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Baillieu pledges to save VCA

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TED Baillieu is promising to save the Victorian College of the Arts.

In an audacious bid for the arts vote, the Opposition Leader is pledging that if the Coalition wins next year's state election he will ensure the college has enough money to remain viable.

Mr Baillieu makes the promise - which could cost the state budget up to \$6 million a year - in an open letter to students and staff of the college, obtained by *The Age*.

He also says the controversial 2007 merger with Melbourne University has imperilled the college, and vows that as premier he would be prepared to return it to "its previous independent and autonomous status".

"The Victorian College of the Arts is one of Victoria's great treasures," Mr Baillieu writes. "If we are to remain the arts capital of Australia, we cannot lose the special quality of the VCA."

His intervention follows concern about funding shortfalls and a storm of protest - from past and present students and staff as well as all 11 living former Victorian arts ministers - about the university's plans to cut staff and reduce the amount of specialist training offered by the college.

Premier John Brumby has rejected calls for the State Government to provide a financial lifeline, saying universities are funded by the Commonwealth, and the college's money woes date back to the Howard government's decision not to fund it as an independent arts institution.

"It's not a matter for the State Government," Mr Brumby said last month. "It's always been a federal funding matter."

But federal Education Minister Julia Gillard yesterday put the onus back on the university and the State Government, making clear she would not intervene.

"I don't run universities," she said on ABC radio. "I'm not going to intervene to tell a university what to do."

"I am happy to talk to people if they think the Commonwealth perspective can assist, but this is a debate involving the University of Melbourne and the State Government ..."

Mr Baillieu says in his letter that the absorption of the college into Melbourne University's new course structure should not proceed as proposed.

"As it currently stands, we risk losing one of the most significant arts institutions in the nation and some of the best arts students and staff in Australia," he writes.

"A Baillieu government would ensure that the shortfall of up to \$6 million currently preventing the college from fulfilling its purpose will be restored.

"Further, if Melbourne University is unable to adequately meet the requirements of the college ... a Baillieu government will move to return the VCA to its previous independent and autonomous status, ensuring that it is able to provide teaching and instruction in accordance with the practical requirements of a school of the arts."

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/baillieu-pledges-to-save-vca-20090911-fkuv.html>