

Below is the email we sent to the Office of Multi Ethnic Student Affairs (MESA) at the University of Michigan on October 10, 2008 regarding the Dance for Mother Earth powwow. Please read the below letter and forward it on to other members of the community. The powwow committee appreciates your support and feedback. Please direct any correspondence regarding this issue to Conner Sandefur at sandefur@umich.edu

To MESA:

I'm emailing you to follow up on the email I sent about canceling the powwow planning meeting. The reason I canceled the meeting is conversations have been taking place throughout the community about the progression of the powwow over the years. I've spoken with powwow committee members, UM faculty, and other Native community members and among them all is a strong desire to change—a change in the approach to our powwow, the structure of the planning, and the emotions surrounding powwow.

For a long time we've been calling this powwow the 2nd largest student-run powwow in the nation. I think most of us will agree that our powwow is no longer student run for a number of reasons. It's difficult for students to find time to plan powwow; the Native community is small and few people are consistently involved in the planning; and MESA has many more staff and fiscal resources to support the programming. For these and other reasons, the majority of the responsibility has transferred to the MESA office. This has affected not only the way the powwow is planned, but more importantly, Michigan Native communities' attitudes towards it. Each year, the powwow loses support from the community as demonstrated by the declining numbers of participants.

As a result, the committee and other community members are taking it upon ourselves to try planning the powwow on our own. The benefits to this approach are numerous. We can avoid much of the bureaucracy that has frustrated dancers and drummers for years. We, as Native people, have never used bureaucracies to organize our spiritual and social events. It is inherently contradictory to the spirit and tradition of powwow. By moving away from the current structure, we can return to a more traditional way of managing powwow - using tobacco and other traditional medicines, following counsel from our elders, and interacting with the community building personal relationships, rather than business, professional relationships.

For too long the powwow has been considered an event to be handled; the Native community, a group to be dealt with or managed. Planning the powwow on our own is a step that we need to take to make sure that the powwow is meeting our students' needs and our communities' needs. It should be a chance to celebrate our cultures, reunite with our families and friends, and learn and pass on our traditions. It should be for our community and our students, not for Ann Arbor residents and University recruitment brochures. It should never come between us and the preservation of our language. Our powwow should be treated as a meaningful community celebration, not as a showcase for diversity.

The Native community has continually been marginalized by the University. Issues with Michigamua, mismanagement of the tuition waiver, refusal to return our ancestral remains, tenure our faculty, and respect and support our staff and students has lead to a strong distrust for the University. Tensions surrounding the management of the powwow and the MESA office only exasperate these feelings. We need to make an effort to repair some of the damage done and protect our community.

Therefore, we will not be utilizing the Division of Student Affairs' \$50,000 of support for powwow this year. This does not mean we do not want to work with the University or MESA at all. Everyone is still welcome to participate in planning, publicizing, and staffing the powwow. However, we need a fundamental shift in the power and leadership for the powwow in order to ensure that it is fulfilling its purpose and supporting our students and communities.

We are very grateful to MESA staff for their dedication to our powwow. I am willing to meet with you to discuss this further, or clarify points made here, but our committee won't be having weekly meetings in MESA anymore, and we won't be consulting you for the majority of the powwow programming work. Please do not spend any more MESA or DSA funds on this powwow or continue with any planning until you hear from our committee. We understand that this may raise concerns among the administration, but this is an important step we needed to take for the preservation of our culture and the celebration of our lives.

Thank you for understanding.

Sincerely,

Conner I Sandefur
Co-chair, Native American Student Association
Chickasaw Nation, Oklahoma