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Work Study Innovators

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High School in Santa Ana will welcome about 120 freshman this fall

Corporate partners of **Cristo Rey Orange County**, a new Catholic high school in Santa Ana that employs a unique work study program, are eager to have teenagers fill their entry-level jobs.

“This is new to us and there are certainly unknowns, but the energy and excitement for it is quite contagious,” **Ed Slater**, principal at Costa Mesa-based **Slater Builders Inc.**, a Cristo Rey OC corporate work study partner, told the Business Journal.

Slater Builders, a general contracting firm that ranked No. 27 among OC’s largest commercial construction companies on last year’s Business Journal list, plans this fall to onboard four students in accounting and marketing roles. The company had \$51.9 million in OC revenue for the 12 months ended December 2021.

It's one of several area construction and engineering-related firms partnering with the upstart school; others include **Clark Construction**, **Fuscoe Engineering**, **Psomas** and **Snyder Langston**.

Local Heavyweights

Cristo Rey OC is the 39th school in the **Cristo Rey Network**, whose work study program has attracted 2,700 national corporate partners, including **Coca-Cola Co.** (NYSE: KO), **Johnson & Johnson** (NYSE: JNJ) and **Ford Motor Co.** (NYSE: F).

The upstart Santa Ana school's local base of corporate partners is approaching 40.

Alongside the area construction and engineering companies are a variety of local banks, law firms, hospitals and nonprofits.

Notable partners include **City of Hope**, **Latham & Watkins**, **Kings Seafood Co.**, **First American Financial Corp.**, **Children's Hospital of Orange County**, **Farmers & Merchants Bank**, and **Northgate Gonzalez Markets Inc.**

Temp Agency Similarities

Schools in the Cristo Rey network target underserved communities, and families who fall well under the federal poverty threshold.

Students enrolled in Cristo Rey OC will cover nearly half of their tuition, earning about \$9,000 a year through the school's work study program, while also getting a head start in their careers.

The program "operates like a temporary employment agency," the school says.

Students "earn a majority of their education cost while gaining real-world work experience that strengthens their cognitive and non-cognitive skill development, catalyzes confidence and aspiration, and prepares them for success in college and careers."

Intersection

"Oftentimes, business and education don't intersect," Cristo Rey OC Founding President **Stephen Holte** told the Business Journal. "So, we're closing that distance between them."

Slater, who attended a Catholic high school, said he “fell in love” with the Cristo Rey model when he was initially introduced to it while Slater Builders worked on **Cristo Rey Los Angeles**.

“If this ever comes to Orange County, we’d love to participate,” Slater said he thought at the time. “The Cristo Rey network is a very well-thought-out, fine-tuned system.”

Cristo Rey OC is currently accepting applications for its inaugural freshmen class, which officials anticipate will be around 120 students. Applications are due March 4, officials said.

Underserved Communities

Cristo Rey Network’s founder, **John P. Foley**, started the nonprofit about 30 years ago after seeing a lack of affordable educational options for children in Chicago’s Pilsen community, which primarily consisted of working-class Mexican immigrant families. The nonprofit aims to provide a career-focused, college preparatory education to students with limited economic resources.

Cristo Rey’s average household income is \$38,000 for a family of four. Additionally, about 98% of the network’s 12,000 students are people of color.

Cristo Rey OC’s surrounding community is predominantly Latin American, with a notable Vietnamese population. The parish the school is leasing the property from, the **Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church**, hosts nine masses every weekend, seven in Spanish, one in English and one in Vietnamese. Officials expect the school will reflect the area’s demographics, as they hope to draw in students from Santa Ana, Anaheim and Garden Grove, among other neighboring OC cities.

Integrative Curriculum

Despite being a faith-based school, students, faculty and administrators don’t have to be Catholic to join Cristo Rey OC.

“The number one reason students choose Cristo Rey is because of the work study program,” Holte said. “They want that career exposure.”

Cristo Rey students work five days a month; four students share one office job and rotate on a weekly basis, working at least one day every week. The school also provides vans that take students to-and-from their offices daily.

When a student isn't at work, they spend the remainder of their school week in class. Cristo Rey OC plans to integrate corporate skills and tips into its curriculum, teaching students proper email etiquette, programs like **PowerPoint** and **Excel** and how to interact and advocate for themselves with supervisors.

"We're looking to help students develop transferable work skills," Holte said.

Company Benefits

On the corporate side, Cristo Rey's work study program helps companies meet their diversity, equity and inclusion goals, since the vast majority of the network's students are minorities. Businesses pay a flat fee to become a work study partner, similar to how outsourcing agencies charge companies for their staffing services.

Partnered companies have also used the work study program "as a way for their entry-level supervisors to gain some real-world experience in a fairly low-risk environment," Cristo Rey OC Founding Vice President **Steffanie Early** told the Business Journal.

In the long term, the work study program aims to create a local workforce pipeline. About 20% of alumni continue to work with a Cristo Rey corporate partner, according to officials.

"These kids will go through the program, go to college and come back to OC to be influential leaders," said Slater, who also serves on the founding board of Cristo Rey OC.

About 85% to 90% of Cristo Rey graduates attend college. Cristo Rey students are two and a half to three times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than their peers, according to Holte.

Renovations

Cristo Rey OC's current site, which runs about 26,000 square feet on McFadden Avenue and South Clara Street in Santa Ana, is a temporary home for the school before it reaches full capacity for all four grades.

Officials said they are looking into other nearby sites for the school's permanent home, which they hope to find and move into in the next three years.

The school's current building is the former site of Catholic school **School of Our Lady**, which closed in 2020 due to under-enrollment. Prior to fall, the building will undergo a roughly \$2.25 million renovation, including new lighting, paint, flooring, doors and fencing.

“We’ll leave the church with an improved facility that can hopefully be a resource,” Holte said.

Reflecting OC

Although schools in the Cristo Rey Network share the same educational model, officials at Cristo Rey OC are open to adjusting its policies to meet the needs of the surrounding community.

“We really want to listen to the students, families and partners we’re serving, rather than work top-down and tell them how it’s going to be,” Holte said.

“Every Cristo Rey is unique,” he added. “We joke around that if you visit one, you’ve seen one, because they all have different neighborhoods.”

Other Cristo Rey schools honor students’ cultural identities by hosting Our Lady of Guadalupe celebrations at schools in predominantly Latin American neighborhoods or by adapting to the area’s unique work culture.

“The Cristo Rey in New York City have people that are working on Wall Street, so they’re going to go to work in ties and a jacket every day,” Early said. “The Orange County work culture is a lot more casual, and the businesses here will have different expectations of students. So, we’re going to adapt to the community that we’re in and make sure that we provide students with the skills to be successful in that environment.”

Tuition Breakdown, Partnerships and Fundraising

While the **Cristo Rey Network** corporate work study program covers 45% of funding per school, 50% is secured through fundraising and 5% is accounted for by students’ families.

Families pay \$25 to \$300 a month in tuition depending on family size, income and other factors.

“There are many other private schools that offer financial aid and scholarships for students from underserved communities, which is great, but they don’t always have the capacity to provide support for the students who are specifically from these communities,” **Cristo Rey Orange County** Founding Vice President **Steffanie Early** told the Business Journal.

To further support its students, the school has partnered with youth-mentoring non-profit **Big Brothers Big Sisters of America** and other organizations that help students struggling with food insecurity.

Cristo Rey OC aims to raise \$5 million this year. The school has raised about \$1 million to date.

—Kaitlin Aquino