

## Beyond the Network with Cisco IT: Classroom to Boardroom

*Cristo Rey is a lot like any other high school. Students ride the bus or walk to school, take history and math, and chat with friends in the hallways. The school offers something that most conventional high schools don't, however, a chance for its low-income, often academically-struggling students an opportunity to change the course of their life*

*Sabrina Ahmed explores, as we Go Beyond the Network with Cisco IT.*

**Sabrina Ahmed:** The teachers announce roll call. The staff meet for their morning protocol to review the plan for their students. The students arrive at the school. Depending on the day, they go to the classroom or go to a boardroom.

Something that may not feel as familiar to a conventional high school? Students attend their work internship once a week. That's right, Cristo Rey offers a comprehensive work-study program for all their students. This high school model is not new. The first school in its network was built in 1993 in Southside Chicago and has since grown to 35 locations nationwide. The San Jose location opened its doors 5 years ago in 2013. Cisco IT is a proud partner. The program has fostered meaningful relationships among students and IT employees. Kaela Quinto was part of Cristo Rey's San Jose, California school's first-ever graduating class, in 2018, and spent part of her work-study with Cisco IT.

**Kaela Quinto:** It's just crazy to see kind of the difference it has made in me and the lives of my classmates. I have friends that I went to middle school with that didn't finish high school. I have friends that had teen pregnancies and got involved with dangerous things and so it's just it's weird to see like how my life could've have went a different way. And, so I just I'm really grateful for this opportunity because I felt like it did save like a lot of people from following into that same path that a lot of people in our community go into. And, so I'm not saying that the community that I'm from doesn't kind of create great people because there are great people. But, I feel like with extra support those people can go so far. And, like I'm kind of just I feel like Cristo Rey is just an uprising of like seeing the potential that these people from these low-class community have that a lot of people don't see. And just it's really, I feel like a lot of people are beginning to see what it could be doesn't have to be, another sad story. It doesn't have to be that our community doesn't need to see that. We are kind of just an uprising and just potential. Over 90% of my classmates are first-generation college students. All of my classmates are going to college and that's like three times more than the average in our neighborhood and so, to see from a 30% rate to a 100% rate it's just it's crazy and it's not just me, but my classmates are thankful for the opportunity.

Sarah Chesson, the assistant director of the Cristo Rey high school, delves deeper into what makes the high-school unique.

**Sarah Chesson:** We are a private high school which means our students come from all over the place. The majority of our students come to us from South San Jose and east side San Jose, but we do have students who come as far as East Palo Alto, all the way up peninsula and Hayward.

So, 93% of our current enrollment identifies as Latino or Latina and the remaining 7% are made up of African-American, Asian-American, Caucasian and multiracial students. You have to identify as low income, so we target families that probably can't necessarily afford to send their students to other private school options and then we're really looking for students that have a strong interest in what we have to offer. I tell incoming 8th graders that you're trading a traditional high school experience, like football teams or going to football games on a Saturdays for going to work! How exciting! (Laughter) We're really looking for students that want something different. The corporate work-study program is a big draw for our students We are a College Prep High School. Students have to be ready for a pretty rigorous college prep curriculum with but all kinds of AP classes that many most of our students will participate in and so we're taking students that not only may have come from challenging backgrounds and different kinds of ways of academically-behind to get ready to college in 4 years and go to work. We really ask a ton from our students but the gains they make and the grounds that they're able to cover academically is really amazing.

**Sabrina Ahmed:** The high school has ambitious goals and high expectations for their students. Sarah has worked at the high school for 3 years and is constantly impressed by the way the students tackle every challenge head-on

---

and never fail to do so, with a great sense a humor. She is most proud of their accomplishments and how they are changing the fabric of their communities.

**Sarah Chesson:** 98% of our class of 2018 will be the first in their families to go to college. So, that really drives the work and inspiration and commitment that our corporate partners, faculty and staff to our students. Knowing that we are launching students, a part of partnering with their families launching them into a future that will be different than what maybe their family members have had access to before. So, when we look at the class of 2018, 99% of our class graduated from Cristo Rey San Jose. 98% were confirmed to have enrolled in college. 100% were accepted to college. 98% are confirmed to have been enrolled.

**Sabrina Ahmed:** Cristo Rey in San Jose has currently 455 students. A private Catholic high school that provides a rigorous college prep curriculum and substantial professional work experience isn't free. Sarah digs deeper on how this program continues to be national leader in economically disadvantaged, first generation youth.

**Sarah Chesson:** Yeah, that's that is a really tricky thing, right? We run this private high school where we are serving families and students from underserved communities. Who is carrying that price tag? You know, who's paying tuition? So, essentially corporate partners like Cisco and Cristo Rey San Jose works with over a hundred partners now those corporate Partners all pay a program fee. That program fee is essentially that student worker's quote-unquote salary their earnings agreed to contribute their students' earnings back to cover their tuition so every year Cristo Rey San Jose the tuition it would take to educate one student here for the year is around \$16,000. So, those corporate partners fees offset the full tuition costs by about 50%.

**Sabrina Ahmed:** So, these are 14-year-old students...getting ready to set foot at their first job at a corporation in Silicon Valley. Where do they start? Sarah ensures the high school starts their experiences the summer before, classes officially begin.

**Sarah Chesson:** Typically, all of our 9th graders and transfer students attend a summer bridge program, so we are working with them on their professional skills, soft skills, and technical skills throughout the month of July. So, we are working with them on how to create a good communications style. Working with corporate partners like Cisco who are as invested in the futures of the student workers. They work with our teachers or counselor's other academic leadership. So it's incredible, we are doing a really weird thing, a really unique thing where we send all of these teens to work for 1 day/week all four years of high school.

**Sabrina Ahmed:** Cisco was one of the high school's first partners when Cristo Rey opened their doors in 2013 in San Jose, California. There is a symbiotic relationship between the high school and corporate partners. The program is a gateway to creating a well-qualified, diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century pipeline. The relationship positions companies to show how they are leading in diversity in STEM efforts. The program builds meaningful relationships across the employee community. Bringing teams across the business together for a greater purpose and working with students who brighten their day and teach them how to work with the up and coming working generation. Employees also have leadership positions such as intern supervisor, program manager and mentors. IT Director Katty Coulson started the internship for Cisco IT as the IT supervisor and built a team to continue developing a work curriculum both enriching and engaging for students and Cisco.

**Katty Coulson:** You receive a lot when you give and when the program started it was very different because in my experience you have an intern, the intern comes during the summer months and then off he or she goes back to school. This program is completely different when the internship begins when the classes begin, and it goes through, from September to June. So, it really takes an adjustment. And the reality is that they are so young. They are high school age. So, when they come this is going to make an impression. So, it's up to us to ensure that the experience is good, because they're going to be life-changing going to be remembered forever so it's really bad or going to be really good. I wanted to be really good. It's something that you can't do on your own, so you start bringing people in...

**Sabrina Ahmed:** Katty Coulson and Joe Rodriguez worked together leading the effort as program managers from Cisco IT and Supply Chain respectively. They coordinate with the high school and act as supervisors to the students. When the students first arrive at the office, they are welcomed by their supervisors. Each student receives a laptop, a badge and orientation walking them through everything from using Cisco technology to their major project they are to work on, alongside, guidance of all the Cisco employees that have the great opportunity to work with the students. Joe served for 4 years, and now is an advisor and huge advocate.

**Joe Rodriguez:** I remember when I first heard of the program and when it kind of fell in my lap and I became involved, we really only started with maybe one or two students and at the time they're only maybe one or two supervisors literally doing the whole program end to end and onboarding the student, bring them to the orientation providing them a curriculum of work that will work for they themselves here at Cisco and then for the professional development and personal development as well.

---

Last year, we peaked at 12 students, fully enrolled. So, we had all of freshmen, sophomores juniors, and seniors that was also the first year that the school's fully enrolled. This year, we increased our headcount now we have 14 students that across supply chain and in various different functions. We have students in supply chain, IT. Then we also have students that working within various organizations in those functions.

**Sabrina Ahmed:** Katty Joe and a dozen others worked to create a valuable work internship experience that starts in September, when classes begin, and ends in June when school ends. The students who come to Cisco will stay all 4 years, determined by a mutual student-corporate-school matching process. Kaela worked on a wide-range of projects, starting in the supply-chain organization to IT. Her first project was understanding Cisco's supply chain product life-cycle management which she recalls helped her understand organizational chart and networking because she had to talk to many people to create a PowerPoint presentation on it. Kaela comments on her internship experience with one her work supervisors, Rimsha Khalid.

**Kaela Quinto:** So that was really interesting for me because it was something that I hadn't done before and at the end of the year for my journey presentation just looking at the growth and how that change like from where I started and then where I ended it was really it was a lot. And so, I'm kind of just seeing how that how much how far I can go is really I don't know, it taught me a lot about myself.

**Sabrina Ahmed:** The students work towards a final deliverable, "Journey Presentation". Katty describes the importance,

**Katty Coulson:** Everything they work on during their school year in our fiscal year at the end they have to give a presentation to a group of executives and these executives are the high-level executives that sponsor the program, so they have to tell the people that make this possible, that put the money down, so they can put the money down for this to take place here at Cisco, what they have been up to. Not only do the projects and initiatives you know every week and every month they also have to know how to present, who's their audience what's the value of what they did why didn't they you know, what they commit to this activity is what they learn and why was it good for Cisco. So, at the end of the day is going for so many months there has to be a benefit for both the students and the corporation and if we have found a way to have them involved and driving project that give us value like making videos for us, driving programs, hosting people, making presentations, understanding how our technology work, and improving processes.

**Sabrina Ahmed:** From a student's perspective, the stakes are high as their performance at their internships affects the student's final grade, but rewarding as alum, Kaela explains.

**Kaela Quinto:** Preparation honestly starts first week back, because you want to be able to set up a project tracker, the way to figure out what I did by the end of the school year, so laying out your project tracker to keep track of all of that. For me the journey presentation is helpful because you get to see kind of your growth throughout the year and you get to see your accomplishments you got to see where you faced obstacles you get to see kind of where you can improve for the following year. So, just overall like an interesting thing to go through in the process it's hard because a lot of the other students have other things that they I need to get done and so just finding time throughout that day to kind of work on it. We present to the corporate work-study supervisor so like the people from our school the teachers from our school that run the corporate work-study program, we presented in front of each other supervisors because like Joe is saying like there's more than one supervisor and different orgs. We present in front of co-workers that have supported us throughout the way and parents. Parents come in to see the project being done and so it's just like I said it's just a really enriching experience for anyone. It's a lot different standing up in a classroom full of people that you know to standing up in a room full of like executives and your supervisors and your peers. It's a lot of pressure but its kind of just sets like it's at like for me a lot of confidence in myself.

**Sabrina Ahmed:** Excel sheets, email etiquette, hosting and public speaking opportunities, networking skills, firm handshakes, final presentations to Cisco executives and peers... all is meaningful on multiple fronts. Joe reflects,

**Joe Rodriguez:** I would say at the end of the day, what we're really looking for our students, I'd say it's three-fold. It's personal development, it's professional development and then the third one I would say the human element of really just growing in that time of their lives. That time of lives when they're in high school that time of their lives being exposed to new things different environments different people and that third thing I think it's the biggest one because it's really the human element of what I like to call and it's a chance to impact the students' lives for the better. And then on top of that the personal development, the professional development really comes full circle in building a well-rounded individual. So, I have no doubt that not only the supervisors and everybody was involved in the program and also the partner network and then the school will share the same sentiment, that is really it's about it's about growth. It's about the next generation of the workforce, next generation of people.

---

**Sabrina Ahmed:** The work-study model's ultimate goal is to provide the students with access to higher education. Their corporate work experience allows the students, who come from underserved communities, to have a level-playing field. It allows them to be competitive in applying for colleges and universities.

**Kaela Quinto:** I think that the corporate work study program did have a large impact on a lot of my me and my classmates. Our college applications stand out because we stand out in a different way. We have corporate experience and it's also paved a lot of the ways for my classmates too. At Cisco and just like I don't know my application process it was interesting because I had so much to talk about because of all the opportunities given to me, I felt like it wasn't hard for me to find things to talk about, it was hard putting all of those experiences into words.

**Sabrina Ahmed:** Kaela is part of the first graduating class at Cristo Rey in San Jose. She is now attending Santa Clara University, majoring in business, which she notes was entirely influenced by her internship. She had a positive experience that piqued her curiosity to learn more about business. All parties involved are benefiting from the network's model. Katty continues.

**Katty Coulson:** You see the investment is going and, you know, the truth is that we need more talent. We need more talent in STEM. We need more diverse talent. Many of these kids just because of their circumstances they would probably not go to these great universities, are getting acceptance letters from. They probably would not even be thinking of going to college because you know that's not just not the reality. When you get into better for a pipeline we have to get more talent and we have to get more diverse talent and I think this is an excellent source. Many groups of people that have financial difficulties don't even get to finish high school, let alone college. We go there if we go early and give them a good experience. It's a virtuous cycle that you can more people with better chances of going to college then they know that people in Corporate America actually are good human beings who want to help them out. At the most basic foundational level it just makes work or coming to work a much nicer place it just brings goodness out of people and the community.

*You've gone Beyond the Network, with Cisco IT. This episode was written and produced by Sabrina Ahmed. Special thanks to Angie Rodriguez and Arthur Woo for recording assistance. For more information on Cristo Rey high school in San Jose, visit [www.cristoreysanjose.org](http://www.cristoreysanjose.org). Follow and like our podcast on SoundCloud or iTunes. Visit [cisco.com/go/ciscoit](http://cisco.com/go/ciscoit) for episode transcripts and related content.*



---

**Americas Headquarters**  
Cisco Systems, Inc.  
San Jose, CA

**Asia Pacific Headquarters**  
Cisco Systems (USA) Pte. Ltd.  
Singapore

**Europe Headquarters**  
Cisco Systems International BV Amsterdam,  
The Netherlands

Cisco has more than 200 offices worldwide. Addresses, phone numbers, and fax numbers are listed on the Cisco Website at [www.cisco.com/go/offices](http://www.cisco.com/go/offices).

Cisco and the Cisco logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of Cisco and/or its affiliates in the U.S. and other countries. To view a list of Cisco trademarks, go to this URL: [www.cisco.com/go/trademarks](http://www.cisco.com/go/trademarks). Third party trademarks mentioned are the property of their respective owners. The use of the word partner does not imply a partnership relationship between Cisco and any other company. (1110R)