose the increase at this time. And yet, we realize that saying "no" to the proposed increase is not the end of the story - it is only the beginning. Saying "no" does not relieve the underlying pressures that we imagine you are facing as a group of people, a Faculty team newly integrated into a revised University of Alberta bureaucracy.

We propose that finding a practical, inspiring way forward will be like playing jazz: we'd best prepare to improvise. In that spirit, to explain our "no" and our imagined "maybes" and "yeses," we call on a few key notes that can easily get lost when people under pressure have a lot at stake. [1]

Key note #1: Humanity. You, and the members of the Faculty, are people too. We imagine that collectively, you must have been burdened with a tough choice. We can imagine that this increase became a proposed option only in the face of considerable pressures. As your students, we have noticed you and other professors dedicate time and effort to our education and the wellbeing of the broader Faculty. We thank you for those moments of support and dedication, seen and unseen.

Key note #2: Trust. We strongly oppose the increase at this time in large part because the process to date has not accounted for the speed of trust. The proposal was brought forward just before examinations, with scant information, only six weeks to provide feedback, and an implied ultimatum in the Faculty's language and the Faculty's default position to request an increase. This does not provide the breathing space required to develop relationships, respect, and good ideas. Instead, it raises tension and shuts down creativity. [2] Our next key note directly follows from this.

Key note #3: Diversity. Groups are more likely to complete high-quality work and identify creative solutions when they centre diversity. This is hard work. Better results do not appear magically: they come from committing time, unlearning, and applying skills to work with people that do not share the same assumptions, perspectives and experiences. [3] Serious concerns have been raised about the proposed increase detracting from diversity at our school. These concerns are critical to understand and address. At DLIS, one of our values statements is that "law, like tech, is never neutral." From our perspective, the Faculty's tuition-proposal process to date has devalued diversity, rather than leaning into its strength. Together, we have the opportunity to re-centre diversity.

For the DLIS Executive, sending a strong "no" to this increase, under this timeline, is a way of clearing the noise to make space for humanity, trust and diversity: for "yeses" and "maybes."

Now is the time to pause and listen for the surprising opportunities that arise through crisis. As the proposed increase suggests, our UAlberta Faculty of Law community has pressing problems to solve. We imagine a process to help stakeholder groups effectively respond together to the pressures that sparked the increase, and find a way forward that is practical and inspiring.

Although "innovation" is an oft-misused word, we care about the substance of it. The time-tested processes and principles gathered under that label can help groups that are "stuck" find surprising, positive ways through the crucible. They have been successful with stakes as high as civil war and in organizations as established as the Government of the United Kingdom. [4] With such a broad range of success in challenging environments, we believe that they are worth considering here, too. We invite you to do so, and offer our support to approach them well.

With this invitation, we want to acknowledge your humanity and clarify that for the DLIS Executive team, our current opposition to an increase is not an opposition to the Faculty, or to any individuals within it. We care about this law school and the people that make it up. We also care about those yet to come. We have a responsibility to consider them. We hope that given the strength of relationships in the Faculty, and a willingness to further strengthen them, various groups can work together to get creative and find a productive way forward across stakeholder groups.

We offer our skills and voices to help develop a process that is timely and spacious, in the service of a practical and inspiring way forward from this crisis. We are happy to answer any questions you may have, submit a draft to help communicate what a process might look like, or otherwise engage.

Meantime, thank you for reading and (most emphatically) take care.

The Digital Law & Innovation Society Executive Team

Hero Laird President	Nick Asquin Vice President	Andrew Cisna Vice President	Melissa Erickson Vice President
Justin Hjesvold Vice President	Raj Oberoi Vice President	Karyna Omelchenko Vice President	

References

[1] See Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman and Michael Patton, [Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed](#) (2007).

[2] See Johanne Johnson, [Wahkohtowin Law and Governance Lodge language bundles](#) (2021) for reflections on the importance of relationship in conflict management. For a discussion of the role of gratitude and humility in Canada's legal system, see Lindsay Borrows, [DABAADENDIZIWIN: PRACTICES OF HUMILITY IN A MULTI-JURIDICAL LEGAL LANDSCAPE](#) (2017).

[3] The research on this point is extensive. See summaries and links to research from the [World Economic Forum](#) and [Forbes](#).

[4] See process examples at [Liberating Structures](#); a quick, informal overview of social innovation and its history from the McConnell Foundation, [What is Social Innovation](#) (2017); and a deep dive by Adam Kahane, [Solving Tough Problems](#) (2007).

Further resources are available upon request.