

## Living & Learning: Path to success doesn't have to run through college

By Ayana Stewart

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Fernando Mustiga

Gil Cohen had a 1.6 grade point average in high school.

"I just wasn't doing well," he said.

Soon, he found something that clicked: software writing. He dropped out of high school at 16 and focused on writing software for an Internet start-up in New York.

In 2002, he helped start a technology company that grew into a multimillion dollar firm and was

eventually acquired by Earthlink. Currently, he's helping found a new technology company.

Looking back, he said, there are some things he missed out on, but he's content with the route he took.

"School's not for everyone," said Cohen, who grew up in North Miami Beach. "If you feel that going down this conventional path isn't for you, it's OK."

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, a growing number of students are taking non-traditional paths after high school. About 66 percent of high schoolers opt for further education, but out of the students who don't go to college, 75 percent entered the labor force right away.

Miami-Dade College enrollment management director Rene Garcia says he's seen an increase in the number of students opting for two-year degrees. In 2013, he said, about 45 percent of Miami-Dade high schoolers enrolled at Miami-Dade College, with many choosing two-year degree programs.

"Nationwide, a very large chunk of students come straight out of high school and go to community college," he said. "You can still get some pretty good courses, and it's not going to cost you an arm and a leg."

The college offers bachelor and associate degrees along with college credit certificates in business, aviation, criminal justice, nursing, public service and more. Many for-profit schools also offer two-year degrees, though at higher costs.

When Fernando Mustiga graduated from Felix Varela Senior High School in The Hammocks area of Miami in 2004, he looked for a stable field that didn't require an advanced degree.

A law career seemed interesting, he said, so he decided to try paralegal studies. After graduating from a two-year program and finding a paralegal job, he realized it wasn't for him.

"I hated the 9-to-5 life," Mustiga said. After a year in the military, he stumbled upon job openings at the Turkey Point nuclear plant near Homestead. He earned two security licenses and became a security officer.

Six years later, he's working his dream job as an armed officer and making more than \$70,000 a year.

MDC's Garcia thinks non-traditional career paths are becoming more common. Students are often swayed by the idea of not having to pay room and board fees, and some high schoolers don't feel ready for the independence that comes with moving away from home for college.

Another factor that influences students: not having to worry about selective admissions. Students applying to many two-year programs often aren't rejected because of GPA and standardized test score thresholds.

"I think that is a very big deal," he said.

As for Mustiga, he says he "wouldn't change anything."

"I'm very happy," he said. "I knew school wasn't for me."