

Cristo Rey High School: The School That Works—Literally



By Amanda R. Gimbel

What is Cristo Rey?

Cristo Rey High School of Sacramento opened in 2006. Last year's graduating class was the first to attend all four high school grades at the facility. All 53 of the 2010 graduating seniors were accepted into four-year colleges; and every single one of them is currently in college. The valedictorian received a full-ride scholarship to the University of the Pacific's Pharmacology Program and the salutatorian received a full-ride scholarship to Loyola of Chicago.

These are impressive statistics for any high school, but even more so when you understand what Cristo Rey is. An innovative high school designed for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Cristo Rey is a private, college-preparatory school that assists students with their tuition costs by sending them to work in the corporate world. Indeed, Cristo Rey is not a charter school which takes public funding and is thus tied to public strings. Rather, the school's innovative financing structure serves the dual purposes of enabling disadvantaged students to attend a private college-preparatory school while simultaneously exposing them to the corporate world where they can gain valuable skills and marketable job experience.

There are 24 Cristo Rey High Schools across the country and all target economically disadvantaged students, many of whom test far below the reading level for their grade. Cristo Rey recruits students who have a willingness to work hard, are motivated to succeed, have a desire to attend college, have good behavior and attendance, and meet the school's financial guidelines – i.e. most come from families who are

at or below the poverty level. Thus, Cristo Rey students have great potential but limited financial means. While the school has Catholic roots, there is no requirement that attendees be Catholic.

Cristo Rey students are not only expected to graduate from high school, they are expected to go to and successfully complete college. Many of these students are on their way to being the first in their family to graduate from high school and advance to college. High expectations, a rigorous curriculum, and a college-bound culture prepare students for a future full of possibilities and success. The campus includes a college counseling office which takes students on college

visits, assists them in filling out college applications and the FAFSA, and prepares them for the SAT and ACT tests. The school also offers after-school extracurricular programs, including football, boys and girls soccer, boys and girls basketball, study hall, student council, choir, fine arts and yearbook staff.

The competitive academic curriculum at Cristo Rey has been enhanced to maximize academic achievement. Longer school days and smaller class sizes mean

the students don't miss instruction time to go to work, giving students as much classroom time as other college-preparatory schools. Students attend school from 7:50 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. Five days a month, students are bussed to their respective jobs where they complete a wide variety of entry-level tasks, including faxing, copying, inter-office mailing, back-up reception duties, data entry, professional shadowing, and records management. In addition to the legal profession, Cristo Rey students also work in industries such as information technology, arts and entertainment, sales, construction, finance, civil service, medical, government and



A Cristo Rey student receives an assignment from Daniel C. Kim, associate attorney at Matheny Sears Linkert & Jaime LLP

nonprofit. Working in these corporate settings empowers these determined students with professional skills.

How Does it Work?

Cristo Rey's Corporate Work-Study program connects students with entry-level professional jobs throughout the Sacramento area. In order to prepare students for their jobs, Cristo Rey conducts a four-week summer institute for incoming freshman each year. Here, students learn valuable skills such as how to dress appropriately for work, how to tie a tie and give a firm handshake, the importance of making eye contact, goal setting, filing techniques, payroll duties, records management, phone etiquette, computer programs (such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and basic typing

Study, Inc., a separately incorporated, nonprofit 501(c)3 corporation, acts as a placement agency and thus bears all administrative costs, taxes, Social Security, state disability, unemployment insurance, and workers' compensation benefits.

Through the Corporate Work-Study program, students earn wages to offset tuition costs, but more importantly, they work with adults who demonstrate the importance of a college education and strong work ethic—something to which many of these students may have never been exposed. According to **Ward Fansler**, president of Cristo Rey High School, "meeting the high expectations of their employers gives students the confidence and stamina to persevere through college." The work-study program, together with



Cristo Rey students hard at work

skills), communication skills, math, language arts and study skills. The students are even taken on a mock business lunch where they learn everything from use of the salad fork to appropriate conversation.

The Corporate Work Study program is the only way the school exists and its only source of funding beyond voluntary donations. Employers, or corporate sponsors, sponsor one or more Cristo Rey students to work at their business at a competitive rate. The employer pays no benefits or taxes on the student employees. Cristo Rey High School Work-

Cristo Rey's rigorous and challenging academic program, prepares students not only for college, but for work in a professional environment beyond college, adds **W. David Brown**, Cristo Rey's Work-Study Director.

What's in it for the Sponsor?

Understandably, employers may be hesitant to sponsor high school students to fill positions that may normally be filled by someone with far more education and experience. However, sponsoring Cristo Rey students is not a simple act

of charity by employers. To the contrary, since opening its doors in 2006, more and more local businesses are realizing the value of sponsoring Cristo Rey students. The program offers an easy way to sponsor trained and motivated young enthusiasts at a competitive salary, while simultaneously investing in the region's future workforce. The program is successful because students do real jobs. It's not a community service project for employers, as Cristo Rey students fill employers' needs in a cost-effective manner.

According to Brown, employers in the Sacramento legal

after a brief learning curve, they are providing a reliable and consistent work product that is an essential service to our firm."

David A. Melton, a shareholder at *Porter Scott*, echoes Mr. Jaime's sentiments. "The Cristo Rey business model program provides a fantastic opportunity for high school students to gain valuable work experience and to further their educational goals. Our Cristo Rey students are extremely hard-working and routinely exceed our expectations. Our students have helped out in all aspects of the operation of our law firm. Our goal is to help the student learn skills to help him or her in their future employment, but in return we have an energetic and hard-working employee."

Many firms find sponsoring Cristo Rey students not only a smart investment, but an inspirational experience as well. "They are already trained, very dependable, and come ready to work," Jamie said. "But watching them succeed against such overwhelming odds is really a rewarding experience for the whole office."

Cristo Rey students are a tremendous yet cost-effective asset to any business, Melton said. But beyond that, he said, the students provide companies an opportunity to help make a difference, not only in their

communities, but by helping these highly motivated, yet economically disadvantaged students gain confidence and self-respect. Companies who sponsor Cristo Rey students, Melton explained, are not only investing in the economic future of the community, but helping to empower young people to exceed expectations and realize their full potential.

Cristo Rey is truly the school that works.

For more information on Cristo Rey's Corporate Work-Study program, or to become a corporate sponsor, interested members can contract David Brown, Cristo Rey's Work-Study Director at (916) 400-3478 or DBrown@CristoReySacramento.org.

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Cristo Rey's 2010 Graduating Class

community should strongly consider sponsoring Cristo Rey students to help meet their firms' needs. Administration is simple and inexpensive. Not only will employers save on payroll taxes and benefits, Brown said, but students have reliable transportation and are sent to work every day with a lunch. Students are required to be in business attire when they go to work and many students are bilingual -- an added advantage for any business.

Matthew C. Jaime, a partner at *Matheny Sears Linkert & Jaime LLP*, has been a corporate sponsor of Cristo Rey since 2007 and is one of Cristo Rey's biggest advocates. "On a personal level, having been involved with Sacramento's Cristo Rey Program since early on, our firm has had the opportunity to see these students grow from quiet and shy children to accomplished and confident young adults by the end of the school year. The transformation the students undergo is remarkable; and to be a part of the process is rewarding on many levels. As an employer, we also get the benefit of having youthful enthusiasm coupled with drive and determination to succeed. The students' minds are like sponges, and