Distributed by UW News Service December 16, 2024

Link to original story: <https://www.uwec.edu/stories/blugold-grows-high-school-dropout-college-graduate>

Blugold grows from high school dropout to college graduate

**Story by UW-Eau Claire**

Jeremiah Coey admittedly was a challenging student who dropped out of high school after being told by teachers and family that college was not a viable option for him.

“Everyone knew I was smart and told me I had all this potential, but all I was doing was wasting it,” Coey recalls. “I actually loved the learning part of school; I hated the structural and authority part of school. They said I wasn’t responsible enough to go to college.”

On Dec. 21, Coey will prove his doubters wrong when he is among the first graduates of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire’s new professional studies major that started this fall.

The major promotes bachelor’s degree completion for students who have either earned an associate degree or have significant college credits.

“I’m the first in my family to go to college,” says Coey, now of Eau Claire. “Now I will be the first in my family to graduate college, first generation to have a degree. I have proven to everyone else — but most importantly to myself — that college was an option, and I did this. I am a college graduate, and I can do anything that I put my mind to in my career.”

Coey’s bachelor’s degree is an example of the value of the professional studies major that was developed with support from UW-Eau Claire’s $9.4 million Workforce Innovation Grant from the state of Wisconsin, says Nichole Miller, academic advising manager in Advising, Retention and Career Services at UW-Eau Claire.

“I feel like everything just lined up the way it was supposed to for Jeremiah despite all of the obstacles and barriers,” Miller says. “For him, to be able to culminate this incredibly long journey into something meaningful and legitimate, I think it is a breath of fresh air for him.”

Coey recalls how he struggled in high school with high absenteeism and poor grades, and eventually was diagnosed with ADHD and bipolar disorder. After he dropped out of school, he worked odd jobs for about eight years before his family convinced him to return to school to earn his GED at Chippewa Valley Technical College.

While studying for his GED, CVTC staff encouraged him to pursue a college degree.

“When they asked me if I had considered going to college, I scoffed,” Coey recalls. “I said, ‘I’m a high school dropout getting my GED.’  They said none of that matters. I gave every excuse I could think of why college wouldn’t work for me, and they shot down every excuse.”

Coey enrolled at UW-Eau Claire in 2020, studying social work before switching his major to liberal studies. In spring 2024, Coey thought he may have to drop out of college as his financial aid was running out and he still was a year away from a degree.

Miller worked with Coey to switch to the professional studies major, where he could use his liberal studies program courses to meet many of the new major’s requirements, saving time and money.

“I like the interdisciplinary aspects of the program and how you’re able to mesh so many different things together to get what you actually need,” Coey says of the professional studies major. “You can take all of the components that you need and combine them into what you need for your profession, the career that you plan on going into.”

Miller is pleased she was able to help Coey achieve his goal through the new professional studies option.

“I just admire his perseverance throughout his entire journey,” Miller says. “I wish him all the best as he completes this chapter and starts the next.”

Coey was a Latin American and Latinx studies major and worked in the department at UW-Eau Claire; he also was part of an immersion trip to El Salvador. After graduation, he plans to move to El Salvador and marry his fiancé, who is from the Central American country. Coey will enroll in Spanish classes to improve his speaking skills and be a volunteer English teacher until he obtains a work permit. After that, he wants to do community development work in El Salvador.

**New major proves popular**

Coey is hardly the only person who has discovered the professional studies major can be an avenue to complete a college degree.

The major was approved by the UW System Board of Regents in February, focusing on increasing the number of Wisconsin residents with bachelor’s degrees and providing educational opportunities to residents in the region and state.

UW-Eau Claire had anticipated eight students would be in the major this first year and 12 would graduate in the first five years. The popularity of the major has far exceeded expectations as more than 50 students already are in the program, with nine students scheduled to graduate in December and another 10 in May 2025.

“These are stories of people who have just been trying to finish their degree,” Miller says. “Some students are relieved, some are emotional. To just be able to work with people and to help them reach this goal, it’s been a really humbling experience for me.”