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The Cristo Rey Story

Serving the Marginalized through Learned Ministry

By Robert J. Birdsell

Last April, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, called on Jesuit universities to think with him about re-creating the Society of Jesus, to re-create the journey, to re-create the institutions of the Society. It was this spirit of “re-creation” that in 1994 led Fr. Bradley Schaeffer, S.J., the provincial of the Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus, to imagine a new Jesuit institution that would help break the paralysis of poverty on Chicago’s near south side. Fr. Schaeffer prayed about the ministries of the Society and the impact they were having. Through this prayer, he began to see the need to serve the Mexican immigrant population in Chicago with a college preparatory high school. Fr. Schaeffer passionately pursued this desire of providing a Jesuit secondary education to low income students. In 1995, he called Fr. John Foley, S.J., to return from 34 years in Peru to open and lead Cristo Rey Jesuit High School. In 1996, the school opened its doors to 74 students.

Today, there are 24 schools in the Cristo Rey Network, with ten additional communities in some stage of opening a Cristo Rey school. Consequently, over 6,500 students are earning a Catholic, college preparatory education, who otherwise would not have had such an opportunity, had Fr. Schaeffer not listened to the call to re-create the Society’s institutions to serve one of Chicago’s most marginalized communities.

However, the story does not end here. The mission of the Cristo Rey Network is not to simply provide thousands of students a quality high school education; rather, it is to break the cycle of poverty. In the 21st century this means educating young men and women to succeed in college and beyond.

The ingenious part of the Cristo Rey story is the much-touted business model – the way the Jesuits re-created the model of the traditional, private high school. In 1995, when Fr. Schaeffer asked how the school would be funded, Fr. Foley and his Jesuit brothers turned to a consultant for assistance. How could we fund a private, Catholic high school for economically disadvantaged youth? We certainly could not charge the tuition typical of traditional Jesuit high schools. As a result, the idea for the Corporate Work Study Program was born.

Today, we have partnerships with over 1,500 corporations, law firms, hospitals and universities that provide entry level, professional jobs to every student in the Cristo Rey Network. Cristo Rey students, in this year alone, will earn over \$30 million to support their education. And many Jesuit universities are a cornerstone of this partnership by employing students from Cristo Rey schools.

Initially, the Corporate Work Study Program was envisioned as purely a revenue model to support the schools. Today, we know that the four-year work study experience is a critical component of our students’ educational experience. In fact, we are designing an empirical study to quantify the skills gained on the job that prepare them for success in higher education – skills like persistence, teamwork and collaboration, precision and reasoning strategies.

In addition to engaging in a rigorous college academic program. Cristo Rey students are taught how to thrive in a civil society. All Cristo Rey freshmen spend three weeks in a

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work training program that teaches them how to greet colleagues, shake hands, look people in the eye, dress professionally, communicate clearly, and succeed in the work place. This experience is transformative for young people who have never worn a tie, worked in a professional setting, or been expected to look adults in their eyes when they speak to them, and it sets them up for success in work and life.

In addition to the 34 communities and 1,500 corporate partners that are part of the Cristo Rey Network, 24 universities join with us to ensure the success of our mission. These universities are working deliberately and diligently, “networking” as Fr. General suggested, with our team and our schools to ensure that every Cristo Rey student will graduate from college and thus be positioned to “help shape a more humane, just, faith-filled, sustainable world.”

The Cristo Rey Network is a young organization – just ten years old. At the beginning, our work focused on replicating the success of the Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago. Two years ago, we too stepped back and began to think about “re-creating” the Cristo Rey Network. We asked if all we were being called to do was replicate and grow. Was our success simply measured by the number of schools and number of students being

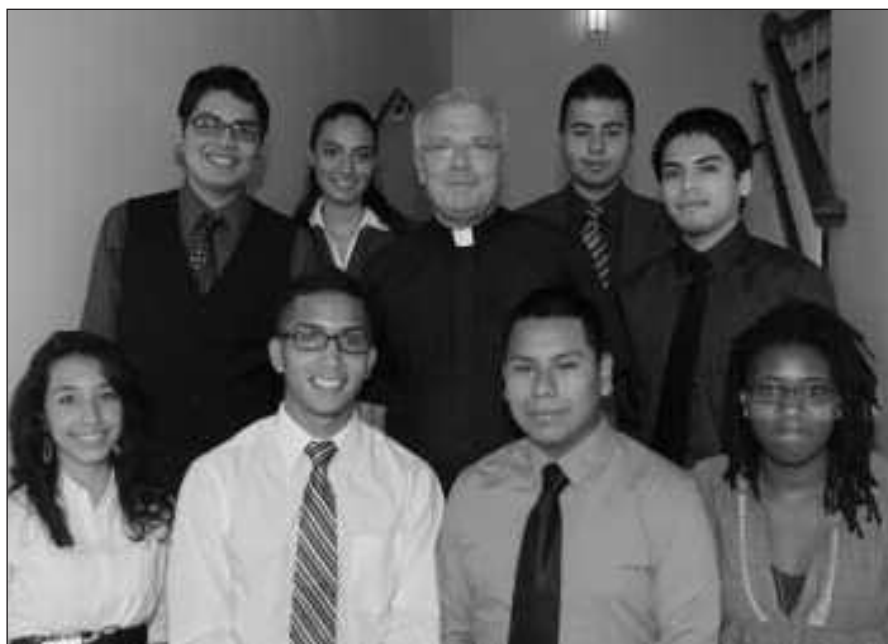
served by Cristo Rey schools? After much discernment and discussion, we felt that we needed to re-create the Cristo Rey Network to focus not only on growth, but also on enriching the quality of the academic programs in our schools and ensuring the long term postsecondary success of Cristo Rey students. What do we need to be doing to prepare students, who are often coming to our schools two grade levels behind, to complete college? This year alone we will invest over \$1,000,000 enriching the academic programs in Cristo Rey schools and scaling best practices that are working in these schools across the Network and with our university partners.

Today 80 percent of the graduates are enrolled in college

Through a partnership with the National Student Clearinghouse, we also began to systematically and deliberately track the alumni from Cristo Rey schools. For the class of 2008, over 85 percent of the graduates from Cristo Rey Network schools have enrolled in college. Over 200 alumni have enrolled at one of our university partners since 2008 and this year 97 percent of those students were retained into their sophomore year. This success metric is

no accident, but the result of our university partners’ deliberately employing strategies to ensure that these students succeed. For example, since the beginning of Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, Loyola University of Chicago has been a resource and partner to the school and to the Cristo Rey Network. This summer hundreds of teachers and school leaders from virtually every Cristo Rey Network school will convene at Loyola Chicago’s Water Tower campus to work collaboratively on college-ready curriculum and assessments and to incorporate evidence-based teaching practices. Similarly, the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness at Loyola has hosted summits to teach Cristo Rey faculty about the culture of poverty and to build communities of learners.

In addition to this support of the work at the Cristo Rey Network, Loyola has a strong and deep com-



Loyola University Chicago President Michael J. Garanzini, S.J., with Cristo Rey Network alumni.

mitment to the dozens of Cristo Rey alumni studying on its campus. Fr. Justin Daffron, S.J., has built a cohort of students succeeding at the institution and rallied support from Loyola's alumni to build the Cristo Rey Scholars program (http://www6.luc.edu/undergrad/academics/factsheets/cristo_rey_scholars.pdf). Over the past two years since the Scholars program was launched, every student in the program has been retained. As Wendy Gomez, first year chemistry scholar, stated recently, "I am lucky to be at a university that truly cares about its students." These supports and partnerships allow Cristo Rey and Loyola to fulfill our common mission.

Since 2007, Fairfield University has hosted students from across Cristo Rey Network on its campus for a week long college immersion experience. Following this lead, Georgetown hosted students from 18 Cristo Rey Network schools for a three-week summer program. Students learned about college life, visited Capitol Hill, and took college courses next to some of the most gifted students in the country. (you can see a video about this program at: http://www.cristoreynetwork.org/college/university_partners.shtml) What these students felt on Fairfield and Georgetown's campuses was an extension of their own school – faculty and staff committed to their success. And they felt a common shared identity with each other as they became part of these institutions' "knowledge societies."

I was fortunate enough to have dinner with the students studying at Georgetown at the end of their first week. The enthusiasm and hope in their eyes impressed me, but even more than this was their connectivity to one another. They were networking amongst themselves – they had found a family of students like themselves from all across this country.

There are many more examples of Jesuit universities forming partnerships with the Cristo Rey Network; one of the most exciting examples is the growth in Cristo Rey student enrollment. Over 280 Cristo Rey Network alumni have enrolled at a Jesuit college over the last eight years. Over 80 percent of these students have enrolled since 2008.

Fifteen years after Fr. Schaeffer envisioned "re-creating" a Jesuit high school to serve the most vulnerable



Cristo Rey Network rising seniors at Georgetown University's Pre-College Program in summer 2010.

and marginalized in Chicago, we imagine what a Jesuit university could do if it re-created itself in the spirit of a "learned ministry," as Fr. General described last year in Mexico. He stated that "an important challenge to the learned ministry of our universities today comes from the fact that globalization has created 'knowledge societies,' in which development of persons, cultures and societies is tremendously dependent on access to knowledge in order to grow. Globalization has created new inequalities between those who enjoy the power given to them by knowledge, and those who are excluded from its benefits because they have no access to that knowledge. Thus, we need to ask: who benefits from the knowledge developed in our institutions, and who does not? Who



Cristo Rey Network rising seniors at Georgetown University's Pre-College Program in summer 2010.

needs the knowledge we can share, and how can we share it more effectively with those for whom that knowledge can truly make a difference, especially the poor and excluded?"

Time to re-create

In its first decade, Cristo Rey grew from an idea to a single school to a national network with alumni in hundreds of universities, including many of the finest in the nation. The growth strategy of this decade has been successful by virtually any measure — pace, professionalism, scale, quality, results, cost.

However, there are many more young people to serve, and one of the impediments to the growth of the Cristo Rey Network in the next decade will be identifying religious sponsors for our schools. The Jesuits are already involved in 11 of our 24 schools, the Christian Brothers three, and 30 other orders either sponsor or endorse a school. As we look to communities like Milwaukee, Seattle, Dayton and Philadelphia, a major hurdle we face is identifying a religious sponsor for each new community.

As we have focused on "re-creating" a Cristo Rey school from a governance perspective, two different Catholic universities have surfaced the idea of sponsoring a Cristo Rey Network school. The excitement and possibilities around this concept are palpable. We envision the value a business school might bring to a high

school work-study program, the engagement of a school of communication with a high school's marketing plan, and a school of education establishing a Cristo Rey school as a model quality program, offering access to college readiness to those with limited options. (This concept has been incorporated at Stanford University and the University of Chicago, both sponsoring high performing charter schools, and at the College of the Holy Cross, co-sponsor of a Nativity Miguel middle school.)

This suggestion responds to Fr. General's asking of some "specific questions of faculty and students: How have they become voices for the voiceless, sources of human rights for those denied such rights, resources for protection of the environment, persons of solidarity for the poor?" What better response than to extend the Cristo Rey movement to a Catholic university campus?

As America and the world struggle to counter the "inequality of knowledge distribution," we must re-create our institutions of knowledge. For too long, the disconnect between secondary and tertiary education has led to over 40 percent of college freshmen needing remedial courses. For too long, our doors have been closed to those with limited financial means. What remarkable impact would result if Jesuit universities were to reinstitute the high school, sharing the abundance of research and learning with the excluded — offering hope and opportunity to the marginalized by incorporating Cristo Rey high schools on their campuses? ■