



SERVING STUDENT CAREGIVERS AT TURTLE MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

Situating Turtle Mountain College

“The Spirit Within Us”

Turtle Mountain College (TMC) is a tribally controlled college located in Belcourt, North Dakota, serving the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians and the surrounding community. Founded in 1972, the college provided academic, vocational, and cultural education for nearly 1,000 students in fall 2025. Over half of TMC students were enrolled full time, and about 96 percent identified as American Indian. TMC offers associate’s and bachelor’s degrees in fields such as elementary education, business administration, environmental science, and Native studies, with curricula that incorporate Anishinaabe values, language, and traditions.

The college’s mission emphasizes both academic excellence and community service, with a strong focus on meeting the educational needs of families in the Turtle Mountain region. TMC is known as a cultural hub, hosting ceremonies, elder support networks, and intergenerational gatherings that strengthen ties between students, families, and the broader community.

TMC’s institutional model recognizes the layered roles students occupy as learners, caregivers, workers, and community members. Through its participation in the Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses knowledge exchange with the American Indian College Fund, the Urban Institute, and PERG Learning, TMC has expanded its approach to student support to recognize and serve caregiving students and help them achieve their goals. This perspective informs how the college designs its academic policies, campus services, and partnerships, ensuring they are responsive to the full scope of students’ lives.

“Listen to your students. See what they need. Make a safe space for them so they can confide in you.”

—Cynthia Poitra
Director of Enrollment Services

See the video at <https://collegefund.org/cultivating-native-student-success/>

About Tribal Colleges and Universities

Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), most on or near reservation lands, provide culturally relevant curricula and familial student care, grounded in tribal values, culture, and language. Chartered by American Indian Tribes, TCUs furnish students opportunities to further their careers, attain advanced degrees, and support their communities.

Caregiving at TMC

At TMC, caregiving is central to the student experience. In fall 2024, 206 students identified as caregivers responded to a campus survey. While the survey may not capture all caregivers at the college, it provides important insight into their experiences:

- 169 reported caring for a child; 67 percent of those provided daily or near-daily care and 51 percent identified as single parents.
- 93 cared for an adult or elder, and 40 percent of those provided daily or near-daily care.
- 59 cared for both a child and an adult or elder.

Persistence and Strengths

Despite these responsibilities, TMC caregivers persist in their education.

- Over three-quarters (78%) are enrolled full time, often while raising children—many of them school age—and supporting extended family.
- 90 percent participate in online or hybrid courses, showing the critical role of digital access.
- Students rate food access, housing, technology, and community as among the strongest supports for their success.
- Students praise college supports like the food pantry and weekly free meals, which help them meet food and other basic needs.
- Students emphasize the importance of staff support in navigating child care challenges, noting that they often felt understood when juggling caregiving demands.

These strengths are not only indicators of resilience but also reflect the college's positive atmosphere.

Cultural Inclusion in Practice

Cultural grounding is a hallmark of TMC. Practices such as weekly smudging ceremonies and visual representation of Anishinaabe teachings throughout campus spaces help sustain a sense of

belonging. Students described these traditions as sources of emotional and cultural stability that helped them persist through difficult times.

Flexibility Matters

Flexibility in course delivery and faculty discretion shapes the TMC experience.

Community spaces reflect family inclusion. Children are commonly seen in the gym after school or present in classrooms with the approval of faculty. This flexibility reflects the college's recognition that family and education are interconnected.

- Students can bring children to campus and even to class as long as the instructor is supportive. These norms create flexibility in academic engagement and reflect a campus culture that allows for responsiveness to students' caregiving responsibilities.
- 46 percent of caregivers said they would take more online classes if offered, and over 40 percent expressed interest in virtual tutoring or advising, underscoring demand for even more flexible formats.

Flexibility is not limited to academic design; it is also embedded in the interpersonal culture of TMC, where staff and faculty are known for meeting students "where they are."

Opportunities to Build on What Works

While students report strong support, survey findings and site visits identified areas where expansion could further strengthen retention:

- **Child care:** In addition to a broad need for child care financial assistance and more part-time options, students note they need after-school and backup care to bridge mismatched school, college, and work schedules. Limited access to state subsidies that only cover class or work hours—but not study time—makes it harder to secure adequate care.
 - In response, TMC is exploring child care models and community partnerships.
- **Family-friendly spaces:** 56 percent of caregivers want more kid-friendly materials in offices, 46 percent of caregivers would use child-friendly study spaces, and 52 percent would participate in family activities on campus. Student caregivers want to develop more supportive communities on campus related to parenting or caregiving.
 - In response, TMC is examining ways to make the campus more physically accessible to strollers and wheelchairs, designating accessible parking, establishing more cultural and language spaces for families, and engaging the community in other strategies to enhance family friendliness on campus.
- **Housing:** Students and staff point to limited housing options in the surrounding community creating instability and long commutes, especially during North Dakota winters. That said, survey respondents find their housing situation to be relatively supportive of their education, and less than half would use family-friendly housing on or near campus if it were offered.

Students' survey responses represent opportunities for TMC to extend its already strong culture of community care by convening local partners and adapting policies to reflect caregiving realities. TMC is building on its strong foundation to promote a family-centered environment aligned with its values.

Meaningful Impact

TMC is far more than an educational institution—it is a community hub where students, families, and culture intersect. By supporting caregivers holistically, TMC uplifts not only students but also children, elders, and entire households.

When student caregivers succeed, they strengthen their families and model resilience for future generations. TMC's example shows how tribal and rural-serving colleges can weave cultural traditions, flexible learning, and community values into a holistic model of family-friendly education.

Learn More

To find out more about how Turtle Mountain College is supporting student caregivers, contact Jeremy L. Laducer, TRIO Student Support Services Director/Counselor, at jladucer1@tm.edu or Cynthia Poitra, Director of Enrollment Services, at cpoitra@tm.edu.

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About the Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses Project

The American Indian College Fund, the Urban Institute, PERG Learning, and TCU partners—Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University, Salish Kootenai College, and Turtle Mountain College—have collaborated for the Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses project, with support from Ascendium Education.

The Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses project is a knowledge exchange: Urban and PERG provide the Family-Friendly Campus Toolkit for TCU partners to implement as part of the College Fund’s Cultivating Native Student Success enrollment management initiative. The TCUs are providing feedback to make the toolkit more relevant for tribal and rural campuses. The Urban Institute, in turn, will inform the higher education field about the promising practices TCUs have implemented.

TCU partners refined and administered a Fall 2024 survey for student caregivers and hosted site visits in which staff, administrators, and student caregivers shared their experiences and insights.

The Family-Friendly Tribal and Rural Campuses project is affiliated with the Student-Parent Action through Research Knowledge (SPARK) Collaborative, a national effort to advance evidence and policy change that support parenting students and their families.