

# Introduction

For generations, many Native American people have struggled to achieve self-reliance and prosperity. Once among the most self-reliant people on earth, many tribes now struggle to overcome severe poverty that has resulted from a variety of circumstances and factors. Without the necessary support and mentorship, many Native Americans are unable to complete their education and secure meaningful employment. This phenomenon has been likened to herding buffalo to the top of a cliff and over a buffalo jump (A buffalo jump is a cliff over which plains Native American tribes historically drove bison to kill them in mass quantities). See Figure 1.



Figure 1

The buffalo jump analogy is appropriate, with many Native American communities suffering from extremely high rates of poverty, suicide, and a wide range of other social pathologies. Poverty is widespread. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people experience the highest rate of poverty of any race group, with 29 percent living below the poverty line. And the alarmingly high suicide rates in Native American communities could be described as an epidemic. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Center for Health Statistics, the suicide rate for AI/AN female young adults ages 15-24 is over three times higher than the rate in the general female population and the suicide rate for AI/AN male young adults ages 15-24 is over two times higher than the rate in the general male population. The lack of educational attainment in Native American communities is one contributor to these high poverty and suicide rates.

The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that Native American high school students are almost twice as likely to drop out of high school as students in the general population. This organization also reported that only 28 percent of Native Americans ages 18-24 are enrolled in degree granting higher education institutions and only 40 percent of these students graduate within six years of starting their programs. Therefore, only 11 percent of Native American young adults complete a bachelor's degree within 6 years. Native Americans are also overrepresented among the working poor, with 25-to-34-year-old bachelor degree holders who obtain full-time employment earning, on average, 24 percent less than their counterparts in the general population (NCES).

Clearly, the current programs and services provided are not adequately meeting the academic and career development needs of the Native American people. Many foundations, donors, and government organizations currently provide college scholarship funding to Native American people, but few dollars are invested in programs specifically designed to increase high school graduation, higher education success, career employment placement, and mobilization of the disengaged workforce.

Since the establishment of the reservation system, many tribal communities have been virtually isolated from the mainstream economy and the general population. The Foundation for Indigenous Education, Leadership Development, and Sustainability (FIELDs) provides a bridge to help link Native American people with the mainstream economy through education and career development services. The Mission of FIELDs is to serve as a catalyst in cultivating Native American self-reliance, leadership, and prosperity by facilitating Native American higher education and career success and building human capital for sustainable economic and community development. FIELDs provides a comprehensive, systematic set of education and career engagement services which are directly linked to regional economic opportunities and which honor Native American culture, languages, and principles of sustainability. FIELDs helps to unleash the human capital of tribal nations for the benefit of the world and helps these nations to reclaim their traditional heritage of self-reliance and prosperity.

FIELDs is a Native American owned and managed 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Several key members of the FIELDs team are tribal members and FIELDs has the expertise to develop, implement, and evaluate innovative programs that are based on the unique educational and economic needs of the Native American community. One of the unique success factors that sets FIELDs apart is the mentoring and tutoring services that accompany each of the FIELDs programs. These services are available to each student and are delivered by qualified personnel, including volunteers. Many times, Native American students are not given the necessary support in their studies and are left to navigate the system on their own, which often leads to failure. The FIELDs team understands this and has extensive experience and success in teaching and mentoring Native American students. The dominant factors in each success story are attentive mentors and flexible and assertive delivery of tutoring and other support services.

FIELDs programming provides a bridge from the buffalo jump to self-reliance (see Figure 2).

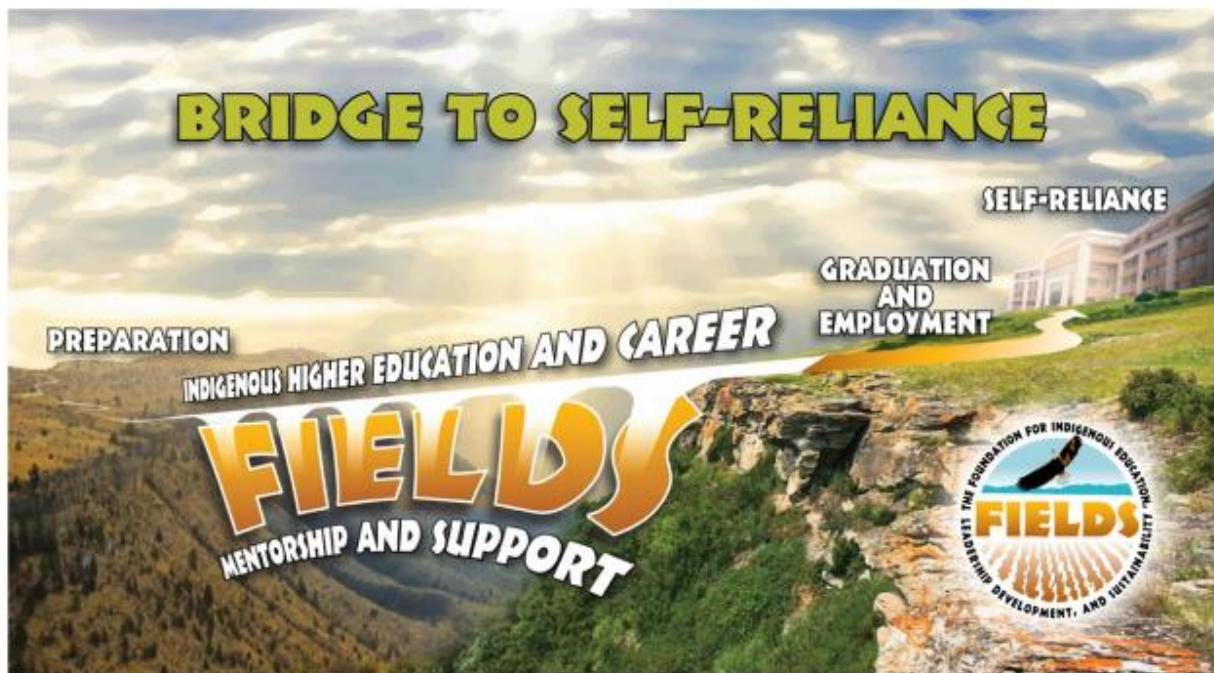


Figure 2

The FIELDs programs are:

1. *FIELDs of Dreams* - Higher education and career preparation for middle school and high school students;
2. *Adult Preparation* - Higher education and career preparation for adults, including entrepreneurship training, and facilitation of adult recovery programs;
3. *The Bridge* - Academic and career mentorship and support for students enrolled in higher education; and
4. *Tribal Workforce Leadership* - Human resource development training for tribal leaders in education, employment and career development, creating workforce development champions in tribal communities.

FIELDs programming “teaches a person to fish” by teaching students to utilize the FIELDs formula, which helps to engage tribes with the regional economy. In this formula, FIELDs strengthens relationships with tribal communities and helps to assess their economic needs and aspirations. FIELDs then conducts a regional economic assessment to identify relevant career pathways and identifies higher education and training programs that will prepare tribal citizens to enter these careers. After these training programs have been identified, the FIELDs team prepares and recruits tribal students into these programs through academic preparation, career exploration, and one-on-one advising. When the students have enrolled in the higher education and

training programs, FIELDS is then able to establish and coordinate high-contact mentoring, tutoring, advising, and workplace internships. These services help students complete the required education and training programs and successfully transition into career employment.

Currently, FIELDS has two operational projects. One is designed to incorporate the full range of FIELDS programs in a project based in Southeastern Idaho that will impact Native American students across parts of Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, and eventually across the rest of Indian Country. This project is in the early stages and is currently a combination of the Adult Preparation Program and the Bridge Program. The FIELDS of Dreams initiative is being planned for local middle and high school students and the Tribal Workforce Leadership Program is being planned for university students. The other project, serving the Cree Nation, currently includes an Adult Preparation Program to help engage tribal members with their regional oil and gas industry. The FIELDS of Dreams, Bridge, and Tribal Workforce Leadership Programs are planned for future phases of this project.

FIELDS' innovative and comprehensive programs and services are based on sound research to meet the specific needs of Native American learners. As FIELDS works with tribal nations to implement its full range of programs and services, it provides Native American people with a path forward out of poverty and its associated social pathologies. FIELDS connects the Native American community with the regional economy and bridges the gap between Native Americans and their academic and career success. Investing in FIELDS makes a transformative impact by increasing self-reliance in the Native American community and engaging a tremendous economic development and labor resource, strengthening tribal nations, the economy, and society. FIELDS provides a blueprint for helping to build self-reliance and prosperity across Indian Country - one bridge at a time.