Elder’s Program: An Introduction

The *Aboriginal Strategic Plan* for Simon Fraser University calls for the creation and maintenance of an Elder’s Program. In 2011, monies were initially provided through the Office for Aboriginal Peoples, to implement an Elder’s Program on the Burnaby campus and in support of an elder for the Aboriginal University Prep and Aboriginal Pre-Health Bridging Programs at SFU Surrey.

The Elder’s Program for Simon Fraser University is currently funded from within the Indigenous Student Centre. Costs for the program are between $10,000-15,000 per annum. This doesn’t include costs for the SFU Surrey elder who works with the Aboriginal University Prep and the Aboriginal Pre-Health Bridging Programs. The Office for Aboriginal Peoples continues to provide the funds for this part of the program.

As of 2015, the Indigenous Student Centre assumed responsibility for the administration and scheduling of the Elder’s Program. Elders work mainly in the Indigenous Student Centre but also perform in different capacities throughout the university. They report to the Director, Indigenous Student Centre.

Elder Definition and Program Participation

Program elders are in a unique position at SFU, which recognizes the value and importance of the role of elders in Aboriginal communities. Elders, as such, will be those recognized by members of on-going Elder’s Programs and existing Elder’s Program ad hoc committees. This will be done in accord with traditional and accepted definitions of “Aboriginal elder”.

Established criteria for program elders, as established by an original ad hoc committee responsible for the creation of the Elder’s Program, are as follows: elders will be healthy enough to travel and not need escorts; if possible, they will have links to the local Aboriginal community; they will have a positive and respectful attitude regarding students and the academic environment they are in; they will have a knowledge of traditional values; if at all possible, they perhaps will have some post secondary education/experience; program elders will be from the different Aboriginal constituencies; and a mixture of male and female elders will be invited.
Elders will generally serve in an on-going capacity. Any discontinuance or change in the role of an elder will be decided upon in discussion with relevant parties at SFU and the elders themselves.

**Elder Duties**

Specific duties are yet to be fully decided upon between the relevant program participants and may be revised over time, according to circumstances.

It is currently envisioned that elder duties will include the following, as they work with students, staff, faculty, and concomitant community at SFU: provide mentoring, cultural support, and special events support; assist on advisory groups; supervise culturally-orientated courses and workshops; lunch/meet with students; be available for interviews and guest lectures; provide guidance in traditional cleansing and ceremonial activities; provide grounding and support for students; teach aspects of history/culture e.g. the Medicine Wheel and traditional games; assist in formalizing Aboriginal protocols in research and other areas; and provide Aboriginal language support.

**Scheduling and Support**

The recognized times of year when elders are most needed on the SFU Burnaby campus are: from the start of September to the beginning of December; and from the start of January to the beginning of April. As financial resources for this program are limited at this time, these will be the times when the services of the group of elders will be best utilized. It is hoped that if further resources for the program can be acquired and if a need is recognized, that elders will be able to be on the campus year-round.

Participating program elders will alternate in their service on the SFU Burnaby campus. The schedule each year will be decided upon through discussion among relevant parties on the campus and with the elders themselves. The schedule for the program elder working with the Aboriginal University Prep and Aboriginal Pre-Health Bridging Programs in SFU Surrey will be determined by the program coordinator and the elder therein.

As of 2014, an Elder’s Room was available in the Indigenous Student Centre on the Burnaby campus. The Indigenous Student Centre determines the times when each elder is situated within the Indigenous Student Centre. The Coordinator for the Aboriginal University Prep and Aboriginal Pre-Health Bridging Programs in SFU Surrey works out similar arrangements with the elder working with these programs.

Students often wish to consult elders for research projects. It is recommended that they take advantage of the posted times when elders will be on the campus for such consultations.

The Indigenous Student Centre works to assist the elders and the Elder’s Program overall in various ways e.g. ordering lunches, assisting in organizing activities, assisting with scheduling, accompanying the elders, and if requested complete reports concerning Elder’s Program activities.

If an elder is invited to open an event, it would be polite to ask the elder if they would like to stay for the duration of the event, as an observer and potential participant.
Compensation

Elders participating in the Elder’s Program on the Burnaby campus will be paid $35 per hour for their scheduled weekly “shift” on-campus.

The compensation for the elder working with the Aboriginal University Prep and Aboriginal Pre-Health Bridging Programs at SFU Surrey will be decided in discussion between the program coordinator and the program elder, as scheduling and duties may differ. However, it is assumed that compensation will be similar to what is being paid to SFU Burnaby elders.

Program elders who are called upon for extra service in other parts of the university, beyond their regularly scheduled times in the Indigenous Student Centre, will be compensated accordingly for their participation. This includes elder attendance at special events and ceremonies, guest speaker engagements in classes, etc. The set compensation for engagements of three hours or less — as of 2015 and until further notice — will be $100 per engagement, per elder. This is in line with what is currently paid by the university to a guest lecturer. For engagements that are longer than three hours, an honorarium of $35 per hour is suggested for the elder’s support and participation.

IMPORTANT: The unit or Faculty who invite the elder’s participation will be responsible for compensating the elder in question. As well, all booking inquiries regarding the elders should be made through the Indigenous Student Centre.

Elder Safety

Program elders will rarely be alone in their duties at Simon Fraser University. As such, assistance will usually be nearby if an emergency health or safety situation arises. However, the following is recommended:

1. That a telephone be readily available where elders will be working (to call 911 if necessary).
2. That someone be made available to assist the elder in their regular duties as necessary or requested.
3. That a First Aid kit and personnel with First Aid training be available in the Indigenous Student Centre.
4. That health and safety measures be discussed between the coordinator of the Aboriginal University Prep and Aboriginal Pre-Health Bridging Programs at SFU Surrey and the elder working in these programs.

Additional Information:

It is becoming the norm to open many SFU events with an Aboriginal “welcome” or opening. Hence, it’s up to organizers when they feel that this is appropriate. But is certainly most appropriate when the event involves an Aboriginal theme, portion, or people.

Openings can take many forms, including (1) an acknowledgement of the local traditional territories/First Nations (2) a welcome song/drummed (3) a prayer, or (4) a mixture of these choices. What hosts/organizers will get will depend on whom they ask to open, what is asked for, and what Aboriginal people usually do when asked to do such.
Elders usually are the best ones to open events. These can be requested through the SFU Indigenous Student Centre. An honorarium is provided to elders for doing this work ($100) as per the above guidelines.

Other Aboriginal staff at SFU are usually happy to attend and open events with a word about the traditional territory and a drummed welcome song (if requested and if they are willing to do so). Regular salaried staff do not usually ask for honorariums for doing this work but if such is available and offered, it is up to the recipient if he/she wishes to accept such.

Hence, there are different ways to open events - and different kinds of events to open - and different people that can be asked (as explained above). Aboriginal offices and personnel can be asked for further guidance if assistance is needed.

As these guidelines become more commonly known or as it becomes more common practice in various places to open events with an Aboriginal “welcome”, it all becomes easier to follow.

**Conclusion**

Any questions concerning the above can be directed to the Indigenous Student Centre or to the Office for Aboriginal Peoples.