

## BUSINESS

# Real-life work: Private high school seeks partners to feed work study program



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Seventeen-year-old Kaylee Razo of Melvindale has already worked for a bank, a law firm and studied at the University of Notre Dame — all before graduating high school.

That's thanks to Detroit Cristo Rey High School, a part of the Cristo Rey Network, a national network of 40 private Catholic high schools that imbed corporate work study in its curriculum.

At the high school, students attend rigorous college-prep classes four days of the week and go to a professional work setting once a week. The private school only accepts students who are financially challenged, although nothing about the school's opportunities — including studying away, offering AP and financial literacy classes, sports and STEM clubs — support the fact that its students come from low-income families.

"I think that something so beautiful about the Cristo Rey community is that you walk in and see all of these very steadfast, really determined students who have a clear path of what they want to do. They're like, 'I want to be a doctor, engineer, forensic scientist,'" Kaylee said.

"All things that you don't often see from low-income students of color, it's really rare to see people who feel so supported to dream so high — at least what's considered high in our community."

The Detroit private school's only obstacle is placing 55 out of its 275 high schoolers in corporate spots since some of its work study partnerships have cut or downsized contracts due to economic uncertainty, resulting in budget cuts. The school is actively seeking partnerships to place teens in work study through the spring.

"Programs like ours are the first to get cut when companies are unsure of the economy," said Pam Jackson, who oversees the work study program. She added that companies are uncertain about finances and expenses, especially after the presidential election.

Usually, 97% of companies retain a consistent number of students each year. But this year the school saw significant downsizing from such companies as Trinity Healthcare, which went to four students from 15. Ciena Healthcare went to 20 students from 32, and DTE Energy Co. went to 13 students from 40, for example.

"They've stayed with us, but they've reduced significantly because of budgets," Jackson said. "They said it's not the kids' performance. These are companies that have been with us for years."

DTE Foundation President Rodney Cole touted the energy company's "long relationship with Detroit Cristo Rey. We have supported various initiatives at Cristo Rey for more than 10 years. As with all foundation partners, support levels can vary based on numerous variables."

At one point, the school had nearly 100 partnerships, which started dwindling after the COVID-19 pandemic. With about 60 partnerships across Metro Detroit and angel investments or sponsorships from companies who cannot commit to a full contract, about 75% of Detroit Cristo Rey's students are currently placed in entry-level positions in finance, healthcare, law, technology, manufacturing and more.

"We need people to take interest in this program, hire the kids," Jackson said. "This is a great way to build the talent pipeline, we've got Gen Z here. This is who they're going to be hiring. This is who they're looking for."

The other 25% of students who are awaiting placement are getting enhanced business training, and some are doing sales outreach for the school, asking companies for donations and corporate work study partnerships.

Students who are placed like Kaylee are getting experience and building connections early. She worked at Ally Financial her sophomore year, and now she works for Brooks Kushman P.C., introducing her to intellectual property law in her senior year of high school.

"Since I was a kid, I knew that I wanted to study law, but it wasn't until Ally that I actually met a lawyer. I had never spoken to a lawyer in my life. I guess in my immigrant community, you really have those two options: ... If you're a man, you go into construction, and if you're a woman, you go into domestic work.

"It was extremely difficult for me to even think outside of those two career paths or to even believe that I think I could do it. I even hesitated when I would say, 'I want to be a lawyer,' because it felt so out of reach. It felt uncomfortable to say that," Kaylee said.

Roughly 85% of Detroit Cristo Rey's students are Hispanic and 15% are African American residing in the Detroit area. Their resumes include volunteering for nonprofits, internships, participating in financial literacy classes and more, in addition to work study. The high schoolers work at Metro Detroit hospitals, law offices, credit unions, banks and more.

Chris Lynch, president of Detroit Cristo Rey, said the students handle tasks that free up adult employees to do more high-value work while also giving the teens the ability to see themselves in a work environment that requires a college education. When the school lacks partnerships, it negatively impacts the funding the school receives from the companies as well as the experience the teens get at work study.

"The experience, confidence and networking that took place when these students went off to work was an invaluable component of their learning experience, and it really gave them a step ahead among other students," Lynch said.

The high school, which has been servicing students with more limited economic resources since 2008, calls itself an eight-year program rather than a four-year program following students through college and their careers. Companies, such as the Ideal Group and General Motors Co., that currently partner with Cristo Rey follow the students through college by offering summer internships and careers post-graduation, aiding in retaining Michigianians.

"It's a benefit for our job partners for not only the work that the students do right now but what they then become in terms of talent for those companies in the future," Lynch said.

Tania Barba is a senior at Cristo Rey and wants to work in Detroit long term. Her resume includes studying at MIT, president of the National Honors Society, advocating for immigrant families, co-captain of the robotics team and a gig outside of school.

Entering high school, Tania was thinking she'd become a nurse since it was suggested by her parents, but now she plans to study aerospace engineering after graduating high school.

"I started realizing all the opportunities of all the things I have available to me and it kind of inspired me to think for my own, so it shifted from nursing into engineering," said Tania, 17.

In her sophomore year, she worked for Ford Motor Co., and for the past two years, she's worked at GM's Milford Center, testing the performance of its old and new vehicles in various weather conditions.

"I have real-life work experience ... this is really useful for me," Tania said. "My freshman year I had no idea how corporate jobs work or testing grounds in general. 'How do I go to work? How do I present myself? What is an interview? What do I do?"

"Being in these job placements makes me feel more ready, so when I'm in college and I have another interview, internship, I know what to do, I'm better prepared, and I know how to present myself." Tania is the eldest of five, and one of her siblings attends Detroit Cristo Rey, too.

Alexander Montesinos of Detroit succeeds his two sisters at the high school who studied robotics and mechanical engineering programs at the University of Detroit Mercy.

Alexander, 17, is heavily involved in his school's robotics programs and the environmental justice club, which is constructing small outdoor cat shelters from storage bins. He has a landscaping gig outside of school, is on the wrestling team and belongs to the National Honors Society.

He's worked at GM for the last three years, learning the company's software and the intricacies of supply chain and electrical manufacturing.

"I feel like building that connection before even graduating high school is really helpful. It helps make me feel a bit better graduating knowing that I have this high chance of at least securing an internship at General Motors because securing an internship, in general, is really hard."

In the long term, he plans to "stay in Michigan to continue volunteering in my community while working. However, I am also open to new opportunities and am ready to follow wherever the job takes me. I am excited about the potential to make a difference in new communities and am committed to continuing my service wherever I go," Alexander said in an email.

Kaylee, who dreams of opening a pro-bono immigration law clinic and/or working with local nonprofits, says she's reached the stage in her life where she's thinking deeply about the future.

"Before my freshman year, I had attended eight different high schools. My family moved a lot. I think that the first time I went to Cristo Rey, I knew something was different because the environment was so welcoming.

"Even doing the Notre Dame program, I would have never been able to afford that. Cristo Rey helps finance any programs that you may be interested (in) to ensure that we can still get the same opportunity as students from more affluent backgrounds," Kaylee said. "I think all of these things combined really help students like myself and my peers thrive to their full potential and be the best versions of themselves."

She's thankful for the encouragement, mentorship and advice from other Hispanic lawyers, giving her "a world she'd never seen before," at Brooks Kushman. "It was that 1-on-1 advice, mentorship that I believe also closed the opportunity gap that many first-generation, low-income students of color face when their parents don't know much about careers, college."

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