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## Introduction to the Focus Section: The Cristo Rey Network of Schools

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## Introduction to the Focus Section: The Cristo Rey Network of Schools

Ursula S. Aldana, University of San Francisco

I became interested in the Cristo Rey Network of schools when I attended a former student's high school graduation. I met Jesse during my first year teaching. He was in my sixth grade class, would later serve as my teacher's assistant when he was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and to the present day we remain in contact. When I attended his graduation, I watched an entire class of young men of color and their families beam with pride as they received their diplomas, and noted the obvious presence of white and Asian adults sitting in the middle and back of the church. As I later would find out, these people were the staff that worked with these students through the corporate work study program. Beyond the academic gains that Jesse experienced at his school, he later shared with me how much he appreciated the staff from his work-study location. He told me they really took an interest in his life and looked out for him, which was demonstrated by their presence at his graduation. In Jesse's opinion, his high school Cristo Rey experience changed his life and the dramatic change I saw in him over his four years there confirmed this. In time, I became interested in researching the Cristo Rey model and specifically, its corporate work-study program aimed at low-income youth. I wondered what specific pedagogical and organizational innovations in the model might contribute to successful outcomes for low-income students from historically underserved communities. My dissertation (Aldana, 2012) was an opportunity for me to explore both the context of urban Catholic, secondary education and specifically, a Cristo Rey school.

The Cristo Rey Network of schools signals an innovation in the field of Catholic education, especially for urban Catholic schools. Similar to the Nativity Miguel schools, the Cristo Rey Network heeds Catholic social teachings and the Church's preferential option for the poor, but with an additional layer of complexity, the corporate work-study program. In a time when urban Catholic schools face a tenuous future, the Cristo Rey Network has been hailed as a model for sustainability.

### Background on the Cristo Rey Network

The first Cristo Rey School was founded in Chicago in 1996. The idea for the first Cristo Rey school came about when Father John Foley had returned from work in Peru and had wanted to continue his work in Pilsen, Chicago, a mostly immigrant and poor Latino community (Kearney, 2008). Families expressed to father Foley that one of the most important things their community needed was a college preparatory high school. As a result, in 1996 Father Foley established a college prep high school that immigrant families could afford by establishing a work partnership with local corporations to employ the students in exchange for tuition payments. Five years later, the Cristo Rey Network of schools was founded as Catholic school leaders met with school leaders from the Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago, in an effort to learn how to replicate the Chicago school model in other Catholic schools.

The Cristo Rey network of schools now totals 28 schools nation-wide. Schools associated with the Cristo Rey Network are mandated provide a college preparatory academic program to students with limited educational options. The Cristo Rey schools serve a student body that is 96% students of color. The average family income is \$34,000 (Cristo Rey Network, 2015a, n.p.). Member schools include newly developed schools as well as existing high schools that were incorporated into the network as a way to address extreme financial burdens that would have otherwise resulted in closing the schools. Cristo Rey Network schools are asked to adhere to 10 standards, which clearly articulate their mission to serve low income and historically underserved students and their families:

Cristo Rey schools adhere to a set of Mission Effectiveness Standards to protect the integrity of the model and articulate the shared mission. As a member of the Cristo Rey Network, a school:

1. Is explicitly Catholic in mission and enjoys Church approval.
2. Serves only economically disadvantaged students. The school is open to students of various faiths and cultures.
3. Is family centered and plays an active role in the local community.
4. Shall prepare all of its students to enter and graduate from college.
5. Requires participation by all students in the work-study program. All students must be 14 years by September 1st.
6. Integrates the learning present in its work program, classroom and extracurricular experiences for the fullest benefit of its student workers.

7. Has an effective administrative and board structure as well as complies with all applicable state and federal laws.
8. Is financially sound and at full enrollment the school is primarily dependent on revenue from the work-study program to meet operating expenses. In addition, the school maintains a comprehensive advancement program to ensure financial stability.
9. Supports its graduates' efforts to obtain a college degree.
10. Is an active participant in the collaboration, support, and development of the Cristo Rey Network. (Cristo Rey Network, 2015b, n. p.)

The Cristo Rey schools are made up of both single sex and co-ed high schools, which pride themselves on offering students a rigorous academic experience and opportunities to develop social skills via a work program designed to prepare them for postsecondary and career success. To date, 9000 students have attended a Cristo Rey school and given the network's expansion efforts, this number is expected to rise in coming years (Cristo Rey Network, 2015a).

### Fostering a Body of Research on Cristo Rey Schools

The research on the Cristo Rey Network is scant but emerging. In a recent study of two urban Catholic high schools, findings point to the prevalence of a college-going culture in a Cristo Rey school facilitated by a college-going discourse utilized by staff and students alike (Aldana, 2014). Much of the literature on the Cristo Rey Network has come in the form of opinion editorials, news, and journalistic writing (Kearney 2008; Sweas, 2014; Whitman, 2008). As an educational researcher and an ethnographer who is particularly interested in issues of equity, I am moved by the stories depicted in these works, but also cognizant that this literature cannot nor should not replace methodologically informed research grounded in educational theory. The importance of evaluation and reflection is critical to educational institutions, and can be particularly useful for Catholic schools.

To that end, the research articles in this focus section explore the successes and tensions leaders, students, and school staff experience within Cristo Rey Network schools. These multiple perspectives on Catholic education and the Cristo Rey Network are grounded in theology, philosophy, sociology, and education research and employ varying methodological approaches. Sajat Kabadi, a recent Ph.D. from the University of Colorado at Boulder, interrogates the balance (dialectic) between a Jesuit identity and the Cristo Rey

model using an Arrupian social justice framework. Dr. Kabadi's article, "The Jesuit Social Justice Dialectic within the Cristo Rey School Model" provides a thorough introduction to the Cristo Rey Network while engaging the reader in a philosophical examination of Catholic social teachings and their role in Catholic secondary schools.

The second article, "Does Jesus Want us to be Poor? Student Perspectives of the Religious Program at a Cristo Rey Network School," provides a glimpse inside a Cristo Rey school, primarily focused on its religious courses and programs. This ethnographic study demonstrates the need for culturally relevant pedagogy in religious classrooms, but more importantly reveals how the corporate work-study program experience complicates students' understandings of their social class standing within Catholic teachings.

In the third article, Thomas Crea, Andrew Reynolds, and Elizabeth Degan examine parent engagement at a Cristo Rey school and use survey data to determine the differences between immigrant and U.S.-born parents. Their article, "Parent Engagement at a Cristo Rey School: Building Home-School Partnerships in a Multicultural Immigrant Community" also highlights the potential for partnerships between Catholic universities and Catholic schools.

The last piece in this focus section focuses on the role of culturally responsive teaching during one school's transition to the Cristo Rey model. This article, "Transformation from Within: Grounded Practice of Teachers amidst Cultural Change," is written by Brandi O. Lucas and Jesse Jovel, educator-scholars who have worked to capture the voices and stories of practitioners "on the ground" in the school.

Drawing on the Church's tenets of Catholic social teaching—and particularly on the preferential option for the poor—the articles in this focus section highlight the complex and important ways in which Cristo Rey schools have maintained and changed the Catholic educational experience—especially for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. It is my hope that this Focus section on the Cristo Rey Network is only the beginning of research and practitioner-led inquiries focused on the CRN as well as other innovations in the field of Catholic education that push the dialogue around issues of Catholicity, social justice, segregation, racism/prejudice and inequity, as they relate to the experiences of marginalized students and families often left voiceless in Catholic schools.

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