



College of  
**HEALTH AND CARE  
PROFESSIONALS OF BC**

# Working with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers

## **Guidelines**

June 28, 2024



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## Background

As the College continues its work towards cultural safety and humility, addressing and eliminating Indigenous-specific racism in the BC health-care system, we will continue to build relationships with and rely on Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers to help guide us in our work. The College recognizes that Elders and Knowledge Keepers are very important members of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, and have invaluable knowledge to share with the College.

These Guidelines are for use by staff, board members, committee members, and others who will work with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers. They provide insight into important considerations for respectfully engaging and working with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers. This includes recognizing the rights, territory, distinct histories, experiences, belief systems, and cultural practices and protocols of Indigenous peoples and communities.

The Guidelines will ensure consistency in extending invitations, communicating effectively, and engaging with Elders and Knowledge Keepers in a way that is culturally safe, appropriate, and humble.

## Commitment

The College has made a public commitment to:

- dismantle Indigenous-specific racism;
- promote cultural safety, cultural humility, and anti-racism as core competencies in its work and for the professions it regulates;
- build and maintain meaningful partnerships with Indigenous-led organizations;
- learn from Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Indigenous professionals to guide its work and ensure it operates within the legal framework of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act;
- continue to build and maintain meaningful relationships with First Nations Knowledge Keepers of the unceded territories that the College occupies;
- create opportunities and pathways to have First Nations Knowledge Keepers of these unceded territories share their knowledge throughout the organization; and
- learn from the teachings, experience, and knowledge of Indigenous individuals to guide and support its efforts in promoting awareness, evoking change, and working intentionally towards dismantling Indigenous-specific racism within the health-care system.

Further, the College values and respects the important role of Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers as teachers and keepers of Indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions. We recognize that when an Elder or Knowledge Keeper shares their knowledge and traditions with us, our work is elevated.



## About Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers

'Elder' or 'Knowledge Keeper' are terms typically bestowed to an Indigenous individual held in high regard by their community because of the experiences and the vast spiritual and cultural knowledge they hold. They are not self-taught; rather, are gifted with and carry their respective traditional teachings and knowledge, as passed down to them by family and other Elders or Knowledge Keepers through generations of oral history, years of mentorship and the teachings of Indigenous customs and traditions, which encompass beliefs, values, worldviews, language, and spiritual ways of life and being. Their title is a very honourable one: they must be treated with the utmost respect.

Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers are leaders, teachers, role models, mentors, and/or healers who, within their communities, often provide the same functions as advisors, professors, and doctors. Some but not all Elders and Knowledge Keepers perform ceremonies.

Specifically, Elders who are First Nations, Inuk, and Métis are acknowledged by their respective communities following a significant period of learned teachings, service, and earned respect. Many communities have a defined protocol and process for becoming an Elder while others have not. Elders should not be confused as elderly people or those who have reached a certain age. Gender and age are not factors in determining who is an Elder.

Knowledge Keepers are Indigenous individuals who may or may not be considered an Elder but who also hold and carry traditional knowledge and expertise in various spiritual and cultural areas. Knowledge Keepers have been taught by an Elder or a senior Knowledge Keeper within their community and understand how to care for the teachings they hold (and when it is or is not appropriate to share this knowledge with others). Again, being a Knowledge Keeper does not imply a specific age; rather, an individual of any age can be graced with the title. They may also be called Knowledge Carriers.

## Role of Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers at the College

The College engages with Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the sharing of Indigenous knowledge and teachings for activities such as Board meetings, symposia, research, and learning. It is important to note that each Elder and Knowledge Keeper has unique skills, knowledge, gifts, traditional practices, and ceremonial protocols. Where some may offer a welcoming and a closing, others may share songs, teachings, and history, or focus on providing thoughts and protocols for creating safe spaces within meetings. It is important to note that each Nation, even within larger communities, are unique and have their own customs, beliefs, protocols and traditions. Respecting this cultural uniqueness is imperative to doing our work in a good way and building respectful relationships with communities, Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Elders and Knowledge Keepers share their gifts and knowledge in a way that best fits with their cultural and personal values and



should never be expected to emulate what another Elder or Knowledge Keeper does. Elders and Knowledge Keepers are not invited to perform or entertain but are guides and teachers in Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Examples of why Elders and Knowledge Keepers may be invited to support the College include:

- providing opening/closing remarks and/or a prayer at the beginning/end of a meeting, event or gathering;
- sharing knowledge as a guest speaker or co-instructor/facilitator (e.g., training, at a conference);
- leading a ceremony appropriate to the territory;
- providing consultation and guidance in areas such as governance, policy development, and program re-design;
- providing teachings direction to staff, board, and/or committee members;
- acting as a witness to events that are meant to promote learning and healing;
- facilitating learning and healing through sharing circles or ceremonies appropriate to the territory; or,
- supporting Indigenous participants at a meeting, event or gathering.

## Building Relationships with Elders and Knowledge Keepers

Although the College is a provincial organization, it is vital for the College to honour the customs, beliefs, and traditions of the nations on whose territory its offices are located, and those of the Elders or Knowledge Keepers working with us. The College must continue to build and maintain relationships with these Host Nations, recognizing their territories have been stolen, occupied and colonized.

The intent of these partnerships is to build a relationship of respect, trust, and reciprocity. When working with Elders and Knowledge Keepers, the College does so with a humble and genuine desire to shed colonial practices and biases, engage in learning and unlearning, and cultivate long-term mutually beneficial relationships, rather than viewing interactions as a one-time knowledge exchange or transaction.

Due to the differences and uniqueness of Indigenous cultures and communities, it is important that staff working with Elders or Knowledge Keepers learn to understand how they may wish to be addressed, invited to participate, or receive gifts and/or compensation.

Additionally, because the protocols and practices of Elders and Knowledge Keepers will vary based on their unique knowledge and spiritual practices, it is important to ask about preferences in advance. Making space for such questions and creating opportunities for conversation demonstrates humility, aids in relationship building, and ensures culturally appropriate engagement.



## Engaging With and Caring for Elders and Knowledge Keepers

To ensure a culturally safe environment for Elders and Knowledge Keepers, it is important to respect and protect their wellness.

- When engaging with an Elder or Knowledge Keeper, begin by initiating introductions. Share something about yourself (e.g., your ancestry, where you/your family are from, where you live/the land on which you are located, etc.) and come to know the same of the Elder or Knowledge Keeper, including how they would like to be addressed.
- Ensure there is a designated staff member to act as a contact and support person for the Elder or Knowledge Keeper at each engagement. This contact person should be identified ahead of time and their details shared with the Elder or Knowledge Keeper (e.g., who they are and how they can contact this member of staff). This designated person should help arrange travel to/from the event, meet the Elder or Knowledge Keeper when they arrive, ensure any needs that might arise are promptly addressed, be watchful of the Elder or Knowledge Keeper's energy levels, and ensure the Elder or Knowledge Keeper feels supported during their time with the College.
- It is also recommended that a quiet space be designated for the Elder or Knowledge Keeper to rest if they need to take a break from the meeting/event/gathering, being mindful to physically show them where this space is at the beginning of the engagement and not wait for them to ask. At the Hub offices, the K'omoks Room (929) should be reserved for this purpose concurrently with the room booked for the meeting.
- Check in with the Elder or Knowledge Keeper and ask if they have any food allergies or dietary restrictions. Make sure to ask if they need anything to eat or drink throughout the engagement and ask about protocols for receiving food and refreshments. It is customary for Elders or Knowledge Keepers to be served their food (as opposed to self-service). It is also protocol for Elders or Knowledge Keepers to eat first unless they instruct otherwise – please make sure to ask about their preference. Some Elders or Knowledge Keepers will not participate in events where alcohol is being served, so be sure to include this information in any invitation ahead of time.

It is important that all staff understand what constitutes respectful conduct around Elders and Knowledge Keepers. This may include not interrupting Elders or Knowledge Keepers when they are speaking, not talking back or arguing with Elders or Knowledge Keepers, and not actively listening, and not swearing in their presence. These behaviours demonstrate disrespect and create a harmful experience for the Elder or Knowledge Keeper.



## Guiding Questions

Below are some questions those working with Indigenous Elders or Knowledge Keepers may wish to ask themselves to determine if their event is an appropriate use of an Elder or Knowledge Keeper's presence.

Question	Guidance
Why are you seeking assistance from an Elder or Knowledge Keeper?	Be as clear as possible on your reasons for seeking assistance from an Elder or Knowledge Keeper. What are your needs? What issue are you trying to resolve? Which gaps in knowledge are you trying to address? What are you trying to add to your meeting/event? This can be worked out with the Elder or Knowledge Keeper but ensure that everyone's reason for participation is properly considered and their time valued.
How long is the engagement expected to last?	Communicate a clear timeframe wherever possible, and account for any time required for travel, preparation, debrief, and follow-up. Ensure this is built into the compensation request. Always provide the option of attending the entire event (even if only providing a specific service). This may affect compensation so ensure this is discussed beforehand.
Who will be College's point person for the Elder or Knowledge Keeper for the duration?	As noted above, identify a staff member who will make first contact with the Elder or Knowledge Keeper, and remain their contact person throughout the event.
Will the Elder or Knowledge Keeper be alone or accompanied by a Helper(s)?	If the Elder or Knowledge Keeper is accompanied by a Helper(s), that individual will also need to receive compensation and/or gift. Whether a Helper is present or not, the staff point person is responsible for offering support as appropriate.
Will there be other Elders attending?	Notify Elders and Knowledge Keepers if additional Elders and/or Knowledge Keepers will be attending the meeting or event. There may be protocols that need to be honoured and followed.
Is it appropriate to provide an offering when extending an invitation or making a request of an Elder or Knowledge Keeper?	In some Indigenous cultures, it is appropriate to provide a small offering with an invitation (e.g., tobacco, gift, contribution, donation, etc.).



Question	Guidance
<p>How does the Elder or Knowledge Keeper prefer to be addressed, greeted and thanked?</p>	<p>It is important to ask how to address, greet, and thank the Elder or Knowledge Keeper. Do they prefer a handshake, a hug, or verbal communication? Do they prefer including the spoken pronunciation of their traditional name (if applicable)? How should their name be written in meeting material or communications about the event? Do they prefer a different title from Elder or Knowledge Keeper (e.g., Knowledge Carrier, Knowledge Holder)?</p> <p>Also, ask if they have a biography prepared, or offer to support writing one for them, so they are appropriately introduced.</p>
<p>How does the Elder or Knowledge Keeper prefer to be contacted?</p>	<p>In person? By phone, email or text message? In writing? Elders often rely more on the spoken than written word and may prefer direct, personal communication. The most respectful way is to make a request in person; however, when this is not feasible it is acceptable to make a request by phone or email.</p> <p>Anticipate that you will need to extend an invitation and follow up closer to the engagement. Ask how and when they would like to receive a reminder of the event.</p>
<p>How will you engage the Elder or Knowledge Keeper in the planning process?</p>	<p>Invite the Elder or Knowledge Keeper to be a part of the initial planning, as they are an important resource with much knowledge and experience to share. This can include how rooms are to be set up, whether specific equipment is required, or if items need to be sent out to participants in advance (e.g., blankets). They can also prepare their cultural work/words in advance once they have an idea of the intent of the session as well as the participants invited. This will help to ensure an event or engagement is facilitated in a culturally appropriate way.</p> <p>Ensure the Elder or Knowledge Keeper has an annotated agenda, knows who the audience is, and understands the intent of the event - similar to how you would prepare a keynote speaker.</p>





Question	Guidance
Does the Elder or Knowledge Keeper know how to contact the College?	You should anticipate that the Elder or Knowledge Keeper may cancel for a community event or health issue and need to notify the College. The staff point person should ensure the Elder or Knowledge Keeper has all the details necessary to reach the College at short notice.
How will the Elder or Knowledge Keeper be appropriately gifted and compensated?	<p>The compensation should be ascertained ahead of any engagement and provided on the day of the meeting, event, gathering, or ceremony unless otherwise directed. The Elder or Knowledge Keeper should never have to ask for their compensation. It is not up to the Elder or Knowledge Keeper to access the College Board <i>Policy: Compensation for Indigenous Services</i>, but they should be aware of it.</p> <p>As per this policy, compensation is not a payment for service but a culturally appropriate exchange of things of value to recognize appreciation for the Elder or Knowledge Keeper’s time and teachings shared.</p>
Are there any barriers to being gifted that need to be addressed?	Recognizing the legitimate distrust based on histories of institutional racism against Indigenous people, especially the distrust of sharing personal information, do not assume that the Elder or Knowledge Keeper will provide you with a SIN, bank account details, or a permanent address (as examples). Respectfully ascertain the barriers and find ways to overcome them, engaging senior leadership where necessary.
Does the Elder or Knowledge Keeper need a ride to and from the event or ceremony?	<p>Do you need to send a car/ride share/ taxi to pick them up? Will they be travelling on their own or with someone (again, recognizing that Helpers may need to be compensated or reimbursed)?</p> <p>Ensure both you and they are aware these costs will be covered as per the College Board Policy - <i>Compensation for Indigenous Services</i>.</p>
Does the Elder or Knowledge Keeper have any mobility restrictions or limitations?	Work out in advance and communicate the layout of the venue with regards to stairs, distance to walk, somewhere to sit, washrooms, etc.



Question	Guidance
	Let the Elder or Knowledge Keeper know where to wait on arrival, who will be meeting them, where they may store outerwear, or whether there are any policies (such as infection prevention protocols) of which they should be aware.
Does the Elder or Knowledge Keeper have any dietary restrictions?	Let the Elder or Knowledge Keeper know if food or refreshments will be available at the event or meeting and ask if they wish to receive food/refreshments. If yes, as noted above, ask if they have any food allergies or dietary restrictions.  If the Elder or Knowledge Keeper is attending with others, ensure all individuals are asked.
If the meeting is virtual, does the Elder or Knowledge Keeper need any IT support to fully participate?	Hold a run-though session with Elders or Knowledge Keeper in advance to ascertain any IT or support requirements. Consider if they require a computer, other hardware, or any software, and provide these well ahead of the engagement, including any training and resources as needed.

When inviting an Elder or Knowledge Keeper to an event or gathering, ensure there is adequate time built into the agenda for them to contribute without interruption and to share what they have been invited to share in a meaningful way. It is important to discuss the amount of time allocated and come to consensus about this in advance of securing the Elder or Knowledge Keeper’s time: this is critical to demonstrating respect and avoiding tokenistic behaviours.

The best approach is one of humility: to self-reflect on the privileges non-Indigenous people may enjoy and take for granted in a majority culture environment that may not be accessible to Indigenous individuals, and make no assumptions as to what an Elder, Knowledge Keeper, or their teams/helpers might need. Always ask questions, listen, and offer support, as guided by them.

These guidelines are not meant to be prescriptive. They are intended to provide staff with recommendations for building respectful relationships with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

If these guidelines cannot be applied, upheld, or closely adhered to, staff must carefully consider whether it is appropriate to extend an invitation to or engage with Elders or Knowledge Keepers. Their wellness and safety must be prioritized and protected to ensure that harm of any kind is avoided.

For questions or guidance, please contact the College’s Strategy, Governance and Social Accountability team.



## Related Documents

- Policy: Compensation for Indigenous Services
- Policy: Territorial Acknowledgements
- Board and Committee Code of Conduct

## Resources/References

Indigenous Corporate Training Institute, First Nation Elder Protocol  
<https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/first-nation-elder-protocol>

University of British Columbia, Indigenous Finance Guidelines [https://iap-2021.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2022/02/Indigenous-Finance-Guidelines-12-10-2021\\_1.pdf](https://iap-2021.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2022/02/Indigenous-Finance-Guidelines-12-10-2021_1.pdf)

University of Victoria, Guidelines for Protocol, Hosting and Payment for səlx<sup>w</sup>éyn Itə /SELWÁN ŁTE (Elders), Knowledge Keepers and Community Members  
[https://www.uvic.ca/services/indigenous/assets/docs/iace\\_elders\\_guidelines\\_for\\_protocol\\_2022.pdf](https://www.uvic.ca/services/indigenous/assets/docs/iace_elders_guidelines_for_protocol_2022.pdf)

Queen's University Protocols for Inviting Indigenous Guests  
<https://www.queensu.ca/indigenous/ways-knowing/protocols-indigenous-guests>

Brandon University, Guidelines for Respectful Engagement with Knowledge Keepers & Elders <https://www.brandonu.ca/indigenous/files/Guidelines-for-Respectful-Engagement-with-Knowledge-Keepers-Elders.pdf>

Guidelines for Working with Indigenous Elders  
[https://www.lenpierreconsulting.com/\\_files/ugd/b6049a\\_8210084bec2642eda315036eb2747c90.pdf](https://www.lenpierreconsulting.com/_files/ugd/b6049a_8210084bec2642eda315036eb2747c90.pdf)

## Definitions

**Compensation** means a symbolic gift or voluntary payment given to an individual(s) for time and services for which fees are not traditionally or contractually required. In the context of this policy, compensation is used as a gesture of appreciation for what has been received, taught, and shared in the partnership between Indigenous Individuals and the college in the spirit of promoting cultural balance.

**Cultural humility** is a process of self-reflection and introspection to understand personal and systemic biases and to develop and maintain respectful processes and relationships based on mutual trust. Cultural humility involves humbly acknowledging oneself as a learner when it comes to understanding another's experience.



**Cultural safety** is an outcome based on respectful engagement that recognizes and strives to address power imbalances inherent in the health-care system. It results in an environment free of racism and discrimination, where people feel safe when receiving health care.

**Elder** is the term typically bestowed to an individual by their community because of the vast spiritual and cultural knowledge they hold and does not refer only to one's age. Elders are not self-taught; rather they have been gifted their respected teachings by other Elders or Knowledge Keepers through generations of oral history, many years of mentorship and teaching. This is a very honorable title and should be treated with the utmost respect.

**Host Nation(s)** refers to the First Nation(s) on whose land the College's offices are situated.

- At the Hub in Vancouver, it refers to three First Nations- the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm' speaking peoples – xʷməθ kʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), and sel̓ilwiltulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, and the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh-ulh Sníchim speaking peoples - Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation).
- At the Victoria office, it refers to the ləkʷəŋən peoples (Esquimalt and Songees Nations) and SENĆOŦEN-speaking W̱SÁNEĆ peoples, including the BOŦÉĆEN (Pauquachin), STÁUTW (Tsawout), W̱JOŁEŁP (Tsartlip), and W̱SÍŦEM (Tseycum) First Nations.

**Indigenous individuals** refers to the first peoples who identify as First Nations, Inuk, or Métis.

**Indigenous services** refers to the services listed in the Policy Statement of the Policy - Compensation for Indigenous Services.

**Knowledge Keeper** refers to an individual who has been taught by Elders or senior Knowledge Keepers and family within their community. They typically hold traditional knowledge, ceremony, and teachings, and understand how to care for these teachings (and when it is or is not appropriate to share this knowledge with others). A Knowledge Keeper does not imply a specific age; rather, an individual of any age could be a Knowledge Keeper.

**Personal information** has the same meaning as in Schedule 1 of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

**Staff** means the employees, contractors, assessors, and inspectors of the College.

**Tokenism** involves incorporating Indigenous Peoples, practices, cultures and customs into processes in ways that narrowly focus on superficial engagement while restricting meaningful contributions and decision making. An example of tokenism includes inviting/appointing a single Indigenous person to participate in College work (staff, Board, Committees, working groups, events), due to the risk of harm to that individual.



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