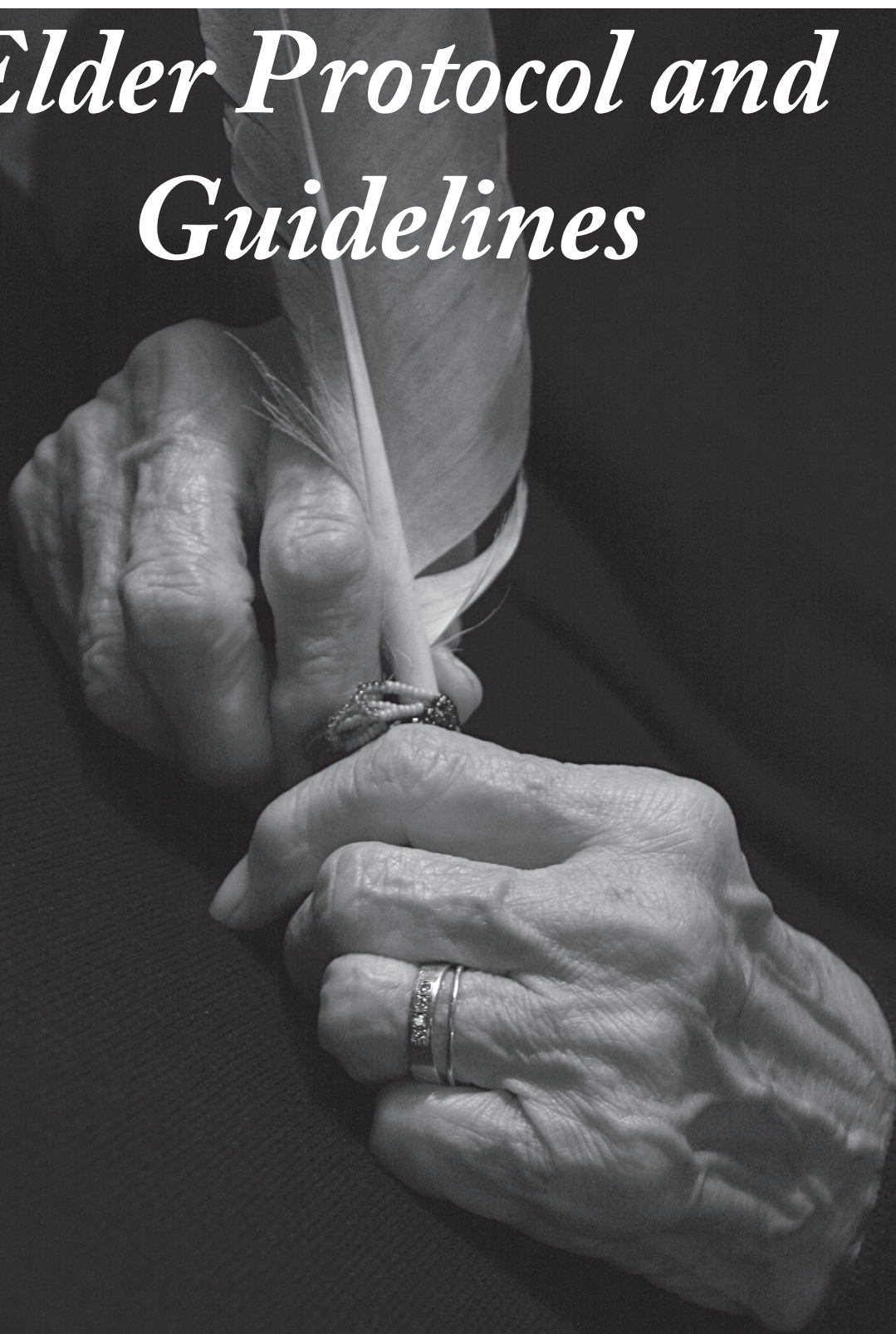


# *Elder Protocol and Guidelines*



Prepared by the Council on Aboriginal Initiatives  
February 11, 2012

Produced by:  
Council on Aboriginal Initiatives  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, AB  
February 11, 2012

Cover Photo by Caroline Monnet  
Cover Photo Model Bette Spence

# **ELDER PROTOCOL & GUIDELINES**

University of Alberta

Edmonton, Alberta

February 11, 2012

Prepared by the

Council on Aboriginal Initiatives

## **Acknowledgements**

The Council of Aboriginal Initiatives acknowledges the wealth of knowledge, support and encouragement that has been so generously provided by our Elders – the Old Ones – “Kehteyak”, community, and leadership to develop this handbook.

### ***Kinanaskomatinan***

(We thank all of you).

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**KEHTEYAK (MEANING “THE OLD ONES” IN CREE):  
FUNCTIONAL ROLES OF OLDER ABORIGINAL PEOPLE  
IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES**





*Preamble:* The first section (pages 2-5) of this document is a teaching called “*Kehteyak* (Meaning ‘the Old Ones’ in Cree): Functional Roles of Older Aboriginal People in Aboriginal Communities,” and has been prepared and written by Leona Carter, Director, Aboriginal Relations Office, City of Edmonton. In Leona’s words, “We hope this document will assist to demystify a title of Elder that has been conferred upon our old ones. The use of the term *Elder* is an attempt to translate the meaning of *kehteyak* from Indigenous languages to the English language.”<sup>1</sup>

## **KEHTEYAK (MEANING “THE OLD ONES” IN CREE): FUNCTIONAL ROLES OF OLDER ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES**

The concept of an Elder in the Aboriginal community is sometimes a difficult one for non-Aboriginal people to understand. The difference is in the language: in English, it is a title; a noun. In Indigenous languages, it is a verb that describes the role.

Consequently, the English word “Elder” does not capture the full meaning of *Kehteyak*, or describe what a person does. In the Cree language, the English word “Elder” translates most closely to “old ones,” people who have not necessarily acquired any special role as an old person. They are senior citizens, as in the non-Aboriginal community, although old age is respected. When describing an Elder from an Aboriginal point of understanding through

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<sup>1</sup> Disclaimer: All opinions contained herein are personal to the author, and do not represent policy or positions of any branch of government, or tribal group or Aboriginal affiliation. This document may be used or distributed for educational purposes to the Mayor and Council and City of Edmonton Staff and the University of Alberta.

the filter of the English language, the nature of the role becomes lost in the translation.

Every Indigenous language describes the role of an old person recognized as having been earned, and some of these “old ones” are sought after for their wisdom, philosophy on life, cultural knowledge, ceremonies, and gifts that have been nurtured over time. There are many roles our “old ones” play: most have specialties, and some are generalists. There is an understanding in our Aboriginal communities that one needs to be a certain age in order to be identified as an Elder, and usually that person will have lived long enough to acquire knowledge from the “old ones” and gain life experiences. One Elder I sought assistance from told me, “we need the Elders here”; he was 73 years old, himself (personal conversation, Joe Spotted Bull, September 2010). That comment gives an idea what the chronological age should be for one to be considered an Elder.

Most of our Aboriginal people who aspire to a particular specialty have worked with Elders for at least twenty years and more, much like an apprentice. Aboriginal people in their thirties, forties, and fifties, who work to serve their communities, work with Elders who have a particular specialty of interest to them: for example, Medicine People, or those who know how to conduct Pipe, Sweat Lodge, Sun Dance, Lodge, and other ceremonies, such as the Chicken Dance and Horse Dance. Elders are recognized and identified by their respective communities according to the service they provide.

## **WHO IS AN ELDER?**

“The Aboriginal Healing Foundation describes an Elder as: ‘[S]omeone who is considered exceptionally wise in the ways of their culture

and the teachings of the Great Spirit. They are recognized for their wisdom, their stability, their humour and their ability to know what is appropriate in a particular situation. The community looks to them for guidance and sound judgment. They are caring and are known to share the fruits of their labours and experience with others in the community (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2005, p. 4)'... [Essential qualities in an Elder are as follows:]

1. Disciplined and committed to a lifetime of learning;
2. Knows traditional teachings and is committed to helping people within this framework;
3. Physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually healthy;
4. Born with, or seeks, the gift of healing in apprenticeship with a traditional healer;
5. Walks his or her talk, i.e., lives a healthy lifestyle within the parameters of traditional values;
6. Provides help when asked, although may not provide this immediately [sometimes will refer to another Elder with particular expertise];
7. Able to bring traditional values and life ways into contemporary urban life and living in a practical way;
8. Treats his or her family, spouse, children, parents, Elders and other traditional healers in a respectful and caring manner [all people];
9. Is a positive role model for Aboriginal people;

10. Able to teach and correct behavior with kindness and respect without humiliating the individual;

11. Always hopeful of people and able to see the goodness in people;

12. Does not use alcohol or drugs or engage in other destructive addictive behavior;

13. Does not set a fee for their healing service or request gifts in payment;

14. Knows the medicines and ceremonies [has experience and participated in ceremonies], and;

15. [Demonstrated] evidence of his or her success exists among the [Aboriginal] people and the [Aboriginal] communities (Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2005, pp. 70-71)."

Genuine Elders never self-identify themselves as an Elder or say that they are a sweat lodge holder or pipe holder; they do not promote themselves; and it is the community that identifies them as having acquired and earned those gifts.

This is a very basic attempt to explain the roles that the "old people" or "old ones" have in our Aboriginal communities. Neither non-Aboriginal institutions nor non-Aboriginal people should attempt to identify Elders for us—only Aboriginal people can ascribe that role to those who have earned it through demonstrated lifelong role modeling and service to our people.

To further explain some of the different roles our "old ones" might hold in Aboriginal communities, we have adopted the following descriptions from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation:

“**MEDICINE PEOPLE** consider themselves channels or mediums in healing work. They diagnose and treat a full range of spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical problems using the pipe, drum, rattles, and other sacred objects. Treatment plans can include: ceremonies, such as sweat lodges or fasting; offerings; feasts; and traditional plant medicines.

**ELDERS** have knowledge of traditional teachings and model living in a Good Way. They transmit the teachings and values in sweat lodge and other ceremonies, teaching and healing circles, and individual or group consultations and/or counseling sessions.

**HERBALISTS** know the traditional uses of a variety of medicinal plants. They often work in conjunction with medicine people, seers, or medical doctors.

**TRADITIONAL TEACHERS** may be “Elders in Training” who know the traditional teachings and are committed to sharing this knowledge for the good of the people. They may conduct ceremonies and will work in conjunction with medicine people.

**SEERS** are able to look into the past and future of a person to identify problems that need attention. They may suggest ceremonies to be carried out or refer to a medicine person or medical practitioner.

**CEREMONIALISTS** are people who do certain types of ceremonies on request and know the songs and protocols for conducting the ceremonies.

**TRADITIONAL MIDWIVES** know the traditional teaching for bringing new life into the world and the ceremonies required. They work with the woman during pregnancy, labour, childbirth, and for a period of time after

pregnancy (Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2005, p. 70).”

There are other roles that have not been mentioned that are also very important in Aboriginal communities in understanding the magnitude of the roles that the “old ones” have. Their roles are multifaceted and are not described by a title but by the function or role they have become identified with by the community. In addition to the functions noted above as mentioned by the National Healing Foundation, there are two more that come from my home community:

**ORATORS** have special skills in public speaking. They have an important role at wakes, funerals, weddings, conferences, and celebrations in the Aboriginal communities. They may not necessarily conduct any of the spiritual ceremonies but they have a gift of a deep understanding, compassion, and knowledge of the Aboriginal cultural philosophy of life.

**ADVISORS** have specific cultural knowledge about the environment, governance, agriculture, husbandry, hunters, fisherman, forestry, genealogy from face recognition, and commerce and/or business, and are sought after for their advice in these matters.

There is general consensus and agreement in the Aboriginal community that the roles, qualities, and attributes listed above are what constitute the conference of the title of “old one” or Elder, the commonly acknowledged term in the non-Aboriginal community.

An Elder or “old one” will never set a fee or ask for gifts. Although it is a traditional practice amongst our people to compensate the “old one” for his or her services, the one making the request is the one who determines

the monetary value and the gifts presented. The amount given and the kinds of gifts given are indicators of how much value is assigned by, or gratitude felt by, the person making the request for help received, but a person who is not able to give an offering is not judged or thought of any less. Harvey Tootoosis made this point clear in a story he related of a person who gave him one dollar. Harvey said, “That’s all he had, so therefore he gave 100% (personal communication, 10 May 2011).” The reciprocity principle—Aboriginal people taking care of each other—is what is important.

As I mentioned previously, the information given here is very basic, and is to give the reader an appreciation of the enormous role and responsibility that our “old ones” have in our communities. This information is from my Cree teachings and from a First Nations perspective, and does not address Métis or Inuit concepts of Elders.

*We thank Leona Carter for her input and knowledge in providing these valuable teachings about the “old ones.”*

## **ELDER PROTOCOL**

### **1. PURPOSE**

Given the University’s Aboriginal Companion document statements, policies, and the demographics of the province of Alberta, many university employees and units have expressed interest in having Elders come into their classes or having them work on cultural events and other tasks. The purpose of this policy is to establish protocol surrounding:

- the compilation of a list of recognized Elders and their areas of expertise;

- consistency in the offering of honoraria and/or gifts of appreciation;
- the reciprocal, respectful treatment of Elders;
- the establishment of an Advisory Committee (ACEPT).

### **The Advisory Committee on Elders, Protocol, and Teachings (ACEPT)**

The ACEPT team consists of University of Alberta staff who are very familiar with both traditional Aboriginal protocol and the rules and regulations of the University of Alberta. As part of our role on campus, we are often seen as cultural brokers between the Aboriginal community and the university community. One area we feel very strongly about is respectful treatment of our Elders and the Indigenous knowledge they carry. Therefore, we have created this policy and procedures document to assist the university community with knowledge about how and when to use Elders in a way that is respectful to our peoples, cultures, and our communities of Alberta. ACEPT is designed to assist and protect both the Elders and the University of Alberta, while offering liaison services between the two distinctive communities.

### **2. SCOPE**

This policy and its procedures apply to all faculty and staff who utilize the experiences and knowledge of Elders, on- or off-campus, for University of Alberta purposes.

### **3. SUPPORT & RESOURCE**

The Advisory Committee on Elders, Protocol and Teachings (ACEPT), along with the Council on Aboriginal Initiatives (CAI) and its Steering Committee, will support faculty

and staff with Elder recommendations, as well as with the traditional process of inviting and thanking them for their contributions.

## **4. PROTOCOL**

In order to maintain a respectful attitude towards the Elders of this region, the following protocols need to be followed:

### **4.1 EXTENDING THE INVITATION**

Most Elders accept tobacco when you ask them to share their knowledge—however, this is not true for everyone. Elders have diverse teachings, so please ask first! Please also note that it is very important to be specific in making your request. If the Elder accepts the tobacco, s/he is accepting the request and will do her/his best to help you. If they cannot do what you are asking, they will say so and not accept the tobacco.

### **4.2 GIFT OF APPRECIATION**

If the Elder agrees to become involved and accepts the tobacco, it is customary to provide a gift of appreciation afterwards to show your thanks. This gift can be monetary and can also be known as a honorarium. Historically, Elders were given food, clothing and other necessities in exchange for their help, and therefore monetary gifts are now acceptable.

Although it is a traditional practice amongst our people to compensate the “old one” for his or her services, the one making the request is the one who determines the monetary value and the gifts presented. The amount given and the kinds of gifts given are indicators of how much value or gratitude is felt by the person making the request for help received, but a person who is not able to give an offering is not judged or thought of any less. The reciprocity principle—Aboriginal people taking care of each other—is what is important.(Carter, 2011).

For internal auditing purposes, it is acceptable to ask Elders for their Social Insurance Numbers (SIN) and their address, and to sign a receipt as acknowledgement of receiving their gift of appreciation.

### **4.3 TRAVEL**

A financial reimbursement of any expenses or incurred costs in connection with the Elder’s involvement with you (i.e., travel, food, accommodations) should be offered to the Elder in addition to their gift or under a separate travel claim.

### **4.4 ELDER HELPERS (OSKAPEW) AND ATTENDANTS**

Sometimes Elders come with their own helper or an attendant. If they do not, you need to ensure there is someone to help and support the Elder. A helper, or *oskapew*, is different from an escort. An *oskapew* (Elder apprentice) assists the Elder in the preparation of a ceremony. If the Elder has their own *oskapew*, please ensure this person is fairly compensated. An attendant is one who looks after an Elder, and whose duties may include arranging transportation to and from the venue, greeting and introducing the Elder, and offering the comforts that Elderly people may require (e.g., bathroom, quiet resting place, food and drink).

### **4.5 ELDER HONOURARIUMS**

#### **Events that typically require honorarium payouts**

---

#### **ELDER: PRAYER**

To start the event/activity with a prayer and end the event with a prayer.

#### **ELDER: PIPE CEREMONY**

Offering to Pipe Carrier

**ELDER: CULTURAL WORKSHOPS**

(ex. Storytelling, drum making)

Requests come from students, staff or Elders for additional cultural workshops. In this case Elder(s) will receive an honorarium for each cultural workshop, which are approximately 1.5-2 hours in length. Adjust accordingly if the requested Elder is required for a full day.

**ELDER: TRADITIONAL CEREMONY**

Requests may come from students, staff or Elders for ceremony.

**ELDER: CONVOCATION**

Elders on stage during convocation will be given an honorarium to be present in offering (eagle feather/Métis sash/Inuit item)

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**ELDER: TRANSPORTATION**

1) U of A parking pass will be offered to Elder that will be coming in for the scheduled visit, workshop, ceremony; if you offer transportation for the Elder, no parking pass will be dispersed.

2) U of A representative may have to transport Elder(s) to and from event; due to the fact that some Elders are not mobile.

**ELDER: MEALS AND ACCOMMODATIONS**

Offering Elders a snack or a meal while they are in your care is necessary (ask prior to their arrival if they have any dietary concerns). If accommodations are required they will be provided to the Elder.

*Costs are variable.*

**Note:** The honorariums are not inclusive of the traditional protocol that is required prior to requesting the presence of an Elder(s) at your event, celebration, honoring etc. In addition to the honorarium for the Pipe Ceremony or Traditional Ceremony the Elder should

be presented with a blanket at the time of ceremony.

**Note:** If your budget allows for a lower or higher honorarium amount then by all means give what you can. The intention of offering an honorarium is to give ‘what you can’ with respects to what the Elder is offering you; guidance, prayer, ceremony, etc. It is extremely difficult to place a dollar value on sacred knowledge and ceremony THEREFORE this document is to be used only as a guideline.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

We have intentionally NOT included a specific amount within this document as these monetary amounts will fluctuate. To access the suggested amounts, please contact Aboriginal Student Services Centre at 780-492-5677 or email [assc.reception@ualberta.ca](mailto:assc.reception@ualberta.ca).

**APPENDIX I**

*Kehteyak* (Meaning the “Old Ones” in Cree): Functional Roles of Older Aboriginal People in Aboriginal Communities’. Edmonton, Alberta, 11 February 2011.

**APPENDIX II**

Elders Leadership and Resource Council Report. Edmonton, Alberta, 29 October 2009.

**APPENDIX III**

Inuit Elders Protocol Guideline. Edmonton, Alberta, 9 May 2011.

## REFERENCES

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation. (2005). *Reclaiming Connections: Understanding Residential School Trauma Among Aboriginal People*. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

Carter, Leona. (2011). “*Kehteyak* (Meaning ‘the Old Ones’ in Cree): Functional Roles of Older Aboriginal People in Aboriginal Communities.” Unpublished paper.

Spotted Bull, Joe. (2010). Personal communication. September.

Tootoosis, Harvey. (2011). Personal communication. May 10.

\*for more information please contact:

Aboriginal Student Services Centre at 780.492.5677 or email at [assc.reception@ualberta.ca](mailto:assc.reception@ualberta.ca).

Come visit our centre located at 2-400 Student’s Union Building, 8900-114<sup>th</sup> Street, University of Alberta, T6G 2J7.





**ELDER PROTOCOL &  
GUIDELINES**

**APPENDIX I**

**KEHTEYAK (MEANING “THE OLD ONES IN CREE):  
FUNCTIONAL ROLES OF OLDER ABORIGINAL PEOPLE  
IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES, HOW THEY ARE  
IDENTIFIED, AND WHO IDENTIFIES THEM**

University of Alberta

Edmonton, Alberta

February 11, 2012

Prepared by the

Council on Aboriginal Initiatives



Kehteyak - “Old Ones” (Cree):

Functional Roles of Older Aboriginal People in  
Aboriginal Communities, How They are Identified, and  
Who Identifies Them.

A TEACHING DOCUMENT PREPARED BY:

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CITY OF EDMONTON

JULY 2011

**DISCLAIMER:** All opinions contained herein are personal to the author, and does not represent policy or positions of any branch of government.

**PERMISSIONS:** This document may be used or distributed for educational purposes.



This document is intended to assist in demystifying the title of Elder that has been conferred upon our old ones by non-Indigenous speakers. It is an attempt to equate the meaning of Elder as used in Indigenous languages to English language usage.

The concept of an Elder in the Aboriginal community is sometimes a difficult one for non-Aboriginal people to understand. The difference is in the language: in English, the word is a title; a noun. In Indigenous languages, it is a verb that describes the role. When describing an Elder from an Aboriginal understanding through the medium of the English language, the role becomes lost in translation.

In the Cree language, we call these people *kehteyak*, which means “old ones.” Not all old people in Aboriginal communities are recognized, necessarily, as having a particular societal role to play as an old person. However, all old people are seniors, just as in the non-Aboriginal community, although old age is acknowledged and respected in Aboriginal communities. There, some of these “old ones” are recognized and sought after for their wisdom, philosophy on life, cultural knowledge, ceremonies, and gifts they have acquired and nurtured over time.

Every Indigenous language describes the role of an old person so recognized as having been earned, and there are many roles our “old ones” play: most have specialties, and some are generalists. There is an understanding in our Aboriginal communities that to be identified as an Elder, one needs to be a certain age, have lived long enough to acquire knowledge from the “old ones,” and have gained life experiences. One Elder who assisted us during a meeting told me, “we need the Elders here”: he was 73 years himself (personal conversation, Joe Spotted Bull, September

2010). That comment gives an idea what the chronological age should be for one to be considered an Elder.

Most of our Aboriginal people who aspire to a particular specialty have worked with Elders for at least twenty years and more, much like an apprentice. Aboriginal people in their thirties, forties, and fifties, who work to serve their communities, work with Elders who have a particular specialty of interest to them: for example, Medicine People, or those who know how to conduct Pipe, Sweat Lodge, Sun Dance, Lodge, and other ceremonies, such as the Chicken Dance and the Horse Dance. Elders are recognized and identified by their respective communities according to the service they provide.

The following information is taken from The Aboriginal Healing Foundation’s publication “Reclaiming Connections: Understanding Residential School Trauma Among Aboriginal People,” to better explain some of the different roles that our “old ones” are recognized for:

**MEDICINE PEOPLE** consider themselves channels or mediums in healing work. They diagnose and treat a full range of spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical problems using the pipe, drum, rattles and other sacred objects. Treatment plans can include: ceremonies, such as sweat lodges or fasting; offerings; feasts; and traditional plant medicines.

**ELDERS** have knowledge of traditional teachings and model living in a Good Way. They transmit the teachings and values in sweat lodge and other ceremonies, teaching and healing circles, and individual or group consultations and/or counseling sessions.

**HERBALISTS** know the traditional uses of a variety of medicinal plants. They often work

in conjunction with medicine people, seers or medical doctors.

**TRADITIONAL TEACHERS** may be “Elders in Training” who know the traditional teachings and are committed to sharing this knowledge for the good of the people. They may conduct ceremonies and will work in conjunction with medicine people.

**SEERS** are able to look into the past and future of a person to identify problems that need attention. They may suggest ceremonies to be carried out or refer to a medicine person or medical practitioner.

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**TRADITIONAL MIDWIVES** know the traditional teaching for bringing new life into the world and the ceremonies required. They work with the woman during pregnancy, labour, childbirth, and for a period of time after pregnancy (2005, p. 70).

There are more roles that have not been mentioned so far that are also very important in Aboriginal communities in understanding the magnitude of the roles that the “old ones” have. Their roles are multifaceted and can not be described by a title but by the function or role they have become identified by the community. In addition to the functions noted above as mentioned by The National Healing Foundation, there are two more that I have observed in my home community.

**ORATORS** have special skills in public speaking. They have an important role at wakes, funerals, weddings, and celebrations in the Aboriginal communities. They may not necessarily conduct any of the spiritual

ceremonies but they have a gift of a deep understanding, compassion, and knowledge of the Aboriginal cultural philosophy of life.

**ADVISORS** have specific cultural knowledge about the environment, governance, agriculture, husbandry, hunters, fisherman, forestry, commerce and/or business and are sought after for their advice in these matters.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation has also provided advice to answer the question “who is an Elder?”:

[S]omeone who is considered exceptionally wise in the ways of their culture and the teachings of the Great Spirit. They are recognized for their wisdom, their stability, their humour and their ability to know what is appropriate in a particular situation. The community looks to them for guidance and sound judgment. They are caring and are known to share the fruits of their labours and experience with others in the community (2001, p. 4) ... [Essential qualities in an Elder are as follows:]

1. disciplined and committed to a lifetime of learning;
2. knows traditional teachings and is committed to helping people within this framework;
3. physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually healthy;
4. born with, or seeks, the gift of healing in apprenticeship with a traditional healer;
5. walks his or her talk, i.e., lives a healthy lifestyle within the parameters of traditional values;

6. provides help when asked, although may not provide this immediately [sometimes will refer to another Elder with particular expertise];
7. able to bring traditional values and life ways into contemporary urban life and living in a practical way;
8. treats his or her family, spouse, children, parents, Elders and other traditional healers in a respectful and caring manner [all people];
9. is a positive role model for Aboriginal people;
10. able to teach and correct behavior with kindness and respect without humiliating the individual;
11. always hopeful of people and able to see the goodness in people;
12. does not use alcohol or drugs or engage in other destructive addictive behavior;
13. does not set a fee for their healing service or request gifts in payment;
14. knows the medicines and ceremonies [has experience and participated in ceremonies]; and
15. [demonstrated] evidence of his or her success [credibility] exists among the people and the communities.
16. a genuine Elder will never self-identify themselves as an Elder or say that he is a sweat lodge holder, pipe holder, they do not promote themselves; it is the community that identifies and recommends them (2005, pp. 70–71).

There is general consensus and agreement in the Aboriginal community that these roles, qualities, and attributes listed above are what constitutes the conference of an “old one” or Elder, the commonly accepted term in the non-Aboriginal community.

To engage the “old ones” for a particular service, one must know and follow proper protocols in a respectful way. There are two important protocols to adhere to: (1) offering, and (2) gifting. First and foremost is the presentation, in person, of tobacco.

One would contact an “old one” first to arrange a mutually beneficial time to meet in order to make the offering in person. The offering always comes before the ask. The ask is the explanation of why, what, where, and when you would require their service(s). If the “old one” is able to accommodate the request, then he or she would accept the tobacco, making it an official agreement. However, if the “old one” is not able to accommodate the request, he/she will decline acceptance of the tobacco and sometimes will defer to another “old one,” although this is not always the case.

An Elder or “old one” will never set a fee or ask for gifts for ceremonies. However, it is a traditional practice amongst our people to compensate the “old one” for their services. The person making the request is the one who determines the monetary value and the gifts presented. The amount given and the kinds of gifts given can be seen as indicators on how much value is assigned by, or gratitude felt by, the recipient for the help they have been received. However, a person who is not able to offer gifts is not judged or thought of any less. Harvey Tootoosis made this point clear in his story of a person giving him one dollar. Harvey said, “that’s all he had, so therefore he gave 100 per cent” (personal communication, May 10, 2011). It is the reciprocity principle—

Aboriginal people taking care of each other—that is important.

This is a very basic attempt to explain the roles that old people, or “old ones,” have in our Aboriginal communities. Neither non-Aboriginal institutions nor non-Aboriginal people should attempt to identify Elders in our Aboriginal communities for us—only Aboriginal people themselves can ascribe that role to those who have earned it through demonstrated lifelong role modeling and service to our people.

Some Elders have been contracted by governments, organizations, or agencies to provide cultural services, and their roles have expanded from rural areas to urban centers. This document is intended to give some insight and understanding into who they are and to have an appreciation of the huge role and responsibility that our “old ones” have in our communities. It is not intended to inform or identify who the “old ones” are in our communities.

This information is from my Cree teachings and from a First Nations perspective, which does not speak to the Métis or Inuit concepts of Elders.

### **Reference List**

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation. (2005). *Reclaiming Connections: Understanding Residential School Trauma Among Aboriginal People*. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.



**ELDER PROTOCOL &  
GUIDELINES**

**APPENDIX II  
ELDERS LEADERSHIP AND RESOURCE COUNCIL**

University of Alberta

Edmonton, Alberta

February 11, 2012

Prepared by the

Council on Aboriginal Initiatives



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# **ELDERS LEADERSHIP AND RESOURCE COUNCIL**

Working Paper

Edmonton, Alberta

October 29, 2009

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The definition of “Elder” is not a simple task; “Elder” is a complex concept that is integrally tied to important issues relating to leadership, knowledge, intergenerational societal teaching, change, and recent history. It is emotionally charged because “Elder” represents many things to people—families, the past, strength, experiences, survival, language, communities, and Indigenous societies. “Elder” is also a politically volatile concept that has come to include both implicit and explicit ideas about authority, power, authenticity, and political correctness, and is a highly contested construct that bristles with questions about who is an Elder, what the qualifications of an Elder are, the different kinds of Elders (positive and negative), and Elder roles.

This is some of what was learned through a small, qualitative research project that ran from June 2008 to May 2009 and undertaken by Jodi Stonehouse and other student research assistants, with the support of the Faculty of Native Studies and the Aboriginal Students Services Council on behalf of the University of Alberta. The project involved conducting interviews with selected Elders and Elders’ helpers in rural Alberta, and two focus groups held in Edmonton, with invited Elders, students, faculty members, and staff members. The last component of the research project included an extensive literature review, which found very little extant critical scholarship or popular materials that went beyond the essentializing rhetoric about culture and Elders that pervades Indigenous discourse. This lack makes the project described here a cutting-edge one, in that the project discusses issues that have not been critically explored elsewhere.

The report presented here summarizes what was learned from the literature review, interviews, focus groups, and extensive discussions held over the year between June 2008 and May 2009. The findings in this report have a potentially broad application across the university—three overarching recommendations have been prepared for consideration by the University of Alberta—and represent a significant contribution to scholarship. These findings make this a critically important and very exciting research project that opens up new conversations and offers some practical ways forward for the University of Alberta.







## PART ONE

### INTRODUCTION: FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS, AND INUIT ELDERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

For the University of Alberta, the past three decades have seen task forces, studies, and reports devoted to exploring and addressing a range of Indigenous issues.<sup>1</sup> The extensive organizing work and lobbying efforts of Indigenous peoples have resulted in, among other things, the establishment of the Faculty of Native Studies<sup>2</sup> and the Aboriginal Student Services Centre at the university.<sup>3</sup> Many important educational milestones have been established for Indigenous peoples in Alberta and, today, Indigenous peoples are an integral part of the University of Alberta.

Indigenous Elders were invited to be involved with Native Studies when it was established, first as a school and, later, as a faculty (Price 1998). Since then, Elders have fulfilled several roles during the twenty-one-year life span of Native Studies—in advising and planning direction for the faculty and in the

1 See University of Alberta, “Aboriginal Task Force Report” (2002).

2 Formerly the School of Native Studies.

3 The first Aboriginal Student Council was formed in 1973.

classroom. The work of Elders continues to be valued and essential to recognizing, relying on, and teaching First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives in Faculty of Native Studies courses.

To date, none of these roles for Elders has been formalized, insofar as establishing responsibilities or terms of service. For teaching, faculty members have relied on their relationships with various communities and with Elders who are interested in participating at the faculty. Similarly, over the years, Elders have moved in and out of service with the faculty’s leadership.

Lack of resources in the early years (1969-1991) prevented the establishment of an “Elder-in-Residence” position at Native Studies. As soon as it was possible, two Elders were hired on a part-time basis (meaning about one day per month during the academic year) to teach and provide advice to students. These first Elders-in-Residence were Cree Elder Raven Makkanaw and Métis Elder Maurice L’Hirondelle (R. Price, personal communication, May 29, 2009). However, a chronic lack of resources has prevented the continuation of the Elder-in-Residence program. Fortunately, since 2000, the Aboriginal Student Services Centre has been able to retain Elders to provide consistent student support.

In the fall of 2007, a Faculty of Native Studies student requested greater Elder involvement at the faculty. At that time, the Provost and the Dean of Student Services (who oversees the Aboriginal Student Services Centre) agreed to fund research into the current and potential roles of Elders at the University of Alberta. This report is the preliminary result of that research.

## PART TWO

### METHODOLOGY

#### 1. INTERVIEWS

The decision to conduct interviews with Elders arose as a result of conversations between Jodi Stonehouse (a Faculty of Native Studies student), Dr. Ellen Bielawski (Dean, Faculty of Native Studies), Dr. Carl Amrhein (Provost and Vice-President Academic), Melissa Gillis (former director of the Aboriginal Student Services Centre), and Dr. Bill Connor (former Dean of Students). Early on in those discussions, it was decided to talk directly to Elders about their current and potential roles within the University of Alberta, and about building new relationships between the institution and the Elders in Treaty 6, 7, and 8 territories. Jodi Stonehouse was the lead project organizer and researcher.

Following these early discussions, an ethics proposal was submitted to, and subsequently approved by, the Faculty of Native Studies' Research Ethics Board in accordance with university requirements and national Tri-Council Research policy.

## 2. SETTING UP THE INTERVIEWS

Local Aboriginal communities and regional treaty offices were contacted in order to learn about their protocols, policies, or bylaws relating to research and access to community members, and specifically to Elders.

Organizing the interviews for the Elders in their communities took time, as proper communication channels and protocols were figured out and followed. Preliminary work, in practice, meant first contacting a relative of each Elder in order to establish a kinship connection and to legitimize the time requested for the interviews.

Each interview was arranged according to the steps required to secure the interviewee's time commitment. In some cases, this meant spending time with more relatives or helpers in order to be granted time for an interview. In some instances, the interview was granted upon completion of a challenging and intense examination facilitated by the Elder and their helpers.

A number of student research assistants worked along with Jodi Stonehouse, and all were required to prove themselves—morally and intellectually—to the Elders. In other words, the team had to establish that this research project was worthy of the Elders' time. In small communities, this slow building of relationships is a critical part of creating trust and respect, and Jodi Stonehouse and the student research assistants were referred to Elders or Elder helpers for actual interviews based on these initial relationships.

This informal referral system for research is known locally as the "snowball method." This process is like rolling a snowball—starting small but growing—and required:

- many conversations with many people;
- relationship building;
- major time commitments;
- explanations about the research project; and
- discussions about who should be interviewed.

The key ingredient throughout the interviews was a major time commitment on the part of the researchers. Time had to be spent visiting, having tea, or even visiting trap lines. Only after time had been spent visiting was it acceptable to present the gift to the Elder and formally ask to do the interview. This preparatory work resulted in the final interviews going smoothly and being completed.

This referral process also was necessary because it was impossible to know ahead of time which Elders were interested in participating, and to know what was expected of outsiders going into their communities. This information was gained through personal relationships.

A number of questions were considered around the issue of research protocols:

- (1) What is research protocol?
- (2) Who does it apply to?
- (3) How do you know which protocol to follow?

For the purposes of this project, our working definition of “protocol” was a set of rules, guidelines, or practices one must adhere to when requesting the assistance of an Elder. Our project approach was premised upon an understanding that, when requesting help, a prayer, or guidance from an Elder, one should offer a bundle of tobacco. From this perspective, the tobacco is seen as a sign of

respect for the earth because the tobacco plant carries prestigious agency, and therefore demonstrates respect for that Elder’s time. The offering of tobacco creates an obligation, once it is accepted by the Elder, to provide assistance: binding the Elder, in other words, to an exchange of services upon acceptance of the offering.

Turning to the issue of gifting, we learned that, when going to see an Elder to request their assistance, it is vitally important to offer an appropriate gift. In our case, the gift was an offering to show our intent, integrity, and desire to draw upon the Elders’ knowledge. The gifts were selected in accordance to each group’s customary practices, and served to establish a reciprocal obligation. Once the gift was accepted by the Elder, we had no control as to how or what form the reciprocal exchange would take place. At this point, the Elder could respond with questions, provide an interview or a prayer, or give a simple “thank you.” There was no predictability as to the outcome.

### **3. SELECTING THE INTERVIEWEES—CRITERIA AND CONSIDERATIONS**

The referral system described earlier (see Methodology, sections 1 and 2, pp. 9-10) provided the researchers with a list of potential interviewees. Elders that were selected for the interviews were people with reputations as political Elders, spiritual Elders, or wise people in their own right. Elders were interviewed in rural Alberta, in Treaty 6, 7 and 8 territories, and were Elders who fulfilled a range of roles in their communities, including:

- ☞ advisor to chief and council;
- ☞ spiritual advisor;

- ☞ federal government employee (Corrections, Health);
  - ☞ culture camps provider for children in foster care;
  - ☞ healer and medicine person;
  - ☞ advisor to judges;
  - ☞ school guidance councillor;
  - ☞ activist protector of land and resources;
  - ☞ political activist;
  - ☞ teachers of traditional roles; and
  - ☞ wife of the last hereditary Chief for the Bloods.
- ☞ Kendall Stavast (Indigenous Peoples Governance, combined Native Studies program);
  - ☞ Cristina Pyesmany (Native Studies Honours program);
  - ☞ Rodney McLeod (Aboriginal Student Council);
  - ☞ Jenna Strachan (Native Studies Honours program);
  - ☞ Colette Arcand (Native Studies graduate);
  - ☞ Chancy Black Water (Aboriginal Student Council).

#### **4. TIME FRAME**

The interviews were completed in the time period from September 2008 to February 2009.

#### **5. GEOGRAPHY**

Treaty 6—Alexander First Nation, Enoch Cree Nation, and Ermineskin Nation.

Treaty 7—Kainai Nation (Blood), Stoney First Nation, Wesley, Chiniki, and Bearspaw.

Treaty 8—Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew First Nation, and Driftpile First Nation.

#### **6. STUDENT RESEARCH ASSISTANTS**

The following students helped with the project as research assistants:

Over the course of the project, these students completed an extensive literature review, travelled and assisted in the interviews, participated in focus group sessions, and helped with report writing.

#### **7. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of the literature review was to explore the scholarship concerning Elders and their various historic and present-day roles with governance, post-secondary institutions, corrections, justice programs, and so on. Restorative justice literature was one area targeted because many Aboriginal justice models involve Elders, and the issues, findings, and evaluations have potential applicability to the University of Alberta. It was anticipated that the literature review would provide some depth, scope, background, and context to the issues and questions about Elders' roles and responsibilities, rhetoric, problem areas, and success stories.

## 8. FOCUS GROUPS

As part of the research, two focus groups were organized, one involving faculty and students, and the other Elders and students.

The first focus group was held on October 28, 2008, with faculty and students. This session was a critical exploration of the circulating ideas about Elders, questions and issues, language, and experiences. This group compiled a list of questions that formed part of the ongoing investigation for this project.

The second focus group session was held March 3, 2009, and included Elders, students, Native Studies faculty members, and Aboriginal Student Services Centre staff. The Elders in this group were mainly those already involved with the university or with other institutions. The discussion for this session revolved around the preliminary research findings from the interviews with rural Elders. The outcomes from this focus group included:

- ☞ identifying the various kinds of work already taking place within institutions by Elders;
- ☞ describing some of the positive and negative experiences of Elders in their current respective roles; and
- ☞ imagining future roles for Elders, working relationships within institutions, and collaborative models.

## 9. ELDERS' GATHERING

On May 13, 2009, a first draft of this report and four recommendations were presented for discussion at a gathering with Elders, Native

Studies faculty members, Aboriginal Student Services Centre staff, students, and guests at Alumni House. The Elders in attendance were those who had been interviewed, and those that had participated in the project focus groups. While this gathering did not result in agreement on the critical questions raised in the draft report, such as Elder selection, the discussion was nonetheless very informative.

What follows in this revised report reflects some the discussion highlights.



## PART THREE

### THE ISSUES

A Cree teacher in an elementary school once said, “An Elder isn’t just somebody that is old, an Elder is somebody in the community that is respected and has earned that title.” There are many questions about the contested concept of “Indigenous Elder,” including:

- ☞ What does it mean to be an Elder?
- ☞ What does community respect mean and look like?
- ☞ How have the various constructs of “Elder” been created over time?

We have all met Elders for whom we have developed a deep respect because of their knowledge, life experience, generosity, and sincerity of spirit. However, we have also all met Elders who may be great knowledge bearers but abuse their power or who engage in unethical behaviour in their communities. What does it mean for us to question Elders? Does this make us bad people?

As difficult as it may seem, asking questions about what it means to be an Elder in contemporary rural and urban Aboriginal

communities is increasingly important because Elders are being incorporated in mainstream institutions such as the university and elsewhere. There is a struggle to understand, on the one hand, what an Elder is in different Aboriginal societies and groups.; on the other hand, what might the role of an Elder be at the University of Alberta? How can the accountability of Elders and the accountability of the institution be defined and maintained? What power struggles might become apparent under scrutiny? What are the various ethical concerns in these instances?

In order to confront these difficult issues, the discursive context, cultural context, and social context of Elders must be unpacked. What does it mean to be an Elder today in Aboriginal societies, groups, and communities? What types of roles might Elders fulfill? Does the concept of Elder differ across Indigenous societies, and from community to community? What is the relationship between Indigenous society and Elders? What are the politics of being an Elder? What comprises the various power relations involved in being an Elder? What happens when an Elder abuses power? And, finally, how might Elders be abused by the institution?

To begin this discussion, we will first turn to the various constructions of culture in the Aboriginal and academic discourses. After all, it is arguably these discourses and constructs about culture that informs us what it means to be an Elder.

The work of Elders is often defined as maintaining culture and passing down traditional cultural knowledge. In this context it is assumed that Elders hold the knowledge of “authentic” Aboriginal cultures. From this perspective, Elders are given the task of dealing with the losses of Aboriginal cultures

and “finding” cultures again through various forms of cultural revitalization.

Cree scholar Verna St. Denis critically examines the idea of cultural authenticity and its possible, damaging effects on Aboriginal groups or collectivities. In recent years, academics and Aboriginal collectivities have sought to find “Real Indians” with culturally authentic identities, and have used them as a form of cultural currency to further the efforts of self-determination.

“Authentic” cultural identity has become high currency. Some of the markers of cultural authenticity include speaking one’s Aboriginal language, having knowledge of and participating in a myriad of spiritual practices, and having knowledge of traditional stories and other practices of the past (St. Denis, 2004, p. 36).

But who defines these “Real Indians,” and who decides on these markers of cultural authenticity? Do these spiritual, Aboriginal, language-speaking, traditional storytellers exist inside a vacuum untouched by the effects of colonization and recent history? Are there English-speaking “Indians” who live in cities but still pass on the knowledge of traditional ways of living? (Interestingly, John Borrows recently observed that Anishinabek peoples have been speaking English for 200 years, and he wonders when English will become recognized as one of Anishinabek people’s languages [Borrows 2009].) What are traditional ways, for that matter? Who has the authority to define a culturally authentic “Indian”? What are the consequences of insisting that such an authentic being exists?

Each Aboriginal society is unique in its own culture, history, politics, economics, and social background. Searching for

ever-elusive authenticity will not result in finding any “Real Indians.” Instead, there are ordinary Indigenous people living their ordinary Indigenous lives as members of their communities. These ordinary Indigenous people are, in fact, living according to what their Elders taught them, despite the history of colonization. The identities of these ordinary people are defined by Indigenous knowledge, as well as by mainstream ideologies and the experiences of recent history.

St. Denis argues that cultural revitalization is problematic as a systemic cure for social inequality because it denies or minimizes challenges such as poverty, discrimination, and structural racism faced by Aboriginal peoples (2004, p. 41). Explaining how cultural revitalization has been constructed based on essentialist and fundamentalist beliefs that are damaging to a diverse Aboriginal population, St. Denis says,

Cultural revitalization, acting as a system of true beliefs, depends on a construction of Aboriginality as a timeless, unchanging, essence. It operates with a fixed notion of culture and a social stratification that regulates the degrees of authenticity. Cultural revitalization supports the development of national and cultural fundamentalism, especially by encouraging a hierarchy of Indianness, partly through the valorization of authenticity and pristine traditions (41).

With this understanding of Aboriginality as “timeless, unchanging, essence,” many academics and Aboriginal peoples define “Aboriginal culture” as an essentialized, fixed phenomenon. This creates a dichotomy between Aboriginal peoples and mainstream society because Aboriginal peoples are defined as the “native Other.” This dynamic

“encourages incompatibility with socio-cultural change as the native must remain Other, distinctly different and identifiable” (St. Denis, 2004, p. 42).

However, it is important to recall that cultural revitalization has also had many positive effects for the Aboriginal peoples. Cultural revitalization, for example, has enabled Aboriginal peoples to experience a sense of pride in their heritage, against crushing colonial oppression. It has allowed Aboriginal peoples to define themselves as peoples in order to move forward strategically in the political arena. Cultural revitalization has also allowed for Aboriginal people, to take up spiritual practices and ceremonies, in a positive fashion, that were once prohibited by colonial states.

The argument of “cultural difference” has been used in the name of self-governance and cultural revitalization. Defining Aboriginal peoples as distinctly different from non-Aboriginal peoples has enabled some political gains. However, as Chris Andersen asks,

Can Indigenous communities be Indigenous without being different? If not, how will these communities sustain themselves in the face of a Canadian nation-state focused on protecting Indigenous difference at the cost of their collectivity? (2005, p. 2).

Andersen argues that “a danger in emphasizing racial difference rather than distinctiveness—especially in the courts—is that it requires Aboriginal communities to emphasize historical identities that offer only a partial glimpse of who they are .... This forces communities to chase historical shadows that never really existed” (p. 2). According to Andersen, there is “no such thing as a core Native identity” (p. 3). The danger of assuming

that an essentialized “Aboriginal identity” exists is that it potentially defines and traps Aboriginal peoples inside a colonial construct of racial difference. In this way, Aboriginal peoples actually encourage stereotypes that too often become negative and serve to limit the political, economic, social, and legal imaginations of Indigenous peoples.

Assuming a “core Native identity” exists encourages racialized language, which results in further racism, stereotyping, and marginalization of Aboriginal peoples. To define Aboriginal peoples by cultural difference is to be defined as the “racialized Other” in relation to mainstream society. Defining Aboriginal peoples as the racialized Other was a discourse created by colonial nation-states in order to separate Aboriginal peoples from mainstream society and maintain Aboriginal people as an underclass in their own territories. Therefore, defining Aboriginal culture by cultural difference does not work to empower a people—instead, it works to racialize and segregate Indigenous peoples from mainstream culture.

This emphasis on cultural difference suggests that Aboriginal peoples and societies are so different from mainstream society that it is impossible for Aboriginal intellectual resources to be of any use to mainstream institutions such as the legal system or universities. Mainstream societies and ideas are often touted as incommensurable to Aboriginal societies and ideas. According to Bruce Miller in his 2003 article “Justice, Law, and the Lens of Culture,” one implication of this argument for cultural distinction

is that only indigenous peoples can administer justice to indigenous peoples because members of one cultural group cannot understand or emphasize with those of another; an associated argument



is that indigenous practices of justice are opposite of whatever mainstream practices might be because they derived distinct cultures (p. 136).

The argument for cultural distinctiveness does not recognize the real, lived experiences of Indigenous peoples in today's world. In other words, an Aboriginal person may use traditional healing practices as well as mainstream psychology to work through the scars caused by residential schools or other colonial experiences. As Miller states,

The real world, the current world of relations between indigenous groups and the mainstream societies of North America, is more complex than can be captured by the ideas of cultural distinctiveness or social separateness, there have been many decades of interpenetration of peoples and ideas (2003, p. 136).

Questions concerning drawing on Aboriginal ideologies and intellectual resources are especially important if some form of Elders' council model is to be created at the university. If a model of cultural difference is used, it will stifle the progress of trying to incorporate Aboriginal intellectual resources within a mainstream institution, such as the university, seriously. As Miller suggests, we cannot deny the "many decades of interpenetration of peoples and ideas" (2003, p. 136). We cannot deny that Elders too have come from a history of colonization, and it is this rich history which will allow for the exchange of ideas.

Miller explores how differing constructs of culture are incorporated into three justice initiatives among the Coast Salish of British Columbia and Washington State. Miller's examination of the different justice initiatives

reveals how the role of culture and the role of Elders can create very different institutional outcomes (2003, p. 139), and as such, offer lessons for the University of Alberta.

First, Miller examines the Upper Skagit Court, the South Vancouver Island Justice Project, and the Sto:lo Nation House of Elders and House of Justice. In each example, the concept of culture and the role of Elders are different. Under the Upper Skagit Court, a process of "sorting out" is used, in which "court officials examine community problems brought to them and provide a range of options for resolution" (2003, p. 142). In this way, a suitable resolution, whether based on traditional cultural practices or mainstream justice practices, can be employed to come to a timely resolution. Under this system, the "critiques coming from opposite corners that tribal courts are either not Indigenous (cultural) enough or not efficient (similar to mainstream courts) enough are both potentially addressed in this model" (p. 142). In this instance, "culture is not problematic; there is not a particular struggle over culture and its relationship to justice because culture can be understood and practiced in a variety of ways" (p. 142). Since there are no strict or rigid definitions of Salish cultural practices, the role of Elders has not been romanticized. Furthermore, it is understood that Elders too "are socially positioned within their communities," and that the role of the Elders' council can be employed "in tribal court in several ways" (p. 148).

Next, Miller looks at the Sto:lo Nation along the lower Fraser River of British Columbia, which began developing a justice system during the 1990s. The Sto:lo justice initiatives arose out of

three primary motivations: to create a justice program that could be put into

place following treaty negotiations with the province and federal governments and thereby assert Sto:lo rights and title, to implement Sto:lo cultural practices as they pertain to justice, and to begin a process of restoring communities to a state of health, viewed holistically (2003, p. 144).

The Sto:lo Nation's justice system has gone through different stages and has incorporated various ideas from both within the Sto:lo and outside the Sto:lo.

Efforts were also made to incorporate Sto:lo concepts into the justice initiatives. For example, Sto:lo legal principles such as the "Seven Laws of Life" (health, humility, happiness, understanding, generations, forgiveness, and generosity) influenced how the justice initiatives were developed. Furthermore, the historic Sto:lo ethic of "doing things the good way" was built into the programs, and the role of the traditional helper became important to conflict resolution.

Finally, turning to another, not so successful example, the South Vancouver Island Justice Project opted for "the separation between band elective governments and the band Elders who drove the program and the highly ideological effort to generate normative 'tribal law' as a collaborative effort between a set of Elders" (Miller, 2003, p. 142). The legal codification effort by Elders was said to be "Edenic in nature, and was said to reflect unimpeachable, unchangeable verities," which made it difficult for those community members with different belief systems (p. 143). The system "derived its sanction from the Syowen (winter ceremonial) world, leaving those outside tradition beyond redemption" (p. 143). In contrast, the Sto:lo laws, defined under a rigid understanding of society and culture, did not take into consideration many factors

of contemporary Aboriginal communities. Instead, "community members spoke of generational rifts and abuse of power by families" and Elders "reported preference not to have political affiliations and their wish to be able to help everyone" (p. 143).

Eventually, the South Vancouver Island Justice Project Miller became completely unworkable, collapsing

under the weight of critique from those living in urban settings who found the interpretation of tradition to be self-serving and self-protective and consequently, found women and children without protection from wrongdoers who did not necessarily appear to be restrained (Miller, 2003, p. 144).

The ultimate and asymmetrical power held by Elders made it especially difficult for women and children to be treated fairly. In some cases, "women were reluctant to approach certain Elders who were convicted sex offenders" (p. 144).

A review of the system revealed "the play of power and the misapplication of the system of Elders." In particular, there was a case where allegations were made that "women who made disclosures of abuse to the police were subsequently approached by Elders who would try to persuade them not to use the criminal justice system" (Miller, 2003, p. 144).

The unfortunate example of the South Vancouver Justice Project shows how a rigid understanding of society and culture can be damaging to a community's efforts to develop a justice system, and also demonstrates some of the ways in which abuses of power can take place. It also illustrates how adhering to a rigid definition of culture can result in:

- (1) the romanticization of the role of Elders;
- (2) failure to recognize that Elders hold social positions and political currency within their community; and
- (3) failure to recognize how this approach creates the potential for abuses of power.

A great deal can be learned from justice initiatives in Aboriginal local communities, including how Aboriginal cultures, ideologies, and Elders can be successfully utilized within institutional settings. According to Jane Dickson-Gilmore and Carol La Prairie, those community members who are responsible for justice initiatives should be accountable on an ethical level. In the following excerpt, Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie explain what constitutes a “functional healthy group of people” necessary to a successful local justice initiative:

At base, there must be a functional healthy group of people willing to support community justice initiatives. Projects are fuelled largely by volunteers, and their volunteerism must be sustained and consistent. As well, as far as possible, these should be persons who are uncontroversial within the community. They need not be paragons of virtue, or have remained entirely out of politics. In most Aboriginal communities, the ubiquity of politics is such that total avoidance is impossible, and no one is without enemies or friends. But those involved in the program should, as far as practicable, be insulated from the larger controversies such that, whatever their shortcomings, there is a reasonably consistent community opinion that this person is fair and ethical (2005, p. 220).

Note that Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie mention that these people are not necessarily “paragons of virtue or have remained entirely out of politics.” This is particularly useful in considering how the role of the Elders has developed in institutional settings. Elders are people too, with past experiences and past mistakes. To treat them otherwise is to set them up for failure. However, as long as Elders are considered fair and ethical in their community, their role can successfully be integrated into various institutional settings. But, this raises more questions for discussion: for example,

- ☞ What is considered ethical behaviour in various Aboriginal societies, groups, or communities?
- ☞ What do Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie mean when they say the people involved with justice projects must be “insulated from the larger controversies”? Is this possible or desirable?
- ☞ How are Aboriginal ethics identified without reification, and how might they be practically reflected (or not)?
- ☞ Will there be a combination of western ethics and Aboriginal ethical ideologies?

In the end, whatever model or ethics a group, community, or collectivity chooses, it is of paramount importance that: (1) standards of ethical behaviour be established in order to prevent abuses of power; and (2) clear processes of accountability be established to deal with any abuse of power that may arise.

Another factor necessary for creating a successful justice program is that members of the group should have an understanding

of the criminal justice system. Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie suggest that such understanding “does not automatically imply accepting the values and outcomes of the system ... knowledge is power and this type of knowledge is central to empowering community members” (2005, p. 220). By analogy, a clear understanding of how the post-secondary education system works may be one of the keys for Aboriginal Elders to be successful at the University of Alberta. Such knowledge may be empowering to Elders, since it would strip away bureaucratic mystery.

Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie put forward that there must be an understanding of local power relations in order for a justice initiative to be successful in Aboriginal communities (2005, p. 221). One of the most challenging aspects of Aboriginal communities is the “asymmetrical power relations and dysfunctional networks” that are created by the structuring of the programs required for their recognition by outside agencies (p. 219). Applying this lesson to the University of Alberta, the proposed Elders Leadership and Resource Council will create a political elite that will become part of the currencies of power at play within the institution. Such currencies, dynamics, and power structures must be explicitly recognized and named, and be dealt with practically if abuses of power to be avoided.

Available resources and supports must be assessed prior to going ahead with the Elders Leadership and Resource Council. Drawing again on Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie, it is clear that “serious attention must be given to what the community can realistically provide to support the work that goes on in the community justice project; it is doubtful that any project can stand alone and function successfully” (2005, p. 221). In the case of building an Elders Leadership and Resource

Council, the assessment of necessary resources should include support for Elders’ helpers.

Another factor that needs to be determined is the jurisdiction of the Elders Leadership and Resource Council. For example, who can access the services of the Council? Will the services be only available to those that identify as Aboriginal people or will the services be open to all?

Still another matter for consideration when examining the role of Elders in any council model is what processes of accountability there will be. It is not enough to say that the Elders are accountable to the “community.” How is the community defined? Who is part of the community? Whose voices are heard? In very practical terms, what does it mean exactly to be “accountable” to one’s community?

Ownership must be accompanied by accountability. Too often, accountability seems to be viewed as implicitly in community development and implementation: that is, a community project is accountable to the community. And yet the majority of projects are silent on the particulars of accountability or what constitutes the “community” for purposes of securing accountability and making it real (Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie, 2005, p. 223).

By analogy, the lesson to be taken from this is that Elders (and anyone else) acting in a decision-making role should be accountable for their actions, especially when those actions have consequences for other people. According to Lecturer of Law at the London School of Economics Declan Roche, the

reluctance to evaluate [justice] programs comprehensively and thoroughly is one part of that absence, as is the failure of

most projects to impose a structure of accountability beyond the rather nebulous claim equating community ownership with community accountability” (Roche, cited in Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie, 2005, p. 223).

Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie suggest informal and formal modes of accountability must be in place (Roche, cited in Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie, 2005, p. 225). An example of informal accountability would be a “type of mutual accountability ... built into meetings where participants provide verbal accounts which are scrutinized and assessed by other participants, whose own accounts are in turn scrutinized” (Roche, cited in Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie 2005, p. 224). The combination of having informal and formal modes of accountability allows Elders to govern each other in an ethical manner, thus taking possible abuses of power into account within the proposed council.

We will return now to our original question, concerning what the role of an Elder is, and who defines what it means to be an Elder. As Drew Hayden Taylor discovered, an Elder’s personal history and definitions of what it means to be an Elder has political implications. Hayden Taylor discovered a hierarchy of Eldership when one Elder was scoffed at because of a former alcohol addiction:

But I didn’t realize those mistakes can also negate the positive achievements a person could accomplish during the remaining years of his or her existence. I was truly surprised to find that only those who have never had a drink in their lives, never lied, never abused tobacco, never swore, walked counter-clockwise at a clockwise ceremony or, in other words, were never human could be considered the only real Elders (2002, p. 5).

The political consequence of this Elder’s history, of once being a “raging alcoholic” negated this Elder’s role and prevented the sharing of traditional knowledge or the use of his own personal struggles to help others. So, an Elder is assumed to be someone of exemplary moral standing, stellar ethical behaviour, utter trustworthiness, and possessing a great deal of life experience—but can that Elder also be human? Can an Elder be someone that has made mistakes in the past? If we romanticize Elders as people with saintly characteristics who never made mistakes in the past, then we cannot learn from their extensive life experience. We will be unable to learn from the challenges and struggles they had in their life. If we romanticize Elders, we negate their wisdom gained from life experience.

What is an Elder? How do you define one? I don’t know. Some say you can’t be one until you are a grandfather. Others say it has to be bestowed on you by the community, not merely by self-identifying. I’ve heard some people say there is an inner glow that you recognize. But perhaps the more important question is who has the authority to say somebody isn’t an Elder? (Taylor, 2002, p. 5)

So, what does it mean to be an Elder? Each Indigenous society has its own definition. For example, the Six Nations’ definition of Elder includes: faith keepers, clan mothers, hereditary chiefs and spiritual leaders. For the Algonquin Nation, an Elder is defined as someone who possesses spiritual leadership that is given by one’s cultural and traditional knowledge (INAC, 2010).

Who is an Elder? This is a very political question. When we have unrealistic expectations, we deny Elders their humanity. Elders do make mistakes, as we all do. Elders are members of our communities, groups, and

collectivities. Elders have families, family dynamics, and personal responsibilities of their own. Elders do have interests, concerns, desires, hopes, fears, and dreams—again, as we all do.

women’s perspectives on history, family, and survival (Elders’ Voices website 2008).



Across Canada and across Alberta, there are many types of Elders’ councils and Elder organizations that fulfill various roles. For example, the Northern Alberta Elders’ Council is comprised of the Elders’ Councils from each of the provincial treaty organizations for Treaties 6, 7, and 8. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has created a Kumik Elders Council<sup>4</sup> to bring Elders from across North America to Ottawa on a rotating basis. The Kumik Elders Centre provides support to INAC employees and is described as:

- a place to speak and listen to Native Elders and hear their teachings;
- a place to express concerns and discuss workplace and life problems;
- a place to share and understand cultural differences; and;
- a place to meditate quietly (INAC, 2010).

For the treaty organizations and the Kumik Centre, communities nominate people to be recognized as Elders and to serve on the various councils.

Similarly, Métis organizations also set out processes for Elder recognition and input. In Alberta, one Métis project is called The Ten Grandmothers, and is intended to capture

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Kumik Council, go to [www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100013748](http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100013748).

they are about caring for the young people” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 7).

### **Having Elders of Both Genders is Important to this Project**

“They’re both knowledgeable. They both have lived the past, you know...They’ve experienced it, you know” (Grandjambe Jr., 2008, p. 9).

### **Need to Rely on Reciprocity and Caring**

“I think a lot of us Aboriginal people, I think we have to rethink ourselves. What are we here for? Do we care about one another? And we have to be, try to continue to be more honest with each other, say what’s more important to that \$350 or being kind to my neighbour? It used to work, the Aboriginal system used to work. If you kill a muskrat one day you’d fed me some. I kill one next day I’d feed you some. So we’re always both, it worked” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 10).

### **Cultural Awareness and Knowledge of Traditional Laws**

“The four laws—honesty, trustworthiness, respectfulness, honourableness” (Powderface, 2008, p. 3).

## **PART FOUR**

### **DRAWING FROM THE INTERVIEWS**

#### **1. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

##### **Budgets, Money, and Conflict**

“There is a lot of conflict. Like, you know, if the Elders do want to be involved with you know, helping out, you know the new society that has come about, they have to participate. They have to not be paid \$150 or \$350, just to talk. They got to come out you know, share their wisdom with the, I guess outside society. Like the ones with an Aboriginal backgrounds right” (Grandjambe Jr., 2008, p. 6).

##### **Monetary Value of Elders’ Knowledge and Ethics**

“When I was a boy growing up, I learned how to make a fire. I didn’t learn to make that fire because in the future I’m going to charge the white man a thousand dollars a day. You know what I mean? It’s a value to me, I learned that. When I skin a muskrat or I skin a squirrel, I’m learning that because I want to ... I care about my ancestors, I care about the Indian Nation and the continuance of it. So for me, it is hard to base that value ... People are placing a lot more on money, value on money than

#### **2. POTENTIAL PROBLEMS OF ABUSE**

##### **Leadership and Vision**

“So that’s what I do and I control. I’m very tough as a chairperson, I will not let you wonder, you know like, if I’m going towards one resolution, then I’m going there and that’s it. Our time to talk this whole thing through will be after. Our vision will come, we can talk about it“ (Marcel, 2008, p. 4).

### **3. DISCUSSION PROCESS AND CONSULTATION**

#### **Special Expertise of Elders**

“Every Elder has a, they specialize in a lot of things. All of them know a lot about medicines. Know a lot about their rights. And that’s where I go. I know what my rights are, I fight on my rights”(Marcel, 2008, p. 6).

#### **Recognizing the Capacities of Elders**

“I think there’s still value for Elders. We have to make sure that we use them in their capacity, though. We don’t put somebody who traps muskrat all their lives suddenly to deal with a hundred million dollar company. I think we have to use their resource wisely” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 11).

#### **Wasting Time and Resources**

Robert Grandjambe Sr. believes there should be a screening process for Elders to ensure that they understand the issues and that “they’re there for passing down wisdom.”

“I’m not going to waste money just because we want to put an Elder there twiddling their thumbs all day. It has to be meaningful, it has to have a vision, it has to have a purpose. Screening Elders, choosing Elders suitable for these exciting positions.” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 8).

“If we put people there for, like, to pay them \$350, well, how much value are we going to get out of it? And that’s why, and they have to be made aware. This is a really exciting and responsible position [proposed council]. I would like to sit on a position like that because you’re dealing with the future and you taking from the past. So it’s an exciting time” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 8).

#### **Interpretation for Elders**

Elders may need translators to interpret issues into their indigenous language.

“If you talked in Cree, maybe they can understand, they can compare a bit more ... They don’t understand. They look lost. They don’t answer, they don’t have any questions, you know, what’s your concerns” (Grandjambe Jr., 2008, p. 8).

#### **Interpretation of Issues and Jargon**

“People knowledgeable about the issues at hand will help Elders better understand the issues and contribute” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 8).

#### **Elders May Need Help Understanding the Issues**

“An Elder’s helper will help in breaking down this information” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 8).

“A lot of times my experience has shown me that the Elders a lot of time don’t understand the issues ... So a lot of times some new issues, financial issues, business issues, a lot of them don’t understand those new issues. But I still believe if it’s explained to them and explain the outcomes and what the results are desired or the results are going to be I think maybe they can put more input” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 7).

#### **Who Determines the Vision?**

“The community, the nation, someone with good ethical/moral conduct” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 5).



## **The University Setting Versus the Community Setting**

“Cause that’s such an intimate setting in your community. And when I think of the students at the U of A and Elders ... they don’t really know of anything about people ... They’re kind of strangers. So how do you mitigate that. How do we, by having more Elders involved, or how do you think?” (Fox, 2008, p. 5).

## **4. ELDERS AND GOVERNANCE**

### **Elders’ Voices**

“The universities are reluctantly giving us a tiny voice. Who’s going to help us? So you got to try to move someplace and, I think, suggesting that Elders’ forum is the way to go. The voice of the Elders with the ability to go to the media. If you have an Elders’ forum there and the University says we have to censor everything, like, like, that comes from you guys before the media gets a hold of it, then it’s not going to work” (Marcel, 2008, p. 3).

### **Censorship of Elders’ Voices**

“Cause you would be doing a proposal, you would certainly need the Elders behind you. And the voice, the voice of Elders has been hushed up. No. Not allowed. It’s the Chiefs that speak out there” (Marcel, 2008, p. 5).

### **Teaching Capacity of Elders**

Tina Fox agrees that Elders can be included in a teaching capacity at the University, possibly in a paired teaching situation (Fox, 2008, p. 4).

### **Feasibility of Teaching Old Ways**

“But is the young people going to be able to do what I’m teaching ... Their time is with computers ... Their time is different than mine

... Mine was to learn from my dad, hunt, fish, trap” (Marcel, 2008, p. 2).

## **Role of Elder in Teaching Capacity and Policy Development**

Robert Sr. sees Elders in “an advisory board but also in a policy making (role) eventually”—this depends on what the board needs and desires (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 5).

### **Advising Role of Elders**

“I provide advice to leadership on advisory boards. And I sit on, the purpose of doing this for me as an individual as a member of the Nation, I think it’s, it’s each of our sole responsibility to try to help our Nation” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 4).

### **Advising the University**

“One of the first things probably is the history of Aboriginal people. Where do we come from? What are we about? What are our likes and dislikes? What makes us tick? I think an Aboriginal person is very ... we should be proud of who we are, and of our ancestry” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 5).

## **An Encouraging and Empowering Role for Elders**

“But you also got to have some Elders there, you know, like a place I go, a place of healing, for me I have to learn to grieve .... Could be one or two Elders. Maybe a man and a woman that the students can go to because if things are not happening the way you want it and you in a university setting, if you were, if things starting going down for you and all of a sudden your granny calls” (Marcel, 2008, p. 3).

### **Elders to Encourage Students**

“I want to make sure students stay in school” (Marcel, 2008, p. 3).

### **Empowerment**

“The advice is there if you ask for it. You don’t ask me anything, I will never tell you anything ... you’d be much stronger with the Elders” (Marcel, 2008, p. 5).

### **Benefiting Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Students**

There is no room for segregation.

“Segregation doesn’t work anymore. That was abolished a long time ago. How would the bigger population ever support what it is you guys are trying to do if we don’t include them in your class” (Marcel, 2008, p. 2).

### **Benefits for Students**

For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, “Elders will be donating their time and encouraging the students trying to go to school” (Grandjambe Jr., 2008, p. 7).

“I think there would be value in an Elder passing wisdom on to Native and non-Natives because then it might help the non-Native better understand the Aboriginal person and, as you know, how much value there is” (Grandjambe Sr., 2008, p. 7).

### **Need for Outside Support**

Marcel described the time the Aboriginal Games were held in Edmonton, and the Aboriginal community received financial support from the Chinese community.

“So to really make this thing work, you got to make sure that we are supported, we’re not going to fight this alone” (Marcel, 2008, p. 6).

### **Learning from Other Advisory Groups**

“With this advisory group that we’ve got ... on a lot of issues more on traditional knowledge but the traditional knowledge extends to provincial lands and the parks and now this group is heavily involved with the national parks and rebuilding the relationship treaty with the current people in Banff National Park ... We’re working on direction. We’re influencing directions of the national park to go back direct, to recognize Aboriginal peoples traditional occupational ... [inaudible] ... and the traditional use. Prior to the parks. And you have, ah, when we’re, when we’re identifying areas that need to be respected, that are culturally sensitive, we do perform ceremonies, sacred ceremonies (Powderface, 2008, p. 3).

Sykes Powderface works as an Elder and technical consultant: “Mostly as an Elder, mainly as an Elder but mostly as a technical consultant dealing particularity with the policies that have to be, ah, working on content with our traditions” (Powderface, 2008, p. 4).

### **Creating Awareness**

“What we’re doing is we’re trying to create awareness of the need for building relationship based on our treaties. So that’s, that’s where we’re at. So once we get to that point, when we come to a point of actually negotiating the type of relationship that needs to be in. First of all to ensure that the, ah, the other partnership/relationship and the management of parks so that those sensitive areas, cultural sensitive areas, will be respected by, by the national

parks, and that will also involve in wildlife management” (Powderface, 2008, p. 4).

### **General Awareness**

“For general awareness. General awareness of our traditional connection to nature. For example, just yesterday we went to this site for the parks, they had some reports of voices being heard at a location. From our research in traditional knowledge, it talked about it being a sacred area where you have little people guard. Who guard what we call [Stoney]” (Powderface, 2008, p. 4).

### **Relationship to Nature and Sacred Law**

In the example above of the little people being disturbed by mining, Powderface suggests, “We ask for awareness of what those situations where our traditional relationship with nature is critical to understand who we are because that’s how, ah, that’s what’s in the Constitution right now, we live by the law set by the Creator” (Powderface, 2008, p. 4).

Many Elders seem to have an understanding of the traditional laws of the land, and also of the mainstream Canadian legal system.

“The Elders recognized the diversity but that they had one thing in common. And that commonality was we, the original people of this land, recognize ourselves as the original people. Know the Creator put us here ... And that the Creator gave us laws that govern all our relationships to live harmony with nature and mankind ... also Section 35, this one, all rights recognized by the Royal Proclamation on October 7th, 1763, is in section 35 of the Constitution. So this is the awareness that we’re working on, that we’re, we’re really not putting aside this at this time” (Powderface, 2008, p. 5).

### **Protocols and Misunderstandings**

“I don’t think that we’ve ever had a case where we disagreed. But if there are any misunderstandings, we might say there are some misunderstandings or maybe it’s because of their knowledge might not be as diverse as mine. One of the things ... We have a common practice. Number one, we respect each other’s protocols. Protocols means their [way of] reasoning” (Powderface, 2008, p. 6).

### **Principles**

“The four principles of governing good relationships and the ones that we’re all familiar with we’re very familiar with, and we work with that. The first one is you gotta be honest. And you got to be trustworthy. You got to be respectful. And you got to be honourable. And if you take those four they work interchangeably, but if you break one of them then this don’t work. And that’s our guiding principles in working together” (Powderface, 2008, p. 6)

### **Importance of Dialogue**

“But let’s look at what is right and what is wrong. And we think that’s how you behave in these four principles that we go through. And that’s building, building relationships and when there are problems, and there again the, the guiding process. We talk about this. When matters go wrong, number one, number two is this, number three talk to each other, keep dialogue” (Powderface, 2008, p. 6).

### **Categories of Elders**

There are self-proclaimed Elders, traditional Elders, and residential school Elders:

“Actually, if you were to add an outline, that [residential school Elder] would be a self-

proclaimed Elder. We have, the reality is that we have traditional Elders, those traditional Elders that never had education, never went to school. They still apply this oral traditional, oral teachings practicing on life as based on education, learning process. And then we have residential Elders that lost out on these teachings while they are young. So they can just assume what this is, but they really haven't experienced it because there's nobody that can relate to them that, about their experiences, so they go about it sort of like a hit and miss. And then we have the self-proclaimed Elders who sort of, for the purposes ... [inaudible] ... while they're there. Um, say they are Elders" (Powderface, 2008, pp. 7–8).

### **More Categories of Elders**

About bingo Elders, political Elders, spiritual Elders, self-proclaimed Elders, and wannabes:

"Yeah, bingo Elders! Then we have, in reality we also have political Elders. I consider myself as a political Elder. I'm not a spiritual Elder, but I do practice when I have to, I can practice some spiritual rituals. Because I'll never get to be, to use it, so I'm very conscious of how I use it, when I use it, where I use it. But I'm more of a political Elder because of my experience, my life-long experience. But I also have a tremendous amount of knowledge about these, well, what a spiritual Elder's role and responsibilities are. And I respect them for practicing those and who we are. And, and then you have these ceremonial Elders, those are the spiritual Elders. But there are also the ceremonial Elders, Elders that do ceremonies. And then you have the self-proclaimed Elders. And then you also have wannabes. So you, how do you determine an Elder?" (Powderface, 2008, p. 8).

### **What is an Elder?**

"So this takes me right through to what is an Elder? To me, what an Elder is a person who is gone through tremendous amount of experience or variety of experience and is very wise. Can apply words of wisdom and to help out. That's the type of Elder that I grew on" (Powderface, 2008, p. 8).

### **Words**

Words are spirits and the oral tradition must be respected.

"They say that words that spirits. They're spirits because they impart something to me. When I'm talking here, I'm leaving you something, knowledge that you going to take with you. And that's the spirit I use. Because we are traditionally oral people. We're not people of the letter, we are oral people. And they always said as soon as you put your words on paper it stops there, the spirit does not travel any further than that" (Powderface, 2008, p. 9).

### **Sharing Knowledge**

"This is why we have this practice of passing on. This is why we have this traditional sharing. Sharing our knowledge, sharing our experience. That's how you pass it on. And they're always there to help you, if you forget something, if you need their help their always there. So you see how when they refer to the words as spirits moving back and forth, this is what we're talking about" (Powderface, 2008, p. 10).

### **Teaching Traditional Knowledge at the University**

"Because we're at that age where we will have to take the best of the two worlds and make it

work, the spirituality of our people and apply all sorts of technology of the modern world and make it work. What does that mean? We have to use the learning institutions. Tie in with our traditional running process that's everyday living. Everyday living. We learn something new everyday from other people. So that's the traditional teachings, is to pass along [knowledge]" (Powderface, 2008, p. 11).

### **What Type of Elder is the University Looking For?**

"How do you classify the type of Elder you are looking for? That will fit into an institution. Who determines that? Like who determines the qualifications? Is it the academic qualifications you are looking for ... If, if that is the case, then the university will determine what kind of Elders they're looking for. I wouldn't fit into their system because I don't have degrees and so forth (Powderface, 2008, pp. 12–13).

### **What is Governance?**

"When you looking at governance, what is governance? Something you govern right? Supposed to be. So to me, what is governance? Sometimes I find out where in my own language what is governance, what is governance outside our, to say what you administer. What you administer is pre-determined by life. You administer life. Within that area you cannot be a little more specific. Are you talking ... about the life you give the community? If that is the case, do you have a role and responsibility? What are the particular responsibilities? And what would be your, what would your roles be?" (Powderface, 2008, p. 14).

## PART FIVE

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Indigenous discourse and politics are deeply complex and fraught with difficult questions, contradictions, disagreement, and the general turbulence caused by ongoing change in a fast-moving world. Against this backdrop, there is an understandable desire to emphasize harmony for Indigenous people, and this is often described in terms of universal cultural traits or principles. There are many reasons for this, including a desperate desire for answers and a yearning for the simpler things in life as imagined in times past, especially when much of today's world seems confusing, out of control, and in constant upheaval.

There is another, more negative aspect to this dynamic, wherein the act of describing Indigenous peoples is laden with power and is an intrinsic part of colonial history the world over. This is the power of describing, and it is absolutely linked to the power of naming that not only creates, but fulfills colonial expectations about Indigenous peoples. In turn, Indigenous peoples seek to fulfill such descriptions that have become pervasive normative descriptions—consciously (for strategic political mileage) or unconsciously (as part of an unexamined life). These colonial

constructs about Indigenous peoples form part of the political and judicial landscapes<sup>5</sup> and generally portray simple peoples with simple cultures without much in the way of rigorous intellectual activity. Consequently, Indigenous people are thought to just “be and do,” rather than being deliberative, reasoning, or interpretive—as all peoples must be. In this limited description, Indigenous people “are harmonious,” rather than “are effectively managing disagreement and solving problems through their legal traditions and governance practices.”<sup>6</sup>

It is useful to draw on the controversy surrounding the idea of universal principles in other social science fields.<sup>7</sup> For example, according to George Pavlich, even though there are serious disagreements about the ethical foundations of our work and a tremendous diversity of principles, many people,

continue to speak and act as though there were some underlying consensus. The *as though* is more complicated because the very reference frames for declaring universal principles—theology, philosophy, science, communitarianism, etc.—offer competing and disparate ethical precepts without an agreed-upon method for deciding between these (2007, 615–20).

Pavlich's observations are applicable to Indigenous politics, including the very complicated arena of Elders and the political arena of “Elderdom.” In this arena, there are many assumptions about the consensus and universality of principles relating to Elders, but in reality, there much disagreement. Worse,

<sup>5</sup> For examples, see Andersen (2005).

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent critique of the politics involved with “harmony ideology,” see Nader (1990).

<sup>7</sup> For a critique regarding the consequences of the oversimplification and reification of “culture,” see LaRoque (1997).

there is no “agreed method of deciding” or working through disagreements (2007, 615–20). Instead, there is a bewildering and volatile minefield of Elder politics, a terrible silencing correctness, and the identification and declaration of numerous Elder authenticities (e.g., popcorn Elder, city Elder, spiritual Elder, political Elder, traditional Elder).

Values politics is a distinctive form of hammer politics that reduces questions of broader public interest (including broader Indigenous public interest) to the defence of an identity and of a way of life.

Values politics creates exclusive political groups because it excludes those who do not conform or who do not interpret values in the same way.<sup>8</sup> In other words, you are either for me (and my value) or against me (and my value).

It is this interpretive aspect for principles and values that are absolutely critical to fostering and building inclusivity—human beings can only interpret according to their experiential or imaginative horizon.<sup>9</sup> To insist that only one interpretation is correct or universal is to be exclusive and, further, an attempt to stifle human agency and creativity—qualities necessary for an informed and engaged citizenry.

This report is a challenge to the description of Indigenous peoples as a mythical people that just do rather than reason through change, disagreement, and life. The recommendations that follow have been drafted in light of the comments made by the Elders in this report and are intended to form part of the Indigenous resistance to colonial definitions of Aboriginal

<sup>8</sup> Turner (2009) argues that there are enough Indigenous academics now to begin critiquing each other’s work.

<sup>9</sup> For an example of this dynamic on-the-ground, see Mapes (2008).

people as simple peoples who are naturally and mindlessly harmonious.<sup>10</sup> As such, our recommendations do not advocate universal principles as a way to provide guarantees against injustice, disagreement, violence, or abuse, because the “foolproof—universal and unshakeably founded—ethical code will never be found ... an ethics that is universal and ‘objectively founded,’ is a practical impossibility (Bauman, cited in Pavlich, 1993, p. 622).”

We draw again on Pavlich to create recommendations that are not founded on universality or essentialism, but on an analogy of a host welcoming a guest. Within this analogy, the host and guest must negotiate ways of being with each other in the immediate future, so that we are always having to think about how to be with each other (pp. 622–23). In this way, we focus on the ethics of processes guided by hospitality. Pavlich explains,

What does this host-grammar of ethics imply for thinking about how to exist justly with others? We have seen that it demands modesty to the extent that ethics cannot provide unshakable principles, nor is a principle-based approach capable of dictating unqualified social advancement. ... However, we should quickly add that this does not mean ethics involve a ... language of “anything goes.” Rather, although we cannot escape ethical decisions in local contexts, there is no reassuring,

<sup>10</sup> For an important discussion about Indigenous academics remaining directly involved with Indigenous politics, see Alfred, T. (2007). According to Alfred, “Our experiences in universities reflect the tensions and dynamics of our relationships as Indigenous peoples interacting with people and institutions in society as a whole: an existence of constant and pervasive struggle to resist assimilation to the values and culture of the larger society” (pp. 22–23).

and ultimately delusional, apparatus of certainty at our disposal (p. 623).

Applying Pavlich's observations to our recommendations means that we must recognize the responsibility that each of us has for our decisions and actions—with each of our interactions with others. Without universal certainties, each of us must decide how to be ethical with others. Ultimately, this means creating space, as hosts and as guests, for critical dialogue, engaging and managing disagreement, continual political reflexivity, relationship building, and the contemplation of new ways of being.

## TENETS

The four basic tenets underlying our proposed recommendations are as follows.

- Do not romanticize Indigenous Elders or disconnect them from their history, society, or experiences. Elders today, and for generations, have experienced the brunt of colonialism. To treat Elders otherwise is to create unrealistic expectations and set them up for failure.
- Appreciate that Indigenous Elders are political and, further, they are human beings. “Elderdom” is a political construct born of the complex dynamics of leadership, identity, disagreement, and changes in Indigenous societies—and, as such, generates contested political currencies in Indigenous discourse.
- Elders are, as such, within their societal processes of accountability (i.e., Cree, Gitksan, Dunne'zaa, and so on), and care should be taken not to disconnect

Elders from those societal systems of accountability and legitimacy.

- Elders have different strengths, skills, experiences, and knowledge. There is no “one size fits all” Elder.

## RECOMMENDATION # 1

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**Over the next three to five years, work toward the design, develop, and implement an Elder's Leadership and Resource Council that will provide guidance for the University of Alberta via the Office of the Provost and Vice-President Academic.**

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### Discussion

This recommendation requires the following tasks:

- pilot a visiting University of Alberta Elders program by drawing on existing Elder councils and organizations in Alberta. Invite one Elder and one Elder helper per term for a one-week period;
- facilitate a number of in-depth discussions with students, faculty, and Elders about the University of Alberta's expectations and responsibilities regarding Elders;
- allocate financial and human resources to support the effective implementation of the visiting Elders' program and discussion groups. These resources should include, at a minimum, the allocation of staff time and an ongoing Elder consultation program;



- draft a “terms of reference” document that will guide the selection and role of Elders for the University of Alberta practically. Develop and maintain an Elder directory of potential University of Alberta council members.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 2**

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**Over the next three to five years, create a dispute management process for the Elder’s Leadership and Resource Council to deal with internal disagreements, and external disagreements with the University of Alberta.**

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### **Discussion**

This recommendation is in keeping with the basic tenets of recognizing Elders as human beings, albeit wise and experienced human beings, who are also political.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 3**

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**Over the next three to five years, create an Ombuds position and process to deal with concerns and complaints about Elder abuse or abuse of Elders within the University of Alberta.**

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### **Discussion**

This recommendation reflects our commitment to not romanticising Elders and to ensuring their safety and the safety of students.



## **PART SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

The completion of this project has required many conversations about how Elders might formally be involved with the University of Alberta. In light of the complexities of the many issues concerning Elders, the resulting three recommendations that we have made are cautious in nature, and are set out in the form of a three-to-five year pilot project.

At the end of the day, the recommendations herein are intended to enable the University of Alberta to:

1. more effectively recruit and retain Aboriginal students;
2. ensure ongoing engagement with Aboriginal communities; and
3. recognize and support the incorporation of Indigenous pedagogies for both students and faculty members.



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**Participants Interviewed for This Project (2008)**

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Grandjambe, Robert Jr.

Grandjambe, Robert Sr.

Marcel, Pat.

Powderface, Sykes

**ELDER PROTOCOL &  
GUIDELINES**

**APPENDIX III  
QUAJIMAJATUQANGIT  
(TRADITIONAL INUIT KNOWLEDGE)**

University of Alberta

Edmonton, Alberta

February 11, 2012

Prepared by the

Council on Aboriginal Initiatives



## PREPARED BY DR. SUSAN AGLUKARK, O.C.

This is a collection of national and Nunavut-miut contacts, with brief summaries and descriptions of groups and organizations serving the Inuit of Canada. These groups each carry their own purposes for their respective groups or organizations, based on where they are located. For the most part, however, we all operate under the belief of Inuit *Qaujimagatuqangit*, or Traditional Inuit Knowledge.

## TRADITIONAL INUIT KNOWLEDGE—INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGIT

Inuit *Qaujimagatuqangit*, or Traditional Inuit Knowledge, was developed under the auspices of the Human Resources Department of the Government of Nunavut.

Inuit as a people have a long-standing code of behaviour based on time-honored values and practices. These values were communicated to younger Inuit at a very early age through stories, songs, direct modeling of behaviour and legends that spoke of the success associated with remembering them (Department of Human Resources, 2005).

Some of these core values are as follows:

**CONNECTION VALUES** — sharing, generosity, family, respect, love, listening, equality, significance, and trust;

**WORK VALUES** — volunteering, observing, practice, mastery, teamwork, cooperation, unity, consensus, and conservation;

**COPING VALUES** — patience, endurance, improvisation, strength, adaptability, resilience, resourcefulness, moving forward, take the long view, survival, interconnectedness, and honesty.

These values are based on the eight Guiding Principles outlined below, which can also be found in *Pinasuaqtavut* (Nunavut Literacy Council, 2004, p. 34):

### **PIJITSIRARNIQ:** Concept of serving

The concept of serving is central to the Inuit style of leadership, as is the measure of the maturity and wisdom of an Inuk. Key here is the understanding that each person has a contribution to make and is a valued contributor to his/her community. Students will be expected to demonstrate this kind of leadership and commitment to serving the common good.

### **AAJIIQATIGIINGNIQ:** Consensus decision-making

The concept of consensus decision-making relies on strong communication skills and a strong belief in shared goals. All students are expected to become contributing members of their community and to participate actively in building the strength of Inuit in Nunavut. Being able to think and act collaboratively, to assist with the development of shared understandings, to resolve conflict in consensus-building ways, and to consult respecting various perspectives and worldviews are expectations that cross all curriculum areas.

### **PILIMMAKSARNIQ:** Concept of skills and knowledge acquisition

The concept of skills and knowledge acquisition and capacity building is central to the success of Inuit in a harsh environment.

Building personal capacity in Inuit ways of knowing and doing are key expectations for students. Demonstrating empowerment to lead a successful and productive life, that is respectful of all, is a powerful end goal of our educational system.

**QANUQTUURUNGNARNIQ:** Concept of being resourceful to solve problems

The concept of being resourceful to solve problems through innovative and creative use of resources and demonstrating adaptability and flexibility in response to a rapidly changing world, is a strength all our students should develop. Resourcefulness should be demonstrated in all learning and also in thinking that seeks to improve the context in which Inuit live.

**PILIRIQATIGIINGNIQ:** Concept of a collaborative relationship or working together for a common purpose

The concept of developing collaborative relationships and working together for a common purpose. The essential Inuit belief that stresses the importance of the group over the individual should pervade all our teaching. Expectations for students will reflect working for the common good, collaboration, shared leadership and volunteerism. *Piliriqatigiingniq* also sets expectations for supportive behaviour development, strong relationship building, and consensus building.

**AVATIMIK KAMATTIARNIQ:** Concept of environmental stewardship

“The concept of environmental stewardship stresses the key relationship Inuit have with their environment and with the world in which they live. Students will be expected to articulate respect for this mutually interdependent relationship and to demonstrate

responsible behaviors that seek to improve and protect the relationship in ways that meet global challenges to environmental wellness (Department of Human Resources, 2005).”

## OTHER INUIT CULTURAL RESOURCES FROM NUNAVUT

### \*Pirurvik (Iqaluit, Baffin Region)

Pirurvik is a centre of excellence for Inuit language, culture, and well-being. Founded in the fall of 2003 and based in Nunavut’s capital, Iqaluit, Pirurvik has developed a reputation for taking on some of the most innovative initiatives in the Territory. Through its team of highly skilled and experienced professionals, Pirurvik offers a range of specialized services, programs, and productions grounded in the Inuktitut language and the Inuit way of life.

Pirurvik’s activities are focused on three core concepts: learning what has come before, teaching what is here today, and developing the future vitality of Inuit culture and the Inuktitut language.

[pirurvik.ca](http://pirurvik.ca)

**Pirurvik’s site identifies some elders from the Eastern Arctic that may be available for ceremonies and/or public events where an elder is required**

### \*Inuit Cultural Online Resource

“This site was created to provide a central location online to learn about Canadian Inuit culture. This site is designed to serve as a resource for Canadian school age children and their teachers. Its purpose is to offer new a different ways of learning about Inuit culture and what it means to be Inuit.”



<http://icor.ottawainuitchildrens.com>

**\*This group represents Urban Canadian Inuit and could assist in identifying urban elders across the country.**

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