There is gridlock in Brooklyn on a Friday morning in December as a charter bus inches toward the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel. On board are 15 Catholic University students and Associate Professor of Business and Economics Reza Saidi. Many of the students are just waking up. They’ve been on the road for five hours, since 4:30 a.m., when the bus pulled away from the front steps of McMahon Hall. As the New York Harbor comes into view, a student spots the Statue of Liberty. And then others catch sight of their destination. Beyond Lady Liberty in the distance is lower Manhattan, home to the city’s financial district. Another student points out One World Trade Center, oftencalled Freedom Tower, part of the new World Trade Center complex. Although still under construction, the skyscraper is already making its mark on the skyline. The students are now wide awake. Excitement is building. Vincent Prattico, a junior from Saratoga Springs, N.Y., says that once on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE), his goal is to meet Margaret Brennan, anchor of “InBusiness with Margaret Brennan” on Bloomberg Television. His classmates are not surprised. Many of them are well aware that he watches the show, usually broadcast live from the NYSE, nearly every morning in his residence hall room. Prattico came to the University in 2009 as an “exploratory” freshman. But he says when he heard CUA alumnus Michael Pascale Jr. (B.A. 1978) speak to a group of students about careers in finance, he decided to look into a major in business and economics. Pascale has 30 years of experience in the financial industry and is a senior vice president for investments at Wells Fargo Advisors. He visited campus in fall 2009 to speak to students as part of CUA on Wall Street, an alumni networking group sponsored by the School of Arts and Sciences. The group of some 250 alumni who work in finance provides career planning and networking opportunities for interested students and alumni. After hearing Pascale, Prattico says he began watching Bloomberg Television every day, especially Brennan’s program. “Every time I didn’t know a term, I made a note of it. Credit default swaps? I’d look it up and write down the answer,” says Prattico. By the time he declared his finance major sophomore year and started taking courses in the Department of Business and Economics, Prattico says he had a “pretty good foundation.” Now on the other side of the tunnel, the bus pulls onto Wall Street with not a minute to spare. The Catholic University group is meeting L.R. Poos, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, in front of the iconic Federal Hall at 10 a.m. The group is on a list of pre-approved visitors for the day as guests of Meridian Equity Partners, an independent brokerage firm founded by CUA alumni Jonathan Corpina (B.A. 1994) and Columb Lytle (B.A. 1994), who are its senior managing partners. Getting through security is tedious, as each member of the group has a photo taken and an ID pass made. Once cleared, the students are led through several non-descript hallways and then, like entering Oz, they step onto the floor of the exchange. Most of the students stop in their tracks as they take it all in — noise, people, television cameras, electronic screens with numbers and graphs showing the Dow, the S&P 500, gold, oil. A large American flag spans a wall high above the activity on the floor and above that is an ornate ceiling. On another wall stands the podium where the bell that opens and closes the day’s trading sits. “I don’t know where to look first,” says junior Michael Mandarino, a finance major from Stamford, Conn. “I’m speechless,” says junior Gabrieli Baretta, an international finance major from Brazil. Prattico’s mouth is open as he looks in every direction. Finally, he simply says, “Awesome.” Lytle greets the group and walks them over to the Meridian booth. As Corpina welcomes them, Prattico recognizes him immediately. He is regularly interviewed from the floor by national and cable television organizations. The students form a tight circle around Corpina, not wanting to miss a word amid the buzz that hovers in the huge open room. Corpina is trading stocks using the touch screen of a small handheld computer as he talks to them. Up to 800 at a time, he tells them, “I’m having a conversation with my customer in real time.”
He points to screens around the room. “We’ve got the Dow in the upper left. The S&P in the upper right. There’s the NASDAQ. Over there you can see that oil is trading at $100 a barrel. Gold is up $13. All of these numbers, sounds, lights, colors: it looks like information overload. But we are conditioned to look up and find what we need right away.

“Every day here is different. That’s what I love about it. The market has fallen 30 points in the last 30 minutes. Anything and everything going on in the world affects the markets. The new unemployment numbers are released, a CEO dies, a drug company doesn’t get a patent, a bridge fails. You always have to be ready to change your strategy.”

As Corpina and Lytle lead the group on a tour, the students almost all at once imagine Brennan wrapping up her news show for the day, her microphone at her side as she exchanges a laugh with the camera. This is Prattico’s chance. Corpina senses his anticipation and says, “Come on. I’ll introduce you.”

Prattico’s classmates tap back to let him have his moment. He tells them how much he enjoys the show and the two pose for his classmates’ cell phone cameras. “You made my day,” he tells her. Lytle and Corpina enjoy being part of the CUA on Wall Street network. “We’ve lucky we have such a great resource to share with the group,” says Lytle. “It’s our duty as alumni to help open doors for these guys.”

“And,” he adds with a laugh. “It’s hard to say ‘no’ to Dean Poos.”

CUA on Wall Street is a pet project for Poos. He knows the major financial institutions have “target” schools, such as Dartmouth or Harvard or Yale, from which they actively recruit to fill the highly competitive paid summer internships. Poos wants his students to have a shot at these opportunities. He’s making that happen through the Wall Street network.

Poos works collaboratively with CUA’s offices of career services, alumni relations, and institutional advancement, and the Department of Business and Economics to keep the network active and thriving. Besides assisting students with their job searches, Poos says CUA on Wall Street “helps our alumni who are in business connect and build networks.”

In addition to the New York City trip, other events are hosted through CUA on Wall Street as well. In the fall semester, the network sponsors a career evening on campus open to all interested students, regardless of major. In fall 2011, more than 75 came to hear a panel of alumni who have achieved success in finance. The presentations were followed by breakout sessions with each of the presenters.

Pascale was on the panel that night, as was Patrick Hennigan (A.B. 1967). Poos says the two alumni are “long-standing, generous supporters of the network who show students a model for being successful in business based on faith and sound morals.”

In 1998, Hennigan met with Father David M. O’Connell, University president at the time, to propose an affinity group of alumni working in finance. He and Father O’Connell then hosted a dinner in New York City with 19 alumni from most of the major Wall Street firms and that marked the start of the network. A few years ago Hennigan offered a $50,000 donation to the program with a challenge to the University to match that figure through fundraising efforts. The alumni in the network came through — matching his donation last summer — and the program now stands ready to expand its reach. Hennigan says that in addition to funding more opportunities such as the New York City trip, the goal is to provide an endowed scholarship.

Now retired, Hennigan was a vice president at J.P. Morgan Securities and a managing director at Morgan Stanley, where he co-headed the investment banking group serving colleges, universities, museums, and foundations. “I was fortunate to make a comfortable living and philanthropy was an important part of that,” he says. “Many Wall Street firms encourage philanthropic and community service with matching funds. It is important for students to see a model of that. And likewise, it is important for Catholic University graduates to have an entree into the financial world. We need more students like them who enter the field with a moral compass.”

Courtney Campbell (B.A. 2000) is the director of synthetic products and securities lending sales at Bank of America/Merrill Lynch. She has been an active member of the network for several years. “I loved my time at CUA and I was grateful to have an education rooted in Christian values. It helped form who I am. I couldn’t imagine not giving back to the University.”

Campbell is one of the afternoon hosts of the New York City field trip. She is animated as she welcomes the students to the new Bank of America Tower on the corner of 42nd Street and 6th Avenue, which is “the greenest building in America,” she tells them as she begins the tour. “That’s the American portfolio sales desk over here and that’s the international securities trading desk.”

In a conference room, Campbell tells the students about the requirements for the Bank of America paid summer internship. She offers tips for applying and getting noticed. A little later she takes the group up to the 52nd floor for a view that includes the Freedom Tower, the Statue of Liberty, the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, and Jersey City.

Alesia and two of her colleagues provide an overview of Mizuho’s new summer internship program, which was launched last year. The bank is planning to expand the program. By the time the students leave Mizuho Bank, they have put in a 13-hour day. But they catch their second wind as they head to the Harvard Club for a reception to meet about 30 New York-area alumni who work in finance and who, through CUA on Wall Street, have expressed a desire to network with students.

On their way down to 44th Street, Barreta, the international finance major from Brazil, is talking about the afternoon meetings. “You could really feel the cultural differences between Bank of America and Mizuho. It was very interesting. There was a more reserved feeling at the Japanese bank,” she says.

“I loved meeting Courtney,” says Ashley Dyan, a junior economics major from East Haven, Conn. “It was great being at the exchange, but it seemed like all the traders were men. It was nice to hear from women in finance.”

Later, Poos welcomes the alumni who have come out on a Friday night to meet his students. He encourages them to get out their business cards and he tells the students, “It is time to practice your networking skills.”

It is easy to pick out the two basketball players in the room, Nadaniel Lorence, a sophomore business management major from Philadelphia, plays center for the Cardinals. He is talking basketball with Jeffrey Baccahs (B.S.B.A 2005) who also played for the Cardinals during his college days.

Lorence applied to come on the trip at the urging of senior Darrell Carroll, one of his teammates. Carroll, an international economics and finance major from South Amboy, N.J., came on the trip two years ago when he was a sophomore. That led to an unpaid summer internship with Meridian Equity Partners, which helped him land a paid internship with J.P. Morgan Chase and Company the following summer. Now Carroll has a job waiting for him at J.P. Morgan when he graduates. Poos already has him signed up for the next network.

Baccahs is vice president of Hedge Fund Administration at BNP Paribas in Philadelphia. He gives his card to Lorence and tells him to get in touch about the possibility of a summer internship.

Pratisco has collected a few business cards of his own. He plans to follow up as soon as he gets back to campus. But for now he is basking in the excitement of finding out that Brennan has renewed the photo of them at the NYSE that he had sent out on Twitter earlier in the day. All in all, a memorable trip for Pratisco and his classmates. CUA