

Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses

A Knowledge Exchange to Support Student Caregivers at Tribal Colleges and Universities

Theresa Anderson
URBAN INSTITUTE

Lisa Silverstein
AMERICAN INDIAN
COLLEGE FUND

Tiffany Gusbeth
AMERICAN INDIAN
COLLEGE FUND
(NORTHERN CHEYENNE)

Jonathan Breaker
AMERICAN INDIAN
COLLEGE FUND
(BLACKFOOT AND CREE)

Elizabeth Osche
PERG LEARNING

Cordero Holmes
URBAN INSTITUTE
STAR FELLOW
(TOHONO O'ODHAM)

Amanda Briggs
URBAN INSTITUTE

Kate Westaby
URBAN INSTITUTE

Students with caregiving responsibilities—including raising children or supporting elders and other family members—make up more than 40 percent of enrollment at tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), yet they are underrepresented in institutional data, underserved by college supports, and largely absent from higher education research. The Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses project addressed this gap through a three-year collaboration among the Urban Institute, the American Indian College Fund, PERG Learning, and three TCUs: Salish Kootenai College, Turtle Mountain College, and Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University. TCUs are tribally chartered, rural institutions serving their respective tribes and Native students. Grounded in Indigenous methodologies, data sovereignty and self-determination, and intersectionality, the project revisited the Family-Friendly Campus Toolkit by gathering survey and qualitative data from students and site visits. Findings show caregiving students are highly motivated and supported by strong cultural belonging, but still face gaps in child care, finances, and navigation resources. The project highlights TCUs as leaders in family-centered higher education practices.

Student parents represent approximately one in five undergraduate students nationwide (Anderson et al. 2024). When combined with student caregivers—who may also be supporting adults, elders, and extended family—the rate is even higher. Despite their prevalence, student parents and caregivers remain underserved and largely invisible in institutional data, policy, and practice.

This challenge is compounded at rural-serving institutions. At tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), students face not only rural geography but also intersecting structural barriers: limited

infrastructure, resource-constrained institutions, and the historical marginalization of Indigenous communities. At TCUs, students with dependent children represent over 40 percent of undergraduates.¹

The Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses project—a three-year initiative funded by Ascendium Education and co-led by the Urban Institute and the American Indian College Fund (the College Fund), in collaboration with PERG Learning and three TCU partners—sought to address this gap. The project had four objectives:

- * Understand how TCUs support students with caregiving responsibilities;
- * Pilot and refine the [Family-Friendly Campus Toolkit](#) (the Toolkit) in TCU and rural contexts;
- * Document and elevate TCU practices for the broader higher education field; and
- * Generate insights to inform Toolkit revisions and institutional action at TCUs and other rural-serving institutions.

Three TCUs participated as full partners: Salish Kootenai College (SKC) in Pablo, Montana; Turtle Mountain College (TMC) in Belcourt, North Dakota; and Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University (LCOOU) in Hayward, Wisconsin. All three are small rural-serving TCUs, each with fewer than 1,000 students, that participated in the College Fund’s Cultivating Native Student Success strategic enrollment management initiative.

Elizabeth Osche and Dr. Theresa Anderson coached the TCU partners in implementing the Toolkit over approximately two years. The Toolkit, which guides a cross-college task force through institutional self-assessment, data collection, and action planning, was adapted iteratively through the exchange.

Themes and Findings

Student Caregivers Are a Large and Visible Presence at TCUs

All three colleges collect or are moving toward collecting data on caregiver status, consistent with the Toolkit’s core emphasis on data visibility. At SKC, roughly 35 percent of incoming students and 45 percent of the overall student population identify as caregivers. At TMC, 206 caregiving students responded to the project’s survey, with 82 percent of these respondents caring for children and 45 caring for adults or elders (29 percent were caring for both children and adults or elders). At LCOOU, multigenerational caregiving is similarly prevalent, with 72 percent of surveyed student caregivers providing daily or near-daily care for children and 42 percent providing daily care for adults or elders.

This expansive definition of caregiving that extends beyond minor children to include adults, elders, and extended family reflects tribal cultural values and required adaptation of the Toolkit’s

¹ This statistic comes from the authors’ analysis of data from the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS): Undergraduates. For more information on American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander Student Parents, see the [fact sheet by Anderson, Gittens, and Westaby \(2024\)](#).

framing. The standard student-parent framing used in most higher education research and practice does not fully capture the caregiver population at TCUs.

TCUs Demonstrate Strong Family-Centered Practices

Despite resource constraints, all three TCU partners demonstrated culturally grounded family-friendly practices that represent meaningful contributions to the field:

- * Widespread norms of faculty flexibility allowing children in classrooms and offices;
- * Family-friendly library spaces, child-friendly study areas, and “kid kits” distributed to offices;
- * A child care exchange program at SKC, where students can work hours at the center in exchange for care coverage;
- * Powwows, graduation ceremonies, and other events that integrate children and families into campus life; and
- * Cultural practices—including smudging ceremonies and Indigenous language integration—that ground students’ sense of belonging and persistence.

Survey results suggest that family-centered practices are making a difference. Across all three TCUs, the vast majority of caregivers said they never felt pressured to leave school because of their caregiving responsibilities. Many cited the supportive environment at their institutions, along with appropriate basic needs resources, as being critical to their success.

Flexibility and Online Access Are Essential

Across all three colleges, flexible and online learning options are central to caregiver persistence. Over half of SKC student caregivers, 90 percent of TMC caregiving students, and virtually all LCOOU caregiving students take some online coursework. Yet students consistently requested more: more asynchronous options, more virtual tutoring and advising, and expanded evening and weekend class schedules. Rural infrastructure challenges, including internet access gaps, complicate but do not eliminate students’ reliance on and demand for flexible modalities.

“When you look at different degrees, most of [them have] some classes online. It really varies based on your degree program. I think it’d be cool for those not located here who want to start their life off the rez but want to start their education here [to have more online access].” –Student focus group participant

Child Care and Financial Support Remain Critical Gaps

Despite existing strengths, students at all three colleges identified child care as a pressing unmet need—particularly drop-in, after-school, and financially subsidized care. Existing tribal child care hours do not align with evening class schedules. State child care subsidy structures that cover only class hours and not study time create a structural barrier that colleges cannot solve alone. Financial supports more broadly, including emergency aid and child care assistance, were among the most universally requested expansions.

“For young parents, the day care [costs are] really expensive. Sometimes, family members like grandparents take care of the kids but at the same time, they are elders, so having that offered on campus would probably be a great solution for a lot of families.” –Student focus group participant

“Several students are taking care of their siblings and don’t have [the] financial means or access to care, and that’s a problem.” –Faculty focus group participant

TCU Input Improved the Toolkit

The Family-Friendly Campus Toolkit was designed for and tested primarily in non-tribal college contexts. This project revealed several areas requiring adaptation for TCU and rural use: the definition of caregiving must extend beyond children; references to “campus” as a physical space must accommodate remote and hybrid learning realities; framing of “parenting” must account for tribal cultural concepts of family and intergenerational responsibility; and the relationship between tribal colleges and tribal governance structures is distinct from on-campus/off-campus distinctions in non-tribal settings. TCU partners’ feedback is now informing a revision of the Toolkit that will be appropriate for rural and tribal contexts and that will be online so users can approach the work modularly at the cadence that fits their resources. The revised resource will be branded the **Family-Friendly College Toolkit** and will be available on the SPARK Collaborative website.

Reframing Institutional Design

The scope of who counts as a caregiving student matters for institutional design. The Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses project highlights the need in tribal and rural higher education contexts to expand the framing of caregivers beyond “student parents” to include students with adult and elder caregiving responsibilities. This broader definition is not merely semantic—it has direct implications for who is counted, who is served, and who is eligible for institutional supports. Institutions that narrowly define the population of caregiving students will systematically undercount—and therefore under-serve—those whose caregiving responsibilities are central to their daily lives and their educational trajectories.

TCUs in this project demonstrated that institutional change in support of caregiving students is both achievable and generative. Participating colleges adopted new strategies, or formalized existing ones, to enhance caregiving students’ college experiences and promote transformative, systemic changes that impact Native student success. These changes ranged from distributing child-friendly materials across campus offices to building dedicated family-friendly spaces, expanding on-campus child care options, and integrating student caregiver needs into institutional planning processes. Critically, these changes were not driven by external mandates but by institutions’ responsiveness to community and student need.

Cultural belonging and community are not supplementary supports—they are foundational to TCU structures and student well-being and persistence, particularly for Native students in rural communities. TCUs in this study did not treat culture as a program add-on; it was embedded in classroom norms, physical campus spaces, ceremonies, and the everyday interpersonal culture

of faculty and staff. This finding has implications for how non-tribal rural-serving institutions think about what it means to be student centered and community responsive.

TCUs demonstrated remarkable nimbleness and creativity in identifying and adapting strategies to address the supports students most requested: child care, financial assistance and housing, navigation support, and connection with others. This capacity for flexible, resource-efficient problem solving in the face of significant structural constraints is itself a finding worth elevating. TCUs showed that innovation does not require large budgets—it requires attentiveness to student needs and institutional willingness to respond.

Finally, the Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses project demonstrated that student caregivers can serve as a key population indicator within strategic enrollment management (SEM) processes. SEM frameworks—which design long-term institutional strategies that improve enrollment, retention, persistence, and completion in ways that reflect community and cultural values—are well suited to institutions seeking to center caregiving students. Where colleges have data on caregiving status, they can use it to identify barriers, design targeted interventions, and track progress toward equitable outcomes over time.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

These findings carry several implications for institutions, systems, and policymakers.

Expand the definition of priority student populations. Tribal and rural colleges should explicitly include students with caregiving responsibilities among their priority populations and expand eligibility for college resources and programs accordingly.

Make caregiving students visible in data. Colleges should identify student parents and caregivers at application and at other appropriate touchpoints in the student experience. Data collection on caregiving status is a prerequisite for institutional awareness, planning, and accountability. As this project and the [Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students](#) have documented, invisibility in data translates directly to invisibility in policy and resource allocation.

Connect students to public and tribal basic needs and child care supports. Colleges cannot solve structural resource gaps alone, but they can help students navigate the resources that exist and can advocate for more. Institutions need guidance and concrete examples for what is within their capacity to offer, such as welcoming children onto campus, creating on-campus child care or care exchange programs, or establishing drop-in care options, as well as models for how TCUs and tribes or colleges and local governments can partner to extend available supports.

Learn from TCU approaches. TCUs offer the broader higher education field a model of student-centered, community-grounded, culturally responsive education that deserves serious attention. Their strong sense of inclusivity and belonging, cultural and community awareness, nimble decisionmaking, and resource efficiency are assets that higher education researchers and practitioners should engage with as expertise, not anomaly.

Integrate a student caregiver focus into strategic enrollment management. Institutions should incorporate and highlight caregiving students as a named population within their SEM processes and should use culturally reflective data to inform institutional policy and practice changes. SEM provides a structured, long-term framework for the sustained, data-informed institutional improvement required for caregiving student success.

Build institutional data capacity. Many colleges—TCUs in particular—need support to improve their capacity to collect their own data, interpret findings, and translate evidence into action. Funders, systems, and intermediaries should provide resources and technical assistance to support this work and policy development, recognizing that data capacity is a prerequisite for evidence-based institutional change.

Leverage student academic programs as a resource. Colleges can look within their own academic offerings to expand supports for caregiving students, particularly in contexts when external resources are scarce. Programs in early childhood education, elementary education, social work, and related fields offer opportunities for students to develop skills through practicums and internships that simultaneously support their caregiving peers. This approach is especially promising in rural areas where transportation and other barriers limit access to external service providers.

Methods

The Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses project was structured as a mixed-methods (Creswell 2014) participatory knowledge exchange grounded in Indigenous research methods (LaFrance and Nichols 2009; Whyte 1991).

Data collection included both quantitative and qualitative methods:

- * A student caregiver survey administered in fall 2024 at all three colleges. TCU staff helped refine the instrument to reflect caregiving broadly, including multigenerational care for elders and extended family, not only for minor children.
- * Site visits with focus groups and individual conversations with student caregivers, faculty, staff, and administrators at each college.
- * Collaborative data interpretation with partners for validation and strategy development.

The fall 2024 student caregiver survey generated responses from 49 students at SKC, 206 at TMC, and 38 at LCOOU. While sample sizes are modest and not designed to be fully representative, they provide meaningful insight into the lived experiences of caregiving students at these institutions.

Survey data were complemented by qualitative insights from site visits at each college in 2024–25. These conversations surfaced practices, norms, and institutional arrangements that survey data alone could not capture, reflecting the dual missions and place-based practices of TCUs, such as the informal culture of faculty flexibility, intergenerational learning, and ceremonies, or how community kinship networks function as informal support systems.

Data were analyzed thematically, with findings checked with TCU partners to ensure accuracy and cultural appropriateness. College snapshots—brief, accessible practitioner publications—were produced for each TCU partner as a deliverable and as a tool to share findings with broader audiences.

Related Resources

- * [Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses project page](#), Urban Institute
- * [Family-Friendly College Toolkit \[link forthcoming\]](#), PERG Learning and Urban Institute through the SPARK Collaborative
- * [Cultivating Native Student Success initiative page](#), American Indian College Fund
- * [Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students project page](#), Urban Institute
- * [Student-Parent Action through Research Knowledge web site](#), SPARK Collaborative
- * [Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses Webinar](#), November 20, 2025
- * [Cordero Holmes Reflects on His Experience at the National Indian Education Association Conference](#), SPARK blog, November 11, 2025
- * TCU snapshots:
 - * [Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University](#)
 - * [Salish Kootenai College](#)
 - * [Turtle Mountain College](#)

About the SPARK Collaborative

The SPARK Collaborative is a multiorganization collaborative initiative. It aims to build evidence and make the case for policy change to support pregnant and parenting students and their families through data, research, lived/living expertise, and past learning, while developing future generations of leaders.

About the Urban Institute

The Urban Institute is a nonprofit research organization founded on one simple idea: To improve lives and strengthen communities, we need practices and policies that work. For more than 50 years, that has been our charge. By equipping changemakers with evidence and solutions, together we can create a future where every person and community has the opportunity and power to thrive.

About the American Indian College Fund

Established in 1989, the mission of the College Fund is to invest in Native students and tribal college education to transform lives and communities. The College Fund is the largest and highest-rated Native education nonprofit in the US, providing education and community revitalization to American Indians and Alaska Natives nationwide. The College Fund supports thousands of American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) students and community members each year in collaboration with TCUs through innovative programs and services that increase educational access and success from birth to career.

The College Fund brings deep expertise in designing and administering place-based, culturally rooted education programs for AIAN students, developed in close collaboration with TCUs, and

has provided over 182,000 scholarships and \$391 million to Native communities since its inception. With over 36 years of experience, the College Fund, a Native-led and Native-serving organization, has established itself as an expert in Native higher education and refined its programming to support a learning experience tailored specifically to Native people, leveraging its knowledge and resources to promote educational access, retention, graduation, and career readiness for Native students. Through decades of experience, the College Fund has established itself as a trusted national resource and advocate for Native student success, empowering scholars to reach their full potential- creating brighter futures for themselves, their families, and their communities.

About PERG Learning

PERG Learning conducts research and program evaluation for a range of educational programs in formal and informal settings. PERG's founding commitment to equity and collaboration has shaped hundreds of evaluations and research studies over more than four decades, working with universities, schools, foundations, state and federal agencies, museums, and other community-based organizations.

About Ascendium Education Group

Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates, and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color, and veterans. Ascendium's work identifies, validates, and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system, and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit <https://www.ascendiumphilanthropy.org>.

In 2023, Ascendium launched the Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success initiative, investing in seven research projects nationwide. Through a collaborative partnership with the American Institutes for Research (AIR), these projects are generating practical insights to help practitioners and policymakers develop and scale strategies that remove barriers faced by rural learners from low-income backgrounds throughout their postsecondary education and workforce training journey.

About the American Institutes for Research

Established in 1946, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit institution that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of education, health, and the workforce. AIR's work is driven by its mission to generate and use rigorous evidence that contributes to a better, more equitable world. With headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, AIR has offices across the US and abroad. For more information, visit [AIR.org](https://www.air.org).

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