

Guidelines for Working with First Nation, Metis and Inuit Elders and Knowledge Keepers

In First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, Elders and traditional teachers play a prominent, vital, and respected role. They are held in high regard as they are the knowledge keepers, carrying traditional teachings and information passed down through oral history, customs and traditions which encompass beliefs, values, worldviews, language, and spiritual ways of life.

Indigenous elders are leaders, teachers, role models, mentors, and healers who within their communities often provide the same functions as advisors, professors, and doctors.

Who is an Elder? Who is a Knowledge Keeper?

First Nations, Métis and Inuit elders are acknowledged by their respective communities as an 'Elder' through a lifetime of learned teachings and earned respect. Many communities have defined protocol and process for becoming an elder. Gender and age are not factors in determining who is an elder.

Knowledge keepers are those people who may not be considered an elder but carry traditional knowledge and expertise in different spiritual and cultural areas.

Purpose:

Indigenous elders and Knowledge Keepers are frequently invited to Carleton University to share in the opening/closing of events, speak to classes, participate on committees, take part in interviews, and provide support, guidance and spiritual help to students, faculty and staff. The purpose of this document is to provide guidelines for working with elders and knowledge keepers, to ensure consistency in:

- extending invitations
- communicating effectively
- respectful care
- timely follow-up

Scope:

These guidelines are for students, faculty, and staff of Carleton University, who will be working with elders and knowledge keepers on or off-campus, in-person or virtually, for university purposes. Members of Carleton University are encouraged to use the following guidelines to request their presence.

Guidelines:

Decide on the intended purpose of the elder or knowledge keepers role. If this is your first-time seeking the presence or service of an elder, the best place to begin is to contact the Centre for Indigenous Initiatives to ensure that the presence of an elder or knowledge keeper is appropriate.

1. Extending Invitations (how to make a request)

A request should be sent well in advance when extending invitations to elders and knowledge keepers. When invitations are sent with little notice prior to an event it can seem as though the presence of an elder or knowledge keeper might be tokenistic in nature. Invitations are best made in person; however, a phone call is also an appropriate way to reach out. Email should be used as a last resort and is better suited to provide follow-up information.

When speaking with the Elder for the first time:

- Introduce yourself and give some brief context to the purpose of the ask.
- If you are in person and presenting a gift, such as tobacco, hold it in front of you and state your request, including information such as date, time and duration of the event, as well as expectations for their involvement. An example of this request might be:

“I would like to offer you this tobacco to ask if you would consider being involved in an event at Carleton University). Our second year Gender Studies class is hosting a poetry night on the evening of Tuesday October 3rd, and we would be honoured if you would open the evening with a teaching about the water”.

- If you are extending the invitation over the phone or by email, indicate that you have a gift to present to them when you see them in person.
- If the elder or knowledge keeper is not able to give an answer to your request right away, thank them for considering and ask them when and how is the best way to reach them to follow-up.
- Once the elder or knowledge keeper accepts the request, thank them, and set up a meeting to provide more information to them and ask them when and how they would like that to happen.

Offer Tobacco and/or Gift

In many First Nations, Métis and Urban Indigenous communities, it is customary to offer a gift of tobacco when making a request of an elder or knowledge keeper. Tobacco is one of the four sacred medicines and has great ceremonial significance.

Inuit elders and knowledge keepers do not accept tobacco offerings, because they do not use it ceremonially. It is still a kind gesture to offer a small gift though, such as tea.

Anyone can offer tobacco. Most First Nations and Métis elders or knowledge keepers prefer traditional tobacco as opposed to commercial tobacco. The gift can be in the form of a tobacco pouch or tobacco tie (loose tobacco wrapped in a small cloth) and is ideally made by the person making the request. As the tobacco is being wrapped, think clearly about what you are asking for, and put good thoughts and prayers into the offering.

When offering the tobacco or gift to the elder or knowledge keeper, many people choose to hold the pouch or tie in their left hand and in turn offer it to the elder's left hand, since there is a close connection between the left hand and the heart.

The exchange of tobacco/gift is similar to a contract between two parties where the elder or knowledge keeper is agreeing to do what is asked, and the person offering the gift is making a commitment to take care of the elder or knowledge keeper from the time the request is made until the follow-up after the event.

Refer to the [Tobacco Offering Protocol](#) for guidelines on how to make a tobacco tie.

2. Communicating effectively

After the elder or knowledge keeper has confirmed that they are interested in and available for the event, follow up with a phone call, email or letter that outlines all the details for the event. If you are providing details by email or letter, it is best to follow up by phone to make sure that the elder or knowledge keeper received the information, and to gather the details that you need to make the experience as comfortable as possible for them.

The detailed invitation should include:

- date, time, and location of the event, including time you would like them to arrive
- a detailed agenda
- a description of what exactly is being asked of the elder or knowledge keeper
- whether they are being invited to stay and/or participate for the entire event or have the option to leave once their role is complete
- clear information about honorarium and compensation for travel and other expenses
- whether transportation will be provided and/or paid for
- whether meals or refreshments will be offered
- accommodation details, if applicable
- information about who will greet and assist them while on campus
- information about recording or photography at the event

Information that you will want to collect from the elder or knowledge keeper, preferably by asking them questions and taking notes:

- full name with proper spelling
- how they would prefer to be addressed – grandmother, grandfather, elder, moshom, nokumis
- mailing address (for honorarium and to send a thank you note)
- phone number and email address (and clarify how they would prefer to be communicated with)
- transportation needs
- food allergies or aversion
- do they prefer coffee or tea?
- set-up requirements (chairs in a circle? A small table for their sacred items? Access to water? a room with ventilation for smudge?)
- Will they bring a Helper with them?
- Are they comfortable with their teachings and/or prayers being recorded or photographed? Are there any specific moments within that should not be recorded or photographed?
- Is cheque an appropriate payment method for the honorarium?
- Ask the elder or knowledge keeper if they have any further questions for you
- Thank them for their time and let them know that you will get in touch a few days before the event to confirm their availability

Follow-up one week before the event, and again the day before the event to make sure that the elder or knowledge keeper is still available and that they have everything that they need to make it to the event. Be prepared for the possibility they may change their minds if an unforeseen circumstance arises making it impossible for them to be in attendance. In this case, you can contact the Centre for Indigenous Initiatives to determine whether another person may be available.

3. Respectful Care

It is an honour to take care of a visiting elder or knowledge keeper. By making sure an Elder is warmly welcomed, and respectfully cared for, you are ensuring that Indigenous knowledge transfer can continue.

There are many details that go into making the experience comfortable and seamless for the elder or knowledge keeper. These include, but are not limited to:

- Assigning a host/helper
- Handling sacred items in a respectful way
- Having payment and a thank you gift ready the day of the event

Assigning a Helper

It is important to assign a Helper to be a point of contact for the elder or knowledge keeper on the day of the event. The role of the Helper is to greet the elder when they arrive, take care of their needs while at the event, and to make sure that they get safely to their next destination. Details for the helper to consider include:

- ensuring appropriate transportation to and from the event.
- greeting and meeting the elder or knowledge keeper upon arrival.
- showing them to the event space and pointing out the closest washrooms.
- asking if they would like water, tea or coffee.
- offering refreshments.
- checking in to see that they are comfortable.
- organizing a quiet space for them to rest in between engagements, if necessary.
- double-checking about protocols for photography and recording.
- having payment and a thank you note ready to present to before they leave.

In some cases, Elders may be accompanied by an “Elder’s Helper.” This person will have an established relationship with the elder and will be available to assist the elder with whatever they need. Nevertheless, a host/helper should still meet them both to show them their way around campus and to make sure they both have what they need.

A host or helper should be close by, alert and able to anticipate the needs of the Elder. If the helper needs to leave for any length of time, they should hand off helping responsibilities to someone else, or let the elder or knowledge keeper know how they can be reached.

By being a good helper, you are demonstrating respect for the reverence Indigenous peoples have for their elders and knowledge keepers.

Handling sacred items in a respectful way

Often elders or knowledge keepers will carry sacred items, such as pipes, hand drums, qulliq, eagle feathers or medicine bundles. They might also be wearing regalia or other clothing items of spiritual or ceremonial significance. **Always ask permission before touching or picking up a sacred item or cultural clothing piece** and respectfully seek clarification if there is something you do not understand. Elders and knowledge keepers are often very open to teaching about their items if time permits.

One of the sacred symbols that an Inuk Elder might carry are face or hand tattoos. It should be noted that it is not considered respectful to ask about the meaning of an elder’s tattoos as they are very personal, and their stories are only shared in certain circumstances.

Having payment and a thank you gift ready the day of the event

In most Indigenous cultures, it is customary to provide another gift at the end of the event to show appreciation for the knowledge the elder or knowledge keeper shared. Historically, food, clothing, and other necessities were provided in exchange for their help and guidance. Contemporary gifts can be practical items such as towels, blankets, notebooks, tea set, other medicines such as sweetgrass, sage or cedar.

In addition to this offering it is also necessary to provide monetary compensation and to communicate the amount of the payment to the elder or knowledge keeper in advance of the event. It is very important to make sure that the honorarium is paid in person the day of the event.

It is also good practice to cover the cost of travel, transportation, parking, mileage, meals, accommodation, or any other expenses that an elder or knowledge keeper might incur while visiting.

4. Timely follow-up with Elders

After the event has ended and the elder or knowledge keeper is safely at home, it is important to follow-up to close the line of communication that was opened when you first made contact with them. You can do this by mailing a thank you note, sending an email, or making a phone call. If you are contacting them by phone or email, ask them about their experience and if there was anything that you could have done differently. Use the opportunity to provide them with feedback as well. Lastly, ask whether the Elder would be interested in coming to future events at Carleton and if it is okay to keep their contact information.

Conclusion

By treating the elders and knowledge keepers with respect from the beginning to the end of our engagement with them, we are creating and maintaining a relationship. This is accomplished by extending the invitation in a respectful way; communicating effectively throughout the process; ensuring the utmost comfort and care of the elder or knowledge keeper at the event; and following up to give thanks and receive feedback. If you have any questions about these guidelines, or would like to learn more, please contact the Centre for Indigenous Initiatives.