



Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des associations des professeurs des universités de l'Ontario

As Omicron surges, Ontario faculty and academic librarians concerned for their physical and mental health

TORONTO, January 5, 2022 – With COVID-19 cases spiking across Ontario and universities planning to return to in-person learning at the end of January, university faculty, academic librarians, and other academic professionals are concerned for their physical and mental health. Further, they believe the provincial government's most recent advice to universities is completely inadequate and shows that Premier Ford and Minister Dunlop are not making the health and safety of postsecondary faculty, staff, and students a priority.

"The sudden surge of the Omicron variant demonstrates the need for us to proceed with caution," said Sue Wurtele, President of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA). "Ontario's university faculty and academic librarians, like students and their parents, are eager to see a return to the classroom. However, health and safety must remain the top priority as we navigate the winter term."

In mid-December, as cases began to rise, many Ontario universities delayed the beginning of the winter term until the second week of January and pushed back a return to in-person learning until the end of January. Without clear guidance or support from the provincial government in Monday's announcement, it is incumbent on university administrations to work with faculty, staff, and students to ensure no one's health is put in jeopardy in a rush to return to in-person learning.

"Preparing for classes takes time, whether online or in-person, and each requires a different approach," said Wurtele. "Educators and students should not be expected to switch delivery methods with only a few days' notice. This only increases the stress and anxiety they already feel as a result of the pandemic."

This is the latest in a pattern of reckless decision-making that has been of longstanding concern to OCUFA. The government has consistently failed to establish clear health and safety guidelines for postsecondary institutions that acknowledge the airborne nature of COVID-19. This past fall, without consulting faculty or students, the government exempted postsecondary institutions from capacity and distancing limits only a few days before classes resumed.

In the absence of provincial leadership, university administrations need to work collaboratively with faculty and staff to develop appropriate plans for the rest of the winter term that chart a clear path forward and address the acute stress and uncertainty many faculty and students are feeling. The provincial government must be pressed to introduce consistent health and safety measures across Ontario's universities and to grant ten permanent paid sick days to all workers, with an additional fourteen paid sick days during public health outbreaks, in order to protect the health of every Ontarian.

Founded in 1964, OCUFA represents 17,000 faculty, academic librarians, and other academic librarians in 30 member associations across Ontario. It is committed to enhancing the quality of

higher education in Ontario and recognizing the outstanding contributions of its members towards creating a world-class university system. For more information, please visit the OCUFA website at www.ocufa.on.ca.

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