

## Jackson County Mental Health's Supported Education Program: Overcoming obstacles - Creating success



Meet Chris, a student of Southern Oregon University (SOU), about to cross the line from student to degree holder. However, after his graduation ceremony he was informed that due to changes in the university catalog of courses, he would not be graduating. Upon hearing this news, Chris did not want to discuss continuing his education and did not pursue finishing his degree.

Fast forward five years as Chris begins to think about completing his education. Chris met with Jackson County Mental Health's Supported Education specialist, Vanessa Taylor. Vanessa suggested they talk with SOU administrators, but Chris was reluctant to return to SOU. With Vanessa's support, Chris was able to meet with the SOU Director of Student Support & Intervention and an SOU Academic Advisor.

But the news was not good. Upon initial review of Chris' transcripts, it was determined that due to catalog changes, he would need an additional 44 credits to graduate! Not to be denied this time, Chris applied for a catalog extension appeal, which was granted. This was a significant change, as now he only needed *one* upper division credit in order to finish his degree! Chris was elated but was told he would need to take this course immediately during the summer term. Chris registered for a one credit course and was ready to finish his degree.

Again, more challenges stood in his way. On what he thought was his first day of class, Chris arrived only to be told that he had missed the first day of the two day course. This left Chris with an automatic failing grade, putting an end to his degree dreams again. Chris reached out to Vanessa and together they worked to contact professors who would allow Chris to start their class late. Finally, a philosophy professor allowed Chris to enroll. Chris worked diligently, ultimately earning a B+ in the course. With this, Chris was able to graduate with his Bachelors of Science in Geography. Not only does he finally have his hard earned degree, he now has a sense of completion he never experienced before.

Chris is now working with Jackson County Mental Health's Supported Employment program with his new degree and he hopes to help others achieve their goals by becoming a peer support specialist.

"Anything is possible, you just have to try."  
-Chris Austin



*Pictured: Vanessa Taylor with Chris Austin, and his college diploma*

### **What is the Supported Education program?**

As many of us know, the process of navigating the higher education system can be a daunting and sometimes overwhelming experience. Many of the individuals Jackson County Mental Health (JCMH) serves have struggled to navigate these systems and face unique obstacles and challenges to completing their education. The vision of the Supported Education (SEd) Program at Jackson County Mental Health is to create the conditions through which an individual can access and deepen their own recovery. We help to support and guide the individuals we serve in pursuing and reaching their educational goals.

Supported Education Services officially opened at JCMH in August 2014 to support current clients who were pursuing higher education at Rogue Community College and Southern Oregon University. Jackson County Mental Health follows two models, University of Kansas Supported Education Model and SAMHSA. Both models provide a framework to guide our interventions and services. The JCMH Supported Education Program was initially funded through a block grant provided by Oregon Health Authority, but we were recently approved to encounter supported education services under Medicaid, making this program sustainable beyond the duration of the grant.

As of January 2016, the program has provided supported education services to 59 JCMH clients. Vanessa Taylor, our Supported Education Specialist, is currently working with 26 clients who are either actively pursuing a higher education program at RCC or SOU or in the process of enrolling in classes.

Chris' success story above was shared at the annual Oregon Supported Employment/Education Center for Excellence (OSECE) Conference in September 2015. We appreciate and applaud his courage in sharing his story.