

Reply to [REDACTED] Foundational Learning, Advanced Education (June 2, 2025)
Cc: The Honourable Peter Guthrie, MLA for Airdrie-Cochrane

Dear [REDACTED]:

Thank you so much for taking the time to respond to my request. I really appreciate that you understand the gravity of the situation - just last week, I learned from the Centre for Newcomers in Calgary that there are an estimated 9,000 newcomers on waitlists in our city for LINC funded classes. Even with Canada's immigration adjustment plan, the backlog will be staggering, and the personal stories of so many who have had their ESL education interrupted is heartbreaking.

I'm also very encouraged to know that the Minister of Advanced Education is still supporting EAL students through the FLA program and CALP, as well as the EAP program at Bow Valley College. As I understand from those who have been in the industry for decades, our provincial government has a long history of supporting ESL programs in our province, even buoying up LINC programming in times of federal budget cuts.

Unfortunately Bow Valley College doesn't appear to show the same mutual commitment to ESL education that we do. The decision to close the School of Global Access was made by the president and the board swiftly and quite frankly, too easily. [REDACTED] the first year of the contract offered by IRCC came at only a 10% reduction from the previous one. If the college had accepted the reduced funding from IRCC, the School of Global Access could have remained open with minor layoffs and even an increase in student seats, [REDACTED]. There would be bigger cuts the following two years, but why not remain open and offer a scaled-down program? Why close so suddenly when you have over 1,000 students on the books and another 1,000 on the waitlist?

We both know that ESL programs are closing all over the country due to the federal cuts. However, it's important to note that service providers were offered different LINC contracts or their contracts were not renewed. It is noteworthy that, according to my sources, NorQuest was offered the same contract as Bow Valley College, and decided to keep their ESL programming open with the budget cuts. When BVC and NorQuest were founded by the Government of Alberta as the Alberta Vocational College in 1965, their purpose was to provide vocational preparatory training, which included ESL programs. Certainly, over time we expect programs to adapt to a changing world, but not to disappear when the need for them is so great. One can only infer that BVC no longer values, or even disdains language training for newcomers and successful immigrant integration.

Now, when the need for ESL programming is so great, and the result of the SGA closure only intensifying the need, we turn to the government for action and accountability.

I respect that the Ministry of Advanced Education does not intervene in institutional matters, including making decisions about what programs to offer; generally we want our government to operate at an arm's length from its agencies. However, this policy seems to conflict with another

policy in the Alberta Public Agencies Government Act, which states in Section 6: “A Minister who is responsible for a public agency shall ...(c) monitor whether the public agency is (i) acting within its mandate...” This insinuates that if a public agency, such as the college in this instance, is not upholding its mandate, the Minister is responsible for identifying this and taking a course of action.

The most recent Mandate and Roles Document for Bow Valley College states that the clients of the college include “newcomers to Canada,” that they offer “non-credit instruction year-round,” and that they are a “community college with regional stewardship responsibilities” that align with “industry need.” English proficiency is essential across all industries - there isn’t a single sector in this province that doesn’t need it right now. The mandate also states, “We are committed to university transfer pathways, continuing education opportunities, and programs in foundational learning, including...English Language Learning.” Again, they note that one of their areas of specialization includes “...foundational learning opportunities in the areas of Academic Upgrading and English Language Learning...” It is significant that English Language Learning and Academic Upgrading are the only two specific programs mentioned in the mandate. No other program the college offers is given such prevalence.

A program that equips newcomers with language skills so they can fully function in society is arguably one, if not the most important college programs in our province, and the closure deserves due attention. Many professionals, skilled labourers, and essential workers are unable to contribute their skills in the workforce due to language barriers.

Thank you for letting me know that the BoG was involved in the decision to close the SGA. I wonder if you also find it dubious that there was no discussion of the closure mentioned in any of the board meeting minutes - so it begs the question as to how the board was actually involved? For certain, there was a complete lack of transparency in this devastating decision with such far-reaching, detrimental impacts. Surely, such a sizable closure at a reputable community college would warrant significant due process, including many in-depth discussions over a period of time. One would expect a subcommittee formed to review the costs and benefits of keeping the SGA open, and consultations with community stakeholders, immigrant service providers, and local government would take place. Inquiries and collaboration with other service providers in the city should have been initiated to determine where all these ESL learners could transfer when the programming came to an end. Making inquiries into these shortcomings appears to fall within the Minister of Advanced Education’s purview, specifically to monitor Bow Valley College’s commitment to upholding their mandate from the provincial government.

I recognize that these are chaotic and unpredictable days for post-secondary institutions, and that programs of every kind are facing the threat of closure because of IRCC’s decision to end the Student Direct Stream visa program and new rules for work permit eligibility. However, as you know, the School of Global Access doesn’t rely on student visas for enrollment, so its closure deserves further investigation.

Historically, Bow Valley College is a well-regarded institution that traditionally models inclusivity, innovation, and leadership. Renowned for their expertise in second language learning, they have long been a leader in ESL education and training, earning respect locally, provincially, nationally, and internationally - notably in strategies for teaching youth, career pathways, literacy instruction, and English for the workplace. Over the years, the Alberta government has invested thousands of dollars into the development of publicly shared materials and resources by content experts. However, with the program's closure, that investment has been irrevocably lost. This is a significant setback to the field of teaching English as a second language, erasing years of innovation and shared expertise.

My optimism remains firm that there is a way forward, through the efforts and ingenuity of the Ministry of Advanced Education, to right this wrong. If the School of Global Access reopens, this will be a significant win for everybody. Bow Valley College will retain their position as a leader in newcomer support, enhancing its reputation and reaffirming its vital role in advancing Alberta's broader goals of successful immigrant integration. The Minister and Ministry of Advanced Education would emerge as true champions of this cause, demonstrating their commitment to fostering career pathway opportunities for newcomers. An increase in student seats for ESL would provide immense benefits to underemployed immigrants and their families, driving economic growth for Calgary and Alberta while reducing reliance on government welfare funds.

Again, I want to thank you for your response on behalf of the ministry, and I sincerely appreciate this opportunity to share my perspective and insights. I hope that the Minister of Advanced Education, Mr. McDougall, will take my comments and perspective into consideration, given everything that is at stake, and will reconsider not intervening. I am still respectfully requesting a meeting with the Minister for the opportunity to present a petition signed by approximately 1,000 individuals who support ESL education at Bow Valley College.

Finally, I want to assure you that our advocacy efforts extend federally, and this work is ongoing. Our affiliates and we are building support among MPs nationwide to restore IRCC funding for LINC in the fall budget for 2025.

I look forward to our continued correspondence and earnestly hope the end of this story results in a mutually beneficial outcome for the Government of Alberta, Bow Valley College, ESL instructors, and above all, our resilient newcomers.

Sincerely,

Janice McCrimmon
Advocacy Coordinator, Stand Up for ESL