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Students' stairway to college

Jesuit school pushes teens to set sights higher

By David Montero, Rocky Mountain News
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Before Erlinda Ramirez started high school four years ago, she figured she might pursue a career in fashion.

The idea of a diploma was nice, but not a necessity. As for attending to college, forget it.

But now, just three months from graduating from Arrupe Jesuit High School, the 17-year-old is trying to pick between the University of Denver and Fordham University in New York - as well as awaiting possible scholarships offers.

And fashion? Try business and finance instead - courtesy of a three-year gig at Wells Fargo sorting through financial portfolios and cross-checking multimillion-dollar corporate accounts.

"At first it was pretty intimidating," Ramirez said. "But I asked a lot of questions and they took time to explain it to me until I understood it."

The senior will leave her job at Wells Fargo and graduate from Arrupe Jesuit in June with what Principal Michael O'Hagan describes as "a diploma and a resume."

It's part of the high school's work-study program that each of its 258 students must go through to graduate. And since opening its doors to primarily low-income families in 2003, the school's first senior class - including Ramirez - is set to graduate.

Not only that, but all 47 graduates are preparing to go to college.

"That's our distinct hope," O'Hagan said. "You never know what last-minute stuff will happen, but that's what we're on track for right now."

The school is one of only a handful nationwide that has a work-study program that requires students to spend one day a week at a job. Because the students lose out on that day of classroom instruction, the school has a longer day and a year to make up for it.

Working with 68 corporate partners in the metro area, the school places students in a variety of career fields ranging from finance, law and medicine. The students usually start their freshman year as clerks and, if they get promoted during the school year, they can stay on the following year. Otherwise, they can try another field.

O'Hagan said in a few cases, students have been fired. If that happens, they have to go through retraining at the school and apply for other jobs.

"We find that's not an experience they want to have happen again," O'Hagan said. "Also, it's a lot easier to be fired at 16 than to be in your 20s and relying on that paycheck."

The students don't work for free. The hours they rack up at their jobs help pay their tuition.

At a cost of \$7,500 a year, Arrupe Jesuit would be unaffordable for many of the families who send their children there. But once work-study credits are factored in, families actually end up paying about \$1,000.

The Rev. Stephen Planning, president of the school, said a sense of ownership gives students an important stake in their education and future.

It also gives them an appreciation for the hard work their parents do daily, he said.

"I've heard some of the students come back after working, complaining about how their feet hurt," Planning said. "I tell them that now they know how their parents feel and why mom might want them to help out with dinner."

The goal of the school, according to Planning, is to get students to think of college as viable. To do that, the school aggressively recruits universities to visit the campus and has students fill out applications.

That's another requirement: Every student must apply to college.

Some are so successful in applying they find they're almost frozen by the choices that open up for them.

Michelle Spreutels, 17, is choosing between eight colleges. She wants to become a doctor and was impressed with Creighton University. But she hasn't committed yet.



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Arrupe Jesuit High School senior Erlinda Ramirez, 18, walks to class last week. She is three months from graduating.

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Her situation is one that O'Hagan wants other students to recognize - that colleges should be shopping for them instead of the other way around.

"These kids are smart and have a lot to offer," O'Hagan said. "We're trying to help them get there."

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