

GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH FIRST NATIONS, INUIT AND MÉTIS ELDERS

In First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, Elders and traditional teachers¹ play a prominent, vital and respected role. Elders and traditional teachers are held in high regard as they are the knowledge keepers.² They are leaders, teachers, role models, and mentors in their respective communities who sometimes provide the same functions as advisors, professors, and doctors.

Purpose:

Elders³ 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 establish protocol and guidelines for working with Elders, to ensure consistency in:

- extending invitations,
- respectful care, and
- providing honouraria and compensation for additional costs.

Scope:

These guidelines are for students, faculty and staff of Carleton University, who will be working with Elders on- or off-campus, for university purposes. Members of Carleton University are encouraged to use the following guidelines to request and secure the services of an Elder.

Guidelines:

Decide on the intended purpose of the Elder's role. The Centre for Aboriginal Culture and Education (CACE) can help guide the process of approaching an Elder if needed. If this is your first time seeking service of an Elder, CACE can assist in making initial contact with the Elder.

1. Extending Invitations (how to make a request)

A request should be sent well in advance when extending invitations to Elders. Here are some guidelines on how to extend an invitation to an Elder in person:

Offer Tobacco and/or Gift

For First Nations or Métis Elders, one must offer tobacco. Tobacco is one of the four sacred medicines, and it is offered when making a request. The offering can be in the form of a tobacco pouch or tobacco tie (loose tobacco wrapped in a small cloth). The tobacco pouch or tie should be prepared by the person making the request. As the pouch or tie is being made it is good to think about what you are asking for, and put good thoughts and prayers into the offering. When

¹ First Nations, Métis and Inuit Elders are acknowledged by their respective communities as an 'Elder' through a community selection process. Gender and age are not factors in determining who is an Elder. Traditional teachers are those individuals learning under the mentorship and guidance of an Elder.

² Knowledge keepers hold traditional knowledge and information passed down through oral history, customs and traditions which encompass beliefs, values, worldviews, language, and spiritual ways of life.

³ For the purpose of this document, the term 'Elder' will be used to refer to both Elders and traditional teachers.

making a request, offer the tobacco by holding it in your left hand (in front of you), state your request (be specific), and if the Elder accepts your request place the tobacco in their left hand.

Inuit Elders do not expect tobacco offerings, because traditionally it is not part of their customs. A small gift may be offered in the same token as one would make a request to a First Nations or Métis Elder. Place the gift in front of you and state your request, the Elder indicates acceptance of your request by taking the gift in their hands.

The exchange of tobacco/gift is similar to a contract between two parties where the Elder is agreeing to do what is asked, and the one offering is making a commitment to respect the process. Ask the Elder if there is anything they need for the event.

If the Elder cannot fulfill your request, contact CACE to be recommended to another Elder.

Invitation by phone or email

Preferably, requests are made to Elders in person. However, many Elders also accept requests by phone or email. If you are making a request to an Elder by phone or email, let the Elder know you have tobacco or a gift to offer when you see them, then make your request.

Follow-up

If the Elder agrees to accept the request, you must follow-up with a call a few days before the event to ensure they are still available for the occasion. 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 CACE to determine whether another Elder may be available.

2. Respectful Care

Ensure to coordinate a host/escort for the Elder. The host/escort is responsible for:

- ensuring appropriate transportation to and from event;
- greeting and meeting the Elder upon arrival;
- taking care of the Elder until their departure (i.e. offer and assist with getting drinks, food, etc.).

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/escort should be arranged since the Elder and helper likely will not know their way around campus.

Photographs, audio, and/or video recordings are often not acceptable when an Elder is conducting a spiritual ceremony. Explicit consent must be received from the Elder before any recordings are taken. Often Elders will carry sacred items, such as pipes, qulliq, eagle feathers, medicine pouches etc. – do not touch these items unless they give you permission.

In respect of the Elder, always ask permission and seek clarification if there is something you do not understand.

3. Honouraria and Compensation for Additional Costs

Honouraria

If the Elder accepts your tobacco/gift it is customary to provide another gift afterwards to show appreciation for the knowledge they shared. Historically, Elders were given food, clothing and other necessities in exchange for their help and guidance; contemporary gifts can be practical items such as towels, blankets, tea pot and cup set, etc. In addition to this offering it is also recommended to provide a monetary gift, in the form of a honourarium, in exchange for their assistance. The intention of offering a honourarium is to give what you can. Ensure their gift and honourarium are ready at the time of the event.

If you have questions about the honourarium, you can contact CACE and speak with an Aboriginal Cultural Liaison Officer.

Compensation for Additional Costs

Students, faculty and staff must make travel arrangements with the Elder or someone working on their behalf in scheduling their activities. Additional costs incurred by the Elder, such as parking, mileage, meals and accommodations, must be reimbursed.

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