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“The School That Works:” Cristo Rey High blends school, corporate internships

Starting their freshman year, students spend five days a month working at the corporate office for a business or nonprofit.



Pablo Rodriguez, fifth from right, a sophomore student at Cristo Rey Orange County High School in Santa Ana, stands with fellow students and members of his corporate partner, Slater Builders, on stage at Angel Stadium during the Draft Day style ceremony in Anaheim on Friday, August 23, 2024. Students are paired with a corporation and do a work-study program throughout high school. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Pablo Rodriguez is a 14-year-old sophomore at Cristo Rey Orange County High School. But five times a month, his classroom is Slater Builders' corporate office in Costa Mesa.

Rodriguez has always wanted to be an architect. Thanks to his high school's work-study program, he has practically as much experience interning at a general contractors firm as he does studying geometry.

Every student at Cristo Rey will participate in a corporate work-study program from their freshman through senior year.

The Catholic high school on West McFadden Avenue is only in its second year in Santa Ana, but it's one of about 40 Cristo Rey schools across the country. The chain of schools began in Chicago in 1996 with the mission to approach education for students from families with limited economic means with rigorous college preparatory academics and four years of professional work experience — and, yes, also theology. The schools accept students of all faiths; about 40% of enrollees nationwide are not Catholic.

The idea behind the model, said Cristo Rey Orange County President Stephen Holte, is to introduce students to corporate networks they might otherwise be excluded from. Students' work, in turn, helps to pay for their private school tuition.

"I like to say we're the most exclusive school in Orange County because if you can afford it, you can't come," Holte said.

The average annual income of a family with a kid at Cristo Rey Orange County is around \$55,000, Holte said. It could cost more than that to send a child to another Catholic high school

At Cristo Rey, Holte says most families end up paying less than \$1,000 per year per child. Donations and work-study pay for most of the remainder of the school's operating costs, including maintaining what is right now a roughly 12:1 teacher-to-student ratio.

Cristo Rey's motto is "the school that works." And, data suggests that's true in more ways than one. Students who graduate from Cristo Rey schools enroll in college at nearly double the rate of all low-income students and at a higher rate than high-income students. They also graduate from college at two times the rate of their demographic peers, [according to Cristo Rey data](#).

The Orange County location now has more than 100 students — freshmen and sophomores — and could grow to full size with between 400 and 500 students, freshmen through seniors, in the next couple years, Holte said.

As students settled into class this August, they also prepared for new work experiences. Every student was placed into their internships this Friday at an annual event the school calls "Draft Day." This year, the ceremony really did feel like a draft because students met their corporate partners at Angel Stadium, breaking the ice with their new supervisors before they head to the office.

Northgate Markets CEO Oscar Gonzalez, also a Cristo Rey board member, said his company participates in the corporate work-study program because the mission resonates with his own upbringing as the youngest of 13 children born to immigrants from Jalisco, Mexico. This year, Northgate Markets has taken four student interns.

"I try to let them know that many of us have been on the same journey that they are on, including myself, and that their story is not real different than our stories," Gonzalez said. "They've got to understand that they have to build that confidence and set high expectations for themselves."

Each day they work, students first have a professional development session on the school campus before a van shuttles them to their job sites. In these sessions, they cover soft skills like workplace communication and networking. Their academic coursework also places an emphasis on skills — like using Microsoft Excel for crunching math and science data or composing emails to teachers for English class — that will translate to the business world, Holte said. Students must also complete a two-week "summer success" program to touch up their readiness for the corporate world.

"During the summer success program, they were really big on having positive body language, posture and eye contact," said sophomore Mayra Cortes, who is entering her second year of work with Woodside Credit, a collector car finance lender in Newport Beach.

Still, Ed Slater, founder and principal of Slater Builders, said one of his big goals for year two participating in the program is to improve onboarding to make young students feel more comfortable and confident in the office.

"This year, we're spending more time upfront to just have conversations," he said. "So they're going to get to interview staff and be able to learn more about each person that they're going

All Cristo Rey students complete entry-level assignments for their corporate sponsors. Rodriguez and Cortes said their day-to-day at their offices consists a lot of mailroom tasks or billing assistance. But Cortes, who also worked at Woodside Credit over the summer, contributed to a marketing project since published online. Rodriguez, meanwhile, completed a rotation to assist Slater Builders teams dedicated to planning, engineering and accounting. He's had multiple opportunities to visit construction sites and participate in meetings with contractors and supervisors. Each is returning to their business for a second year.

Nationwide, Cristo Rey corporate partners have a demonstrated history of bringing back students full-time after they complete college, something Gonzalez said he would like to do at Northgate Markets.

In Orange County, Cristo Rey has more than 40 corporate partners taking on student interns this year, including many nonprofits and a public agency, the Irvine Ranch Water District.

The idea is to have an array of partners, so students can explore industries and sectors that align with their interests and aspirations, Holte said.

Local corporate partners this year include Capital Group, Farmers & Merchants Bank and Sperry Commercial Real Estate. Among the nonprofits participating are Goodwill, St. Joseph's Hospital and Providence St. Jude Medical Center, where students will assist with filing and business operations in multiple departments.

"Young people tend to think of hospitals in terms of the clinical side, but there's so much more to running a hospital," said Providence St. Jude CEO Laura Ramos. "I think it will be great exposure for them."

While the nontraditional high school is small, Cristo Rey is not all about work. Students still have a chance to participate in clubs and sports. Rodriguez and Cortes are each part of fledgling soccer programs.

Rodriguez, dressed in a tie, vest and shirtsleeves — the school's uniform for boys — said Cristo Rey's high standards motivate him to balance work, school and sports, plus his commute from home in east Orange to school in downtown Santa Ana.

"If you're participating in after-school clubs, you get more pressed on those standards," he said. "The pressures are even higher because you're representing your school in athletics. But the teachers here are really supportive, and it's such a close-knit community. They would personally call our parents when we were doing good jobs or if we were missing homework."

One of those rigid standards, Rodriguez said, is mandatory after-school tutoring if any of your grades fall below 80%.

The academic strictness falls in line with Cristo Rey's data-driven methodology.

"Freshman year, if you have a 3.0 GPA or higher, you're on track to get admitted to college and even graduate," Holte said. "There's a lot of data — that's sort of a tipping point. I think we're at 83% of students with a 3.0 or higher and 93% with at least a 2.5. so they're almost there."

"We had 69 students from 41 different schools, 41 different academic cultures, 41 different ways to study, 41 different understanding of what school was supposed to be," he said.

The Cristo Rey approach is to standardize academic processes to give students a routine that will also set them up for professional success, Holte said.

"We focus on executive functioning," he said. "Fourteen-year-olds are naturally disorganized, so let's help them get organized. Every class starts with the same things: you're writing down your homework and you're starting a task. When you get home, your homework is written down every time because we've got you in a routine."

Ultimately, Holte said, Cristo Rey believes in creating a pipeline of opportunity in commerce for students traditionally underrepresented in corporate leadership roles.

"We want students to grow into the potential that we know exists in each of them," he said. "It's not just telling you that you have potential, but showing you. So that's what we do from day one, and then we consistently reinforce that."

The school announcements played over the intercom have one thing in common each and every day, Holte said.

"Our announcement every day is: You belong."

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