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Firm takes on high school students to help them broaden their horizons

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Ungaretti & Harris LLP employs four high school students from a low-income neighborhood on the West Side in order to be a good “corporate citizen,” broaden their horizons, “and help them advance,” the law firm’s managing partner said.

The four students represent the expansion of the Corporate Work Study Program — originally started by Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in primarily Hispanic Pilsen — to a new school on the far West Side.

The Ungaretti students come from Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School in the Austin neighborhood, which opened in 2008 and is predominantly black.

Ungaretti is one of 29 Chicago law firms, plus the American Bar Association, that employ “corporate interns” from those two high schools.

In all, 710 students from those two schools work in the Chicago area at 111 companies, banks, institutions and law firms through the Corporate Work Study Program operated by those two schools, said Preston Kendall, vice president for corporate internships for the high schools.

This year’s 710 students in the program is an increase from 528 students, who worked at 106 offices locally in 2007. Of the 710 students, 180 are from Christ the King and 530 from Cristo Rey.

At Ungaretti, students “fill a real need,” too, in the records center and “are working out very well,” said managing partner Thomas M. Fahey.

“We were in a bona fide need for some help in that area. We were thinking about a hire in an entry-level position,” he said.

The four students from Christ the King split up the workweek so that all together they work five days and fill the single, full-time-equivalent position.

“They’ve been with us for a year now, and we just recommitted to the program for a second year,” Fahey said.

Hiring the students is part of Ungaretti’s “long-term effort to help increase the number of diverse students who enter law school in hopes of creating a more diverse legal community,” according to a firm news release.

The workers don’t miss school.

“Student-workers are put into job-sharing

teams, and their academic schedules are modified so that four students job-share a full-time entry-level job without missing class,” Kendall said.

Peter Beale-DelVecchio, director of development for Cristo Rey High School, said: “We have a longer school day and a longer school year than most. That’s how we get in the accredited hours.”

The official name of Christ the King School is Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School. Christ the King and Cristo Rey are part of the Cristo Rey Network of schools across the country.

Before they become corporate interns, the students go through a training program on “how to look people in the eye, shake people’s hands, how to dress, put on a tie,” and they learn some skills in the classroom, Beale-DelVecchio said.

“The kids are coming from an area that doesn’t have a lot of economic resources,” Kendall said. “It can become very isolated” in either Pilsen or in Austin. We have students come to us who have never seen Lake Michigan, never been downtown, never been in one of those big glass buildings.”

He said role models who have gone to college or who hold professional jobs may be very few.

“Through this program ... we’re saying to them, ‘This is an option for you. ... The way to get that is to stay in school and go on to college.’”

Emmanuel, a 16-year-old student from Christ the King, works at Hoogendoorn and Talbot LLP. (The school does not allow use of students’ surnames.)

“I thought it was going to be easy — nothing but faxing and copying. ... They motivate me into doing more,” Emmanuel said.

He said he also does typing and printing of attorneys’ invoices, filing and sometimes takes papers to the courthouse.

The jobs pay three-fourths of each student worker’s tuition. The students can also earn extra.

Emmanuel said his goal is to be “an entrepreneur in the media business. I want to start my own company and build up from there.”

One Chicago law firm, Katten, Muchin, Rosenman LLP, employs 36 students from these two schools, the most of any company in the program.