Members of the University community,

Today the Government of Saskatchewan released its 2015-16 budget, which included a 1% increase to the University's operating grant and an additional $150,000 for the Nurse Practitioner program.

The University recognizes the current fiscal pressures facing the province, which is why we appreciate the additional funding for the Nurse Practitioner program that is so important both for our University and for all Saskatchewan residents. The operating grant allocation, however, will create challenges. The 1% increase to the operating grant is significantly outpaced by inflation, principally in salaries and benefits. In this scenario, our operating budget will see a shortfall of approximately $3 million. As a result, the University will be required to make some difficult decisions as we work to balance our budget while making progress on the priorities identified in our new strategic plan.

Over the last several years we have undertaken a number of initiatives to reduce our administrative expenditures and identify efficiencies in order to position the University for such fiscal circumstances. For example, in the University's 2014-15 budget, cuts to administrative units reduced costs by $466,000. The Voluntary Incentive Plan for Retirement implemented in 2014 is projected to achieve approximately $1.5 million in savings by the end of the fiscal year. In addition, we have realized $1.4 million in cumulative savings since 2010 by optimizing the University's use of printers. Measures like these - difficult as they have been in some cases - continue to help us face the challenges posed by the current fiscal situation in Saskatchewan.

Even while finding these efficiencies, we have continued to grow as a University. Total enrolments increased by almost 20 per cent between 2008-2009 and 2014-2015, setting record highs in the past four years. One of the ways we have fostered this growth is by maintaining tuition levels competitive with those at other institutions across the country, remaining in the top third in terms of affordability among the 59 Canadian English-language universities. Moreover, due to enhanced funding we have allocated for student support, the University of Regina ranks second among comprehensive universities in Canada in terms of the percentage of tuition and fees devoted to scholarships. The operating grant allocation announced today by the Province will challenge us to remain competitive in these areas.

Keeping post-secondary education as accessible as possible is essential to our mission of fostering academic success for a student body that is increasingly diverse. The University has experienced nearly 50% growth in Aboriginal students over the last five years - growth that has helped enrich the cultural diversity on our campus and expand the role our University plays in addressing the serious gaps that exist in living standards between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan.

We have also increased diversity by nearly doubling the number of international students at the University over the last five years, bringing an increasingly global character to our campus and stimulating the local economy. International students now contribute a substantial portion of our tuition revenue, and it is estimated that the economic impact of our international students is more than $35 million per year for Regina and surrounding area. Furthermore, our growing international character is helping create networks abroad that are of value for all Saskatchewan citizens, something recognized in the provincial budget with an additional $64,000 to help support study abroad opportunities for students.
In these and other ways, post-secondary education is critical to Saskatchewan's growth, creating economic opportunities by supporting innovation, addressing labour market needs, attracting Aboriginal and international students, and helping build key partnerships abroad. New investments by both the federal and provincial governments are needed in these areas to enable the University to continue growing and contributing to the economic health of Saskatchewan. In particular, the University must have the physical infrastructure to enable it to continue to grow and make such significant contributions to the economic vitality of Regina and the province as a whole.

That is why I will continue to work with the provincial government to identify and secure the resources necessary for our extensive capital requirements. In this regard, I am encouraged that the Province has identified an additional $492,000 in funding compared to last year for preventative maintenance and renewal of our facilities. In addition, the Ministry of Advanced Education is setting aside $3 million in 2015-16 so that all post-secondary institutions may apply for additional funding in this area on a project-by-project basis. Despite the new funding and the possibility of accessing other funds for sustaining capital, we will continue to face challenges in this area, as our various facilities are in need of significant rehabilitation. That being said, we appreciate the support received in this budget, particularly given the province's tight fiscal circumstances.

Among our facilities most requiring rehabilitation is the College Avenue campus, a signature historical site of great importance to our city and our province. Unfortunately, no funding was provided in this year's budget for the College Avenue campus renewal project, but we will continue to work with the Government of Saskatchewan to take the next steps on this project. The College Avenue campus is a significant economic, educational and cultural asset to Regina and area, serving approximately 7,400 learners per year. Although we did not receive funding for the project in this budget, I know from discussions with provincial officials that they understand the long-term importance of the College Avenue campus to our province, and I am optimistic they will work with us on moving the renewal project forward.

We are a campus community that has planned thoughtfully in past budgets, and sacrificed where necessary to move the University forward in its mission to promote excellence in teaching, research and public service. We will need to continue to do these things, because I have no doubt that today's provincial budget will necessitate difficult decisions at our University. Please be assured, however, that as we develop our own budget in light of the objectives outlined in our recently adopted strategic plan, we will do everything we can to enhance the student experience, provide continued support for research that has impact, and find ways to foster the diversity and community spirit so crucial to a vibrant campus.

I am proud to lead a University at which our students, faculty and staff are willing to face our fiscal challenges together and collaborate in the choices that are required to create a budget that is balanced and sustainable. You can contribute to this conversation by attending the next open budget forum hosted by the Provost and the Vice-President (Administration) at 10:00 a.m. on Monday, March 23 in the ShuBox Theatre. For those unable to attend, the presentation and discussion will be video recorded and available for viewing at www.uregina.ca/orp/budget/2015-16-budget.html. As always, your thoughts and suggestions on the University's budget are welcome at budget@uregina.ca.

For full details of the provincial budget, please visit www.finance.gov.sk.ca/.

Sincerely,

Dr. Vianne Timmons
President and Vice-Chancellor