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De La Salle seniors: a class of many firsts

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David Sosinski will break new ground next fall, when he will be the first person in his family to go to college. He will enroll in Oregon State University in Corvallis.

Nathanael Stewart will go to Mt. Hood Community College in drama and broadcasting.

Datriona Spears is headed for Bennett College in Greensboro, N.C.

All three are members of the first graduating class of De La Salle North Catholic High School in North Portland.

The four-year-old school, serving mostly low-income and minority students, has posted a remarkable record: 54 of its 55 seniors are going on to higher education.

"Our expectation here is that every student will continue his or her education after high school," says Jason Ashley, De La Salle's college counselor. "And for about 60 percent of these kids, they'll be the first in their family to go."

The college-prep school blends rigorous academics, personal attention and high expectations. The students get an early taste of college: As freshmen, they spend a week on the University of Portland or Marylhurst campus for internship training. Later, they talk with visiting college recruiters, and many tour colleges with parents or youth groups such as Bridge Builders.

Spears, 17, thought she would go to college, but worried how to pay for it. Bennett, a historically black college for women, offered her a \$10,000 annual scholarship. She has a renewable \$1,500 local scholarship from the Black United Fund and is hunting for more.

The Class of 2005 is going to college as far away as St. John's in New York and as close as the University of Portland less than two miles away. Many if not all will have to work in college -- but they're used to that. They earn 40 percent of their tuition working one day a week at companies and agencies that are De La Salle partners. Spears works at Xerox. She's also worked at a credit union, a financial company and an architectural firm.

Sosinski, 18, says the paid internships have given him ideas about his options. He has learned something about accounting, the heating and cooling industry and the law at various companies.

Stewart, also 18, is going to Mt. Hood partly to save money and partly because he is not sure what he wants as a college major.

Matt Powell, De La Salle North president, says about 60 percent of seniors will go to four-year colleges, 40 percent to community colleges. Collectively, he says, they have more than \$300,000 in scholarships for the first year of college.

De La Salle North is a member of the Cristo Rey network of 11 Catholic high schools in low-income urban areas, all dedicated to putting students with limited opportunities on the path to college. The schools have had a strong record, says Ashley, but not all the students finish college.

"We are going to keep track of our students," Ashley says. "My job isn't over when they are accepted to college. It's over when they graduate."

Got a story idea about schools? 503-221-8521; stevenecarter@news.oregonian.com

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