

HIGHER EDUCATION

Students take on real-world jobs to help with tuition

Participants say work-study program mutually beneficial

By JUDY STRINGER
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When Colin Scully agreed to hire a team of inner-city high school students to help staff his company's call centers, he was understandably skeptical.

At the very least, the CEO of Cleveland-based Life Line Screening thought, the company is doing a good thing by giving teens of low-income families a chance for a high-quality, private education at St. Martin de Porres High School. To his surprise, those students are doing good things for the company as well. "This is not a charity program," Mr. Scully said. "These kids are legitimately working. They are fulfilling a business need."

Life Line Screening is one of 75 Northeast Ohio companies taking part in a work-study program at St. Martin that places high school students from some of Cleveland's poorest neighborhoods into "real-world" corporate settings. The Cleveland school is graduating its first class of seniors this year.

Students are given entry-level jobs at law offices, hospitals, banks and numerous other businesses. The money earned pays the bulk of their school tuition.

But, this is not your typical work-study program or even internship, according to Thomas Bennett, executive vice president at the school. For one thing, St. Martin students spend one full day working at a company every week for nine months, not just a few hours a week or a few months in the summer.

And they are working jobs that actually exist in the corporate world, said St. Martin president Richard Clark. A team of four St. Martin students is assigned to fill an existing full-time job at a sponsoring company — each student working one day a week. "The kids love their jobs. That's what really keeps them here at school," Mr. Clark said. "It's opening up a whole new world to them. They see people in these professional roles, and they think, 'I could do that.'"

Perks for the company

The reality of offering students a glimpse of the corporate world means St. Martin doubles as a school and something akin to a temp agency.

Companies contract with St. Martin's work-study program for entry-level positions in their offices and pay the school directly. And, much like a temp agency, students are employees of the program, not the company sponsors, so St. Martin handles all payroll and personnel issues as well.

Companies that participate in St. Martin's program are its biggest cheerleaders. Most join for the satisfaction of giving back to the community, Mr. Clark said. Along the way, however, it's the students who win them over. The enthusiasm and dedication of these young workers, who are given routine office work that their adult counterparts often find mundane and unsatisfying, is refreshing, they said.

"These kids get a lot done," said Mike Krnac, office support manager at Squire, Sanders & Dempsey LLP. The Cleveland law firm was one of the founding St. Martin sponsors and has hosted student employees for four years. "And unlike regular temps that are not too engaged in what they are doing, the students are willing to take on tasks enthusiastically and learn new things."



Colin Scully, CEO of Cleveland-based Life Line Screening, says high school students Javier Woodhall (from left), Jada Hobson and Janessa Ortiz are a valuable addition at the firm's call center.

JANINE BENTIVEGNA

Another big benefit for sponsoring companies, said The Cleveland Foundation's Maggie McGrath, is the ability to make a difference in a young person's life. Ms. McGrath, who is chief of staff for the foundation, aided one St. Martin senior — who has been working at the foundation for four years — in her college search, even visiting college campuses.

"There are not a lot of opportunities in today's workplace to be a mentor, but this is one experience that lends itself to a mentoring relationship," she said. "We really see these students grow and build relationships with them."

Chicago roots

Located in the former St. Vitus School on Cleveland's near East Side, St. Martin opened in 2004 as part of a nationwide network of

Cristo Rey schools created to replicate the success of the initial Chicago school, founded in 1996.

Currently there are 4,234 students enrolled in the network's 19 schools, which include campuses in Cambridge, Mass.; Denver; Indianapolis; Kansas City; Los Angeles; Minneapolis; Newark, N.J.; and New York City. Three more schools are scheduled to open this year.

Nationwide, 92% of Cristo Rey students are racial minorities and the average family income of this year's ninth-grade class is \$33,766.

Mr. Clark said 96% of the students in the Cristo Rey network class of 2007 enrolled in college last fall. And for St. Martin's first class of seniors, the numbers also appear positive.

"So far, 44 of the 50 seniors have been admitted to college," Mr. Clark said. "By the end of the year, I believe they all will be."

St. Martin also is attracting attention from other schools.

Trinity High School, a Catholic high school in Garfield Heights, is developing an internship program that places junior and senior students in corporate settings based on their desired career paths.

Thomas Maher, executive principal at Trinity, said the school counseled with St. Martin on how to build and manage relationships with organizations that could host the students.

Similarly, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District announced plans earlier this year to launch the MC²STEM High School in August 2008.

The initiative will be a "dramatic departure from a typical high school as it will be embedded within a corporate host campus and offer students year-round learning that mirrors the working world schedule and provides for placements in internships and fellowships," according to a news release regarding the plans.

R.D. Nordgren, an associate professor at Cleveland State University who studies urban schools, said he wouldn't be surprised to see more copycats.

"Often, kids in urban areas don't have professional business people that they can model themselves after," he said. "What this program does best is giving students adult mentors and role models."



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