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## No tassel without hassle

By Jack Flagler  
Staff Writer



Students at South Portland High School stayed after class to catch up on schoolwork on their way to graduation in the first year of the school's Hassle to Tassel program. From left: Seniors Gerardo Anaya, Jessica Claudio, Nick Fagone, Carlos Baez and Luis Calderon gather around the mannequin dressed in a cap and gown, donated by Men's Warehouse in South Portland. (Jack Flagler photo)

SOUTH PORTLAND – The final bell rings at South Portland High School every weekday at 1:50 p.m. Students scatter to their cars or buses lined up in front of the school, on their way to practices, afterschool activities, part-time jobs or home.

But this year, a small group of teenagers made the decision to stay inside the building each day after the final bell. Each week, anywhere from a handful to a dozen students, mostly seniors, went from their final class to the high school library after the last bell for the Hassle to Tassel program, offered for the first time this year. There, they worked for an extra hour and a half to catch up on their assignments and talk over questions with teachers.

“A lot of kids leave school with good intentions of doing homework and then something else comes up,” said David Brenner, South Portland’s school completion coordinator and the co-director of the program, along with Assistant Principal Kimberlee Bennett.

In the high school library on Thursday afternoon, May 23, 16 days before graduation and 10 days from the start of exams, five seniors spread throughout the library worked at their laptops with headphones on and books or Kindles out on the

tables in front of them.

Each of the students said the environment in the library was better than home, and even better than study halls during the day. Gerardo Anaya, who moved to Maine at 14 from Mexico, said the availability of teachers after school has been important for him. He can walk to any of his teachers' rooms when he has a question specific to a subject, or to English Language Learning teacher Allison Brown's classroom when a question about language comes up.

Senior Carlos Baez said the program has also lent him some willpower to avoid distractions.

"It's another hour and a half in school, but say you go home. If your friends call you don't want to sound dumb and say 'I'm going to stay and do homework,'" Baez said.

Senior Luis Calderon came to the library in between an accepted students day at Southern Maine Community College and his scheduled shift at the recently opened Five Guys burger restaurant near the Maine Mall, where he'll work from 4 p.m. to close. It adds up to a long day, but Calderon said the structured time in between school and work has been good for him.

"Otherwise, I'd probably just sit around playing video games," Calderon said.

The reason each student started attending the Hassle to Tassel program varies. Calderon and Baez were falling behind on their work already when medical issues complicated their graduation plans further.

Jessica Claudio said she "panicked" when she came into her senior year a full credit short. She was able to overload her schedule, and decided to start coming to the Hassle to Tassel sessions after school in the fall because of the extra work. Nick Fagone started in the spring, when he realized that his focus on his full-time job at Portland Pie Company in Scarborough had caused him to fall behind on schoolwork. He took a few days off from work, stayed after school and caught up to get back on track to graduate.

Some of the Hassle to Tassel students said there were times during the school year when doubt crept in about whether they would graduate this year.

"There was definitely a point where I thought there was no way this is happening," Calderon said.

But Brenner said each of the students that participated in the program showed dedication and self-motivation to achieve their goal despite the adversity they faced.

"We encouraged, nudged and reminded them, but we couldn't make them come. These kids showed a lot of maturity," Brenner said.

Next year, Brenner hopes to involve more community organizations in the program. This year, the Rotary Club of South Portland and Cape Elizabeth donated money for meals from Amato's, and Men's Warehouse in South Portland donated a dummy dressed in a cap and gown that stood in the center of the library. But next year, Brenner thinks the program can do more.

"This is a community issue, not a school issue," he said.

All five of the students in Friday's program plan to attend classes at SMCC. Calderon, Baez and Claudio all plan to pursue a degree in criminal justice. Fagone will take classes in the college's culinary arts program, and Anaya is considering the automotive technician field after taking a year off to work.

Although Anaya was failing chemistry when he started coming to the library after school, he said he's back on track. Now, the end of the year and thought of graduation isn't causing Anaya any concern.

"I'm so excited; I'm not really nervous I'm just excited," Anaya said.

South Portland High School's graduation ceremony will be held Sunday, June 9 at 2 p.m.

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