

ONE OF NOTRE DAME HIGH SCHOOL'S TALENTED GRADUATES FEATURED ON FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY'S WEBSITE

Former Cristo Rey Network student fuels his passion for science at Fairfield University



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Driven by curiosity and the desire to be the best, Braulio Rodriguez of Lawrence, Mass., has always excelled in math and science. His friends and teachers from high school encouraged him to dedicate his life to science in hopes of making a difference in other people's lives.

And like most high school students looking to attend college, Rodriguez began to explore his options. After meeting with his guidance counselor, he was encouraged to apply to several Jesuit universities on the East Coast.

Rodriguez said it was during a campus visit to Fairfield University in Connecticut that he immediately fell in love with the school. "I sat in on a couple of classes and was interested in their engineering program," he said. So, it seemed only natural for Rodriguez to apply to Fairfield.

What makes his story unique is that Rodriguez is part of a special pool of students who are overcoming adversity and receiving the opportunity to go to college through the Cristo Rey Network. Founded in 2001, the organization is comprised of 24 high schools from across the country who partner with post secondary institutions to provide a quality, Catholic, college preparatory education to urban young people who live in communities with limited options. "I come from a Latino neighborhood outside of Boston. Going to school was not considered a cool thing to do by some of my friends. I wish people in my neighborhood viewed education as a valuable thing," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez, 21, grew up in a single-parent household, and said his Dominican born mother has been the role model in his life. "She is a hard working, multi-faceted person. It's her work ethic that inspires me to be successful in school," Rodriguez said.

Since 2008, Fairfield University has been enrolling an increasing number of Cristo Rey Network students from the Northeast and West Coast regions of the country, and school officials said they are proud to support the group. "Such a collaboration is at the heart of our Jesuit mission of the university, which is to provide a quality education to those who deserve it despite challenging circumstances," a university official said.

Given the demographic profile of the typical Cristo Rey Network high school, students would not be able to attend a private, Catholic university in the East without significant financial support. This year alone, Fairfield has provided close to \$800,000 in university

grant aid to Cristo Rey students, and Rodriguez said it was the academic program and financial aid support from the university, and their affiliation with the Network that made his decision to attend Fairfield an easy one. "My high school counselor encouraged me to apply to Jesuit schools because they provide a great education and offer substantial financial aid support to Cristo Rey students," he said.

Rodriguez had a pretty good idea of what to expect when he came to Fairfield - but still he found himself unprepared for the academic rigor that would lie ahead. To encourage their success, the university offers Cristo Rey Network students a place in their summer academic immersion program. Prior to the start of his freshmen year, Rodriguez was able to live on campus for six weeks, become more acclimated to college life, and learn some of the academic ins and outs of becoming a successful college student. Looking back, Rodriguez said attending the summer program eased his anxiety associated with going away to school, and helped him develop an academic plan to succeed at the college level.

It was clear right away to university officials that Rodriguez was a hardworking young man. Meredith Marquez, who runs the academic immersion program at the university, said even then, he was an academically gifted student. "Braulio clearly loves learning and loves a challenge, and I believe that's why he originally chose engineering. However, as time went by, he realized that his true calling was biology. He wasn't afraid to change his major late in college because he is so confident in his passion for his future career," she said. Rodriguez said his love for science played a pivotal role in deciding to switch his major to biology and become a physician. "I want to help people, and maybe by becoming a doctor I might discover a new type of medicine that would cure a major disease," he said. Marquez, who is also his mentor said, "I believe that Braulio will one day be an alumnus that Fairfield University is extraordinarily proud of because I already am very proud of him."

Rodriguez, now a junior at Fairfield plans on completing his bachelor's degree in biology, and has a clear vision for what he'd like to do in the future, and the ambition to do it. "It's a pretty firm decision. I am applying to medical schools with combined programs where you earn a medical degree and a Ph.D. I hope to become a physician scientist," he said.

This whole experience has been an eye opener for Rodriguez, and he credits Fairfield University faculty and the Office of Student Diversity Programs for opening doors for him. "I have been able to complete two internships at Sikorsky Aircraft, and the staff in the student diversity office has played a huge role in my success through their help and unconditional support," Rodriguez said.

Media Contact: Mark Gregorio, (203) 254-4000, ext. 2647, mgregorio1@fairfield.edu

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