



REQUESTING SERVICES OF ELDER/KNOWLEDGE KEEPER MSVU Aboriginal Student Centre/Mount Saint Vincent University

In order to maintain a respectful approach toward Elders/Knowledge Keepers in this region, when requesting the services of an Elder or Knowledge Keeper, Mount Saint Vincent University members are encouraged to use the following protocol:

Depending on the Elder or Knowledge Keeper identified by staff of the MSVU Aboriginal Student Centre (ASC), the ASC may make the initial contact on behalf of the requesting unit, or if the Elder/Knowledge Keeper is known to them, staff themselves may make the initial contact.

Please keep in mind when contacting an Elder or Knowledge Keeper, each have their own specialties so sometimes more than one Elder or Knowledge Keeper may be consulted. Because Elders and Knowledge Keepers have different information and skills it is very important to give Elders and Knowledge Keepers ample time to prepare and confer with others when necessary.

Gifts to an Elder

Upon initial contact, gifting at this stage is most often the gift of traditional tobacco tied in a small bundle of red cloth. If the Elder/Knowledge Keeper can be contacted in person, then a gift of tobacco is personally presented to them by either an MSVU Aboriginal Student Centre representative or the by the person making the request. When gifting tobacco in person, place the bundle in front of the Elder/Knowledge Keeper and state your request. The Elder indicates acceptance of your request by picking up the tobacco.

Tobacco as a gift of appreciation:

Tobacco is one of the few examples of something that is used in many Aboriginal cultures across Turtle Island. In Mi'kmaw culture it is customary to approach an Elder or Knowledge Keeper with tobacco as a gift of invitation for their wisdom. However, it is important that you understand the meaning behind the tobacco as a gift from the heart, rather than something that you just buy. While gifting tobacco is not a requirement in order to ask an Elder or Knowledge Keeper to come to the Mount, it is a *courtesy* if you understand why you are presenting it and feel connected to the gift. When an Elder or Knowledge Keeper accepts a gift of tobacco, he or she is accepting your request. If they are unable to help you they will refrain from accepting the tobacco. Please note: not all Elders or Knowledge Keepers will accept tobacco, nor should you offer it to all Elders or Knowledge Keepers. If you are unsure about whether or not you should offer a gift of tobacco, then ask someone at MSVU Aboriginal Student Centre or the Elders or Knowledge Keepers themselves (this is not considered rude). If you can meet with an Elder or Knowledge Keeper in person rather than through email or phone, then you can present them with tobacco as an initial offering. Upon giving the tobacco, place it in front of an Elder or

Knowledge Keeper and state your request. You must be specific as to what you are asking an Elder or Knowledge Keeper to do for you and know that when an Elder or Knowledge Keeper picks up the tobacco, he/she is accepting your request. **Never** hand Elders or Knowledge Keepers tobacco directly, because then you are taking away their choice in accepting your request. The tobacco, in its natural form, can be placed in a red pouch or a red piece of cloth and tied into a small bundle (tobacco pouches sold in any store is also an acceptable form).

- If the Elder/Knowledge Keeper declines your request, they may be willing to provide a referral to a colleague which a representative of the MSVU Aboriginal Student Centre can assist with.

When making a request of an Elder or Knowledge Keeper, it is also customary to present them with a gift. Gifts given to Elders and Knowledge Keepers were traditionally a means of support with which Elders/Knowledge Keepers would feed, clothe, and shelter themselves. People genuinely gave what they could afford in essentials such as fabric, clothes, fur, meat, or firewood.

In contemporary times, traditional or exclusively ceremonial gifts have fallen to the wayside and Elders/Knowledge Keepers are financially supported through a system of honoraria.

Before approaching an Elder or Knowledge Keeper please ensure you know the amount of honoraria before you make your request so that you can quote this number to your Elder/Knowledge Keeper, this is to ensure an Elder/Knowledge Keeper is given ample opportunity to focus on the task at hand rather than worry about what their abilities are worth. Please understand it is completely unacceptable to leave money negotiations in the hands of an Elder or Knowledge Keeper. It is not up to them to decide what their expertise is worth-it is up to you, also keep in mind Elders and Knowledge Keepers expect to be “given” **only what people or groups can afford.**

Honoraria as Gifts of Appreciation

In most Indigenous cultures, an Elder or Knowledge Keeper’s teachings and practices are considered gifts and therefore should be treated as such. It is common practice to provide an honorarium to Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers for sharing their traditional teachings in a show of reciprocity. This honorarium is viewed as a **gift** to the Indigenous Elder or Knowledge Keeper rather than payment. It is important to keep this in mind because these honoraria are not payments for services rendered but rather are gestures of appreciation for what has been taught and shared. Gift giving promotes balance in Indigenous cultures

Elders and Knowledge Keepers are not paid a salary or wage for their work, which is why an honorarium is an appropriate exchange for their knowledge. While historically Elders were given food or other essentials for their help and advice, today money is a more acceptable gift; however, in some instances, a small gift of appreciation may be an appropriate. For example, if there is a small task or meeting happening and an Elder/Knowledge Keeper is present a small gift of appreciation should suffice. Some common gifts may include any kind of tobacco or sweet grass, which will then be used for ceremonies, or small tokens of appreciation such as jewelry.

This type of honorarium can be presented following the event for which you asked the Elder or Knowledge Keeper to attend.

There is no set amount that you should pay an Elder/Knowledge Keeper. Honoraria should be provided based on what your respective faculty or department can afford. However, it is important to recognize that Elders and Knowledge Keepers in most institutions are acknowledged in the same way as visiting scholars or academics and therefore their honorarium should also commensurate with their stature within the community.

An honorarium is required when you are asking an Elder/Knowledge Keeper to engage in any of the following:

- Prayer to open/close an event
- Cultural Workshop
- Traditional Ceremony
- Convocation
- Lecture/class talk/seminar

Since the honorarium is a gift rather than a payment, it should be processed by your department and financial services as such and Elders/Knowledge Keepers should not be required to provide a social insurance number, dates of birth, nor sign receipts – this could have the effect of being viewed as disrespectful and insinuate Indigenous Elders/Knowledge Keepers are selling rather than sharing their knowledge.

Additional Assistance

If you require additional assistance or guidance on how to find, contact, and invite an Indigenous Elder or Knowledge Keeper to your class, event, or speaking engagement please feel free to contact the MSVU Aboriginal Student Centre.

*Please read through this protocol and familiarize yourself with Elder/Knowledge Keeper protocol before contacting the MSVU Aboriginal Student Centre.

Contact Us:

Veronica Gore
Coordinator of Aboriginal Student Services
46 Melody Dr. (Lower level)
Halifax, NS B3M 2J6

Phone: (902) 457-6228
Fax: (902) 457-6251
Email: veronica.gore@msvu.ca
Web: www.msvu.ca/asc