

Education Special Section: Local programs give working class a 'fighting chance'

By [Keith Larsen](#) – Reporter, South Florida Business Journal
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[Brian Enriquez](#) said he never expected to be working on cars that he read about in car magazines as a kid.

In fact, Enriquez says he didn't think much about his career when he was growing up in a working-class neighborhood off of Bird Road and 89th Street in southwest Miami. He knew he liked cars and always enjoyed fixing them, but thought of it as more as a hobby, rather than his life's work.

Then, a few months after graduating high school, he heard about the Braman Motors Miami Automotive Training Center, a relatively new workforce training program Braman Motors had started with [Miami Dade College](#).

Enriquez says, at first, it seemed too good to be true: Tuition was free, it offered specialized training, paid work and a good chance of getting a job at Braman Motors after college.

"Not that many people besides Mr. Braman would say 'I'll give you knowledge and make you a professional,'" Enriquez said. "I love what I do. I never thought, when I was 16 or 17, that I would be working at a BMW brand."

Six years later, Enriquez, who has no student debt, is a level 2 technician at Braman Motors, where he said he can basically service any type of mechanical issue on BMWs. The job has provided him with a stable career, and a comfortable salary that has allowed him to buy a house at age 24.

Workforce programs such as those offered by Braman Motors are becoming more common in South Florida, according to community college leaders. Colleges and technical schools are partnering with companies to help provide a labor force that meets the industry's needs.

"What we've learned is that once students understand their options, it's about 50/50 whether they will choose this route," said [Shermone Mitchell](#), director of workforce training for [Broward College](#). "A lot of people don't realize that a lot of these careers, computer networks and even airlines require associate degrees."

Mitchell said interest in these programs is twofold: Companies are beginning to realize that they can fulfill their job requirements with employees who have associate degrees,

rather than four-year degrees, and students are starting to recognize the return on their investment in workforce programs.

Nationwide, there also appears to be more interest in these types of programs, as the number of short vocational credentials (less than 18 months) awarded by community colleges increased 109 percent between 2000 and 2012, according to a report by the Brookings Institute.

The authors of the report discuss how these workforce training programs are helping fulfill America's labor shortages in certain industries. They cite a study that shows these programs generally have a high return on investment, especially in Florida, in technical certificates such as IT.

This type of education and industry partnerships could help remedy South Florida's "brain drain" – where people who are educated in the area pursue careers in other cities, leaving companies to look elsewhere to fill job openings.

And while workforce training has historically been associated with plumbing and electrical fields, colleges say they are expanding their offerings in IT, security, insurance and technology.

Highlighting this point, Miami Dade College has developed an animation and gaming educational facility known as the Miami Animation & Gaming International Complex (MAGIC).

Through this program, the college has partnered with such companies as [Univision Communications](#) and Discovery Communications to offer real-world training with media and gaming businesses.

"Those kinds of businesses are coming to us and telling us exactly what we need and, in a lot of cases, it's kind of a preferred status when there is a job opening," said Julie Alexander, Miami Dade College's vice provost of academic affairs.

Univision announced a partnership with MAGIC earlier this year, creating a fellowship and internship programs for students. After the program, Univision hires an MDC graduate to work as a fellow at Univision headquarters in Miami for six months, with a potential six-month extension.

"For us, it's a win-win," Univision Agency Senior VP Joni Fernandez said. "We are looking to identify future minds that we can bring in, and it's always good to hear new ideas."

But, challenges in workforce training still won't solve all of South Florida's talent woes. Companies such as Amazon would require software engineers or other high-skilled jobs that need students with bachelor's degrees or master's degrees, a void that workforce training can't fill.

One thing these programs will provide, however, is an opportunity for people like Brian Enriquez to get a high-paying job with no or limited student debt in a region where there is high income inequality.

Enriquez, who immigrated to Miami from Cuba when he was 10, said if it weren't for the Braman program, he would probably be "flipping burgers or working in construction."

"I owe a lot to Mr. Braman. I didn't come from a lot of money," Enriquez said. "The program gives the low [income] class a fighting chance."