From the 1860s until the 1930s, the U.S. Government worked closely with religious organizations to establish off-reservation boarding schools with the intent of assimilating Native American children through language and religion—two components seen as necessary to complete the civilization process. Students came to the schools from a variety of tribes and by a variety of means—some recruited by men like Richard Pratt (who believed that eradication of all aspects of Native American culture was the only way to assimilation), some brought by their parents, and others snatched out of their homes by police in order to fill quotas at government-funded schools.

One commonality of all the schools involved their military-like regimen, with students receiving standardized haircuts and uniforms, marching to classes, and adhering to strict discipline—all seen as necessary measures to remove all remnants of Native culture, based on the motto “Kill the Indian” to “Save the Man.” The institutions accomplished their primary goal of teaching English by outlawing the use of Native American languages and punishing those children who dared to use their mother tongue. The punishments ranged from being forced to chew on soap to beatings, depending on the institution’s discipline code.

One can look back on history in horror at the way the Native Americans were treated. The U.S. Government forced Native Americans to assimilate and adopt Western culture—while at the same time the government repressed and punished Native Americans who accomplished assimilation on their own terms (the Cherokee Indians, for example, created their own constitution and built their own schools and education systems using the U.S. Government as their model. The government still forced them to leave their land during the Trail of Tears).

Needless to say, Native Americans have cause to distrust boarding schools run by Christians that claim their sole purpose is helping Native Americans. Especially since, for the older generations, the term “boarding school” evokes memories of oppression, abuse, and assimilation. In the 1940s, when the Indian Boarding School movement had all but died out (although there were still some off-reservation schools for Native Americans that offered a boarding option), Marvin and Gwyndolyn Walter, Seventh-day Adventist missionaries to the Navajo Nation, viewed literacy in instruction as a way out of the crushing poverty that plagued (and continues to plague) the Navajo Nation. They
purchased land near the southern border of the Navajo Nation in Holbrook, Arizona, and opened a boarding institution named Holbrook Indian School (HIS). For more than 70 years, HIS has served Native Americans from all over the United States as a low-cost, Christian alternative to government-run schools.

In recent years, HIS has incorporated curriculum based on concerns voiced by older tribal generations regarding the westernization of their young people. Today’s students live in a dichotomy—iPhones and out-houses, rap music and tribal ceremonies, the “You can be anything you want to become” message mixed with “You need to stay home and take care of your family” pleas from some family members. Along with the dichotomies comes the slow realization that the Western way of civilization, which tends to discount all other ways of seeing as “heathen” and “savage,” does little to ultimately improve the lives of Native Americans.

As the faculty of HIS became aware of a need to adapt the curriculum to better serve their students, they sought to make changes that would enhance students’ cultures rather than eradicate them. The curriculum now includes Navajo language and government, Native American pottery, horsemanship, and agriculture (while agriculture is not a tradition for all tribes, for the Navajo it is).

More recently, HIS has adopted a philosophy called the Nutrition, Exercise, and Wellness (NEW) You Health Initiative. The areas of spirituality, mental health, academic achievement, and physical health make up the four pillars of NEW You. The program design allows the school to work in a culturally sensitive manner that fosters collaboration between the educational personnel and the tribal members they hope to serve.

Spiritual Pillar

Since the foundation of the school, an active and growing spiritual journey has been integral. Students attend dorm worships and church services, and observe how the faculty and staff live out their personal relationships with God through prayer, worldview, and faith. Out of respect for Native American beliefs and cultures, faculty and staff invite students to participate in spiritual growth, but never force them to become involved.

Cindy Giago, from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, reflects fondly on her experiences with HIS: “The school goes out of their way to find healing for the broken pieces in their students. That’s something that benefits everyone—no
matter what their beliefs.” Five of Cindy’s children have attended HIS, traveling all the way from South Dakota. She actively raised each of her children in the traditional Lakota beliefs and holds leadership roles in Tiospaye Sakowin Education and Healing Center, an organization and traditional community that focuses on returning to traditional aspects of the Lakota culture to bring healing to their youth. Like Gaigo’s children, many of the students at HIS come from homes where traditional beliefs are integral to their spiritual journeys.

Holbrook Indian School personnel do not seek to eradicate traditional beliefs and traditions; rather, they seek to introduce students to a different way of seeing that includes the message of salvation and a personal relationship with God. Finding identity as one of God’s children provides a crucial step in the healing process for HIS students.

“I recently read about a boy who had to graduate without a graduation cap because the school he was graduating from wouldn’t allow him to wear his beaded cap for the ceremony. Something amazing that happens at that school [HIS] is how supportive they are of cultural identity,” commented Jolena Johnson, HIS alumna from Coyote Canyon, New Mexico, on the Navajo Reservation.

Through English and Bible class curricula, teachers encourage students to sit down with their elders and listen to and learn traditional stories. Students also link Bible stories to corresponding traditional stories from different tribes. This effort shows the commonality of values important in both Christian and traditional beliefs, and thus helps students feel valued and accepted.

**Mental Pillar**

The school’s mental-health emphasis was implemented to address two significant problems: the high number of HIS students experiencing emotional issues, and the lack of quality mental-health services available to them. There is a disproportionate amount of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), reactive attachment disorder, and substance abuse among the students attending HIS. Daily occurrences of nightmares, flashbacks, urges to cut themselves or to use drugs/alcohol, suicidal thoughts, or anger outbursts are not uncommon for some students. These mental-health issues undermine the students’ potential for social, academic, and spiritual success. To meet this challenge, HIS supporters have funded two full-time clinical counselors.

The root causes of the students’ mental-health issues are numerous. A 2011 study done on the Navajo Nation by Northern Arizona University (NAU) showed that in almost 30 percent of households with children under 18 years of age, the father was absent, and in another 10 percent of households, the children were being raised by a grandparent. According to the same study, almost half (44 percent) of all children under 18 years of age in the Navajo Nation lived in poverty.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control regularly evaluate the leading causes of death within American In-
dian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities. Cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and cirrhosis are included, as are disproportionate rates of “unintentional injury” (accidents), as well as suicide and homicide. And according to Espey et al. in the American Journal of Public Health, overall death rates for AI/AN were nearly 50 percent higher than that of non-Hispanic whites in the U.S. from 1999-2009.

The Navajo Nation reported 42 murders in 2013. This rate exceeded the national average, with more murders per capita taking place in the Navajo Nation than in major cities with three times the population, such as Boston and Seattle. The report pointed out that “jobs are scarce, alcoholism is among the greatest social ills, and cycles of violence and lack of access to basic necessities can stifle people’s spirits.”

The above factors may also contribute to the findings in a report from the CDC that shows AI/AN to consistently report two to three times more “serious psychological distress in the past 30 days” than the national average.

At the beginning of each school year, the counseling department at HIS uses screening tools to identify those students who would benefit from their services. Requests by students and referrals by staff and administration can also be made throughout the year. The clinical counselor met individually with 54 of the 96 students enrolled at HIS during the 2015-2016 school year. The case manager met with approximately 66 students throughout the same school year. The department also engaged the students in many psycho-educational opportunities, including classes, small groups, and presentations on topics such as coping skills, grief, trauma, suicide, and substance abuse.

A student receiving counseling services at HIS does not always achieve a higher GPA (although some do improve their grades); success is measured by a decrease in frequency of negative symptoms and an increase in stabilized mood, use of coping skills, positive social interaction, and improved family relations. Spiritual enhancement is also witnessed. These improvements not only benefit the individual student, but also positively affect his or her peers.

One student, who was having angry outbursts, nightmares, volatile family relations, and depressive symptoms, did not trust any of the staff, and had been reacting to the issues by self-injury/cutting, punching walls, and giving in to severe mood swings. Over the course of the school year, staff at the counseling department established a trust relationship with the student, who then became more willing to address the above issues. The counselor and case manager used a combination of therapies and coping-skills development to assist the student. With the student’s permission, they also incorporated prayer as part of the sessions. During the last two months of the school year, the student’s mood began to stabilize, enabling him to move into a leadership role where he helped and encouraged other students who were experiencing difficulties. Despite the student’s ongoing family dysfunction,
which did not improve during this time, he began to make good choices about his life.

**Academic Pillar**

The incorporation of academics as the third pillar acknowledges that without addressing the mental and spiritual concerns of a student, very little HIS does will have a lasting impact. In a study sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, Clancy Blair of New York University, New York City, and his colleagues studied the cortisol levels in students from impoverished backgrounds. “High levels of stress hormones influence the developing circuitry of children’s brains, inhibiting such higher cognitive functions such as planning, impulse and emotional control, and attention. Known collectively as executive functions, these mental abilities are important for academic success.”

Due to the circumstances that thwart HIS students’ learning capacity, the average new student at the school reads three to nine grade levels below other students in the same age group nationwide. In other words, HIS high school students have barely mastered the basics of reading and thus fail classes, which in turn causes increased stress and leads to feelings of inferiority that can cause them to act out or drop out. In order to decrease classroom stress, teachers at HIS incorporate an individualized approach to instruction in the areas of math and reading, while at the same time identifying textbooks for core classes that take into account students’ low reading levels.

HIS has adopted the STAR software published by Renaissance Learning to quickly identify the strengths and deficiencies of each incoming student using computerized tests that take 10 to 15 minutes to administer, and which provide instant results. The test results then help to guide instruction.

In math classes, the students work at their own pace to master objectives. The teacher acts as a facilitator, helping them understand new concepts; and a prescriber, identifying when students have mastered a skill and demonstrate readiness to move on to the next. The system alleviates classroom stress because each student receives individualized assignments that help him or her achieve the goal of math literacy. Success breeds success, and students often experience more than a year’s worth of growth during one school year.

High school students at HIS have participated in the Renaissance Place program (formerly known as Accelerated Reader) for the past six years, with the elementary and middle-school students joining during the 2015-2016 school year. The program works on the philosophy that improving one’s reading requires practice. Renaissance Place uses the gamification model to encourage students to read and to continue choosing more difficult text. Gamification means incorporating a game element into the learning in order to provide an immediate extrinsic reward for small successes. As students progress through the program, they need fewer and fewer rewards because reading successfully becomes its own...
reward. Each student takes the STAR test (a standardized, computerized reading examination) and based on the instant results, sets a reading goal with the help of the teacher. Students learn their ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) and then self-select books from the library that fall in that zone—thus ensuring both interest and success.

The library plays an integral part in the reading program. The HIS librarian has scoured thrift stores, garage sales, and book resellers to purchase an additional 6,000 books (for about $6,000 over six years) for the library—including an extensive collection of picture books (90 percent of new HIS students grades 1 to 12 self-select picture books for the first three to four months of school—the majority of new students have never successfully completed a chapter book on their own). The librarian labels the books with the Accelerated Reader test number, reading level, and the point value of the book (as determined by Renaissance Place). In addition, each book has a colored dot on the spine, allowing the librarian to arrange the volumes by reading level and THEN author. This makes it easy for students to shop for books in their ZPD. During the 2014-2015 school year, students read and passed tests on 3,133 books; and during the 2017-2018 year, on more than 7,000 books.

In addition to the individualized math and reading programs, teachers researched and began the adoption process for textbooks that fall within the majority of students’ ZPDs (for example, textbooks written specifically for second-language learners that incorporate scaffolding and inquiry methods). As their reading levels increase, students discover that comprehension increases in other core classes as well.

For students reading below the 4th-grade level (regardless of actual grade level), teachers also assign learning objectives in the learning apps Skoolbo and Reading Kingdom.

**Health Pillar**

Native American organizations across the country tout the importance of gardening as a part of a well-rounded community, for reversing trends in chronic disease among AI/AN, as well as for reconnecting to their culture. The Garden to Plate Program at HIS comprises an important innovation in the physical pillar of the NEW You Health Initiative. The students participate in all aspects of cultivation, tending, harvesting, packaging, and ultimately eating the fruits and vegetables they helped to produce in the garden at HIS.

Valerie Segrest, of the Muckleshoot tribe in western Washington, describes the importance of a Native American’s connection to the land: “The land is our identity and holds for us all the answers we need to be a healthy, vibrant, and thriving community. In our oral traditions, our creation story, we are taught that the land that provides the foods and medicines we need, are a part of who we are.”

A movement spreading through North America among Native American communities calls for a return to the physical health they enjoyed during the pre-colonization period. This movement embraces both physical and dietary health. According to Allan Richter of EnergyTimes, “Native
Americans are among the original practitioners of holistic health.

Native communities seek to promote an active lifestyle by returning to traditional expectations of physical fitness. Many Native Americans, both on and off the reservations, have a mostly sedentary lifestyle, which contributes to the diabetes and heart issues prevalent amongst this ethnic group. Tribal leaders encourage members to adopt a more active lifestyle through organized events and education. The Navajo Nation hosts a summer series of non-competitive runs and walks called Just Move It, and through community awareness and advertising, participation has risen from 482 participants in 1993 to more than 40,000 in 2015.

Pre-colonization families had to farm, herd, hunt, fish, and gather food in order to survive. The community outreach described above can be as simple as a call to get outdoors while others encourage their youth to greet the sunrise by running to the east each morning—or simply by running or walking each day.

Holbrook Indian School innovates these values through its NEW You programming and physical education (PE) curriculum. HIS requires a minimum of three years of PE credits for graduation, while many public schools only require one or two years. Many of the school’s seniors who have spent four years at the school finish with four or five years’ worth of PE classes. PE students at HIS also have opportunities to learn Native American hand games from different tribal traditions.

Conclusion
In order to effectively work with Native Americans to attain the mutual goal of a beneficial education that will allow students to succeed in life and break the cycle of poverty in which many find themselves, schools and institutions must seek ways to collaborate and honor the culture from which the students come. No one method works for every student, but the guiding principles remain—to work wholistically to address the spiritual, mental, academic, and physical needs of the students and to honor their families of origin.

This article has been peer reviewed.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the Carlisle School, said in an 1892 speech: “A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” This sentiment undergirded both Christian and public education during this period. For more, see Captain Richard H. Pratt, Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction (1892), 46-59: http://quod.lib.umich.edu/n/nccsw/ach8650.1892.001/69?page=root;rgn=
4. Ibid.
5. The Trail of Tears refers to a series of events during the 1830s that started with the Indian Removal Act, which authorized U.S. state and federal governments to remove Native Americans from their land in Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, Florida, and Tennessee—using force if necessary—and compel them to travel to the Oklahoma Territory. For more information, see “A Brief History of the Trail of Tears” (2018): http://www.cherokee.org/About-The-Nation/History/Trail-of-Tears/A-Brief-History-of-the-Trail-of-Tears.
13. Ibid.
16. The Renaissance Place is an Internet-based program designed to strengthen students’ reading and comprehension skills through guided reading practice: https://hosted185.renlearn.com/272509/