**South Texas College**

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## ‘Never too late’ to learn: Veteran Miguel Mireles succeeding by degrees at STC

Miguel Mireles traveled the world for 20 years with the Navy, then worked overseas for 10 more as a civilian contractor. From Afghanistan to Italy to South America, Mireles provided crucial financial tech assistance to keep payroll running smoothly. He also won the prestigious Joint Service Achievement Medal while he was stationed in Portugal.

But when an injury struck and he was forced to return home after 30 years spanning the globe, Mireles lost his sense of direction.

“I ended up feeling lost,” he recalls.

He tried to become a truck driver, but after eight weeks, he realized it was not for him. When his brother recommended that he go back to college, Mireles wasn’t sure. After all, he had dropped out of high school at 16, becoming a migrant worker to support his family before he joined the service. Beyond that, Mireles was now in his 50s, so returning to school would be a daunting task.

Mireles explored many colleges in the area, but when he found STC, he felt comfortable right away. He knew it was the perfect place to find the support and the fresh start he needed.

“I didn’t want to be just a number,” says Mireles, who cites STC’s smaller class sizes and more personal experience as critical to his choice. “At STC, you’re not just someone who’s taking a seat—you’re a human being. That’s what I really like about STC. They actually care about who you are.”

Mireles enrolled in STC and found a home right away. Returning to school was tough, but with support, Mireles was able to turn it around. When he earned a D- in one of his first classes—one of the lowest grades he had ever received—he didn’t get upset. Instead, he saw his own potential. This moment inspired him to strive for even higher grades throughout his academic career.

“It was hard to come back to school,” says Mireles. “But if it hadn’t been for my psychology teacher who opened my eyes, it would have been a lot harder.”

STC professor Blake Armstrong recommended that Mireles go to the VA to get tested for a learning disability. When it was confirmed, Mireles was finally able to find the support and understanding he needed to earn not one, not two, but *three* Associate degrees!

“If someone else learned something in 10 steps, I was going to have to take 100,” Mireles says about his struggles. “Knowing this has helped me a lot, because if I know I have to study harder, I do not let myself down.”

What matters most to Mireles is not giving up. And ever since that fateful D- that showed him his potential, he’s been a high-achieving student.

"That D- in psychology is what opened every door for me,” says Mireles. “I consider that my best grade.”

For Mireles, what made the difference was teachers like Armstrong, Adolfo Lozano, Cybersecurity Program Chair Francisco Salinas, and many others.

“When you have great teachers and people want to learn, it creates a great equation,” he says.

As a cybersecurity student, Mireles felt welcome from day one. It was Salinas, he says, who encouraged him to join the very first cohort of the program at STC—one of just four in Texas bearing the National Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense Two-Year (CAE2Y) designation.

Though Mireles was already working on his Computer Specialist degree, he decided to double down with an additional degree in Cybersecurity. Then, when he realized he only needed one class to complete the Networking degree, he signed on for that as well.

“Miguel is an outstanding student,” says Salinas. “His dedication reflects in the three degrees he has earned over the years.”

Mireles is grateful not only to his teachers but also to the Veteran Support Center, where many of the staff are veterans themselves. From making sure he had his classes to filling out documentation, the Center was always there to help guide his next step.

According to Mireles, the staff go out of their way to help veteran students. He is also grateful for the “Fox Hole,” a veterans-only lounge in which students like Mireles can socialize, do homework, and enjoy snacks and coffee.

Many times, when veterans first come to school, they may not know where to start. But at the Veteran Support Center, staff go the extra mile to help students and make sure they get their educational benefits paid from the VA.

“College can be overwhelming for vets,” says Claire Forrester, Coordinator of Veteran Recruitment & Engagement. “We try to step in and provide support for them.”

South Texas College serves almost 900 veterans and dependents, and bears an official Military Friendly™ designation, for demonstrated service to veteran students.

“You’re not going to come to campus and be lost,” says Forrester. “We’re here to help.”

Mireles can attest to that. Next semester, he plans to return to STC to earn his Bachelor’s degree.

Thanks to his service and the education he gained at South Texas College, Mireles is now able to pay it forward by working at Endeavors, a nonprofit organization that assists with a variety of services to veterans including housing, supportive employment, and mental health.

As a financial assistance associate at the company, one of Mireles’s tasks is to enter information from case managers and outreach personnel on homeless veteran populations and enter it into databases. This allows Endeavor to communicate with other agencies, coordinate help, and provide critical support to veterans.

“It’s a good job, and I don’t do it just to make money,” says Mireles. “At the end of the day, I feel grateful.”

Once he earns his Bachelor’s, he has big plans to become a teacher and to run a finance department.

“Having these degrees will open up many, many doors,” says Mireles. “These degrees aren’t offered in many places, and that’s why STC is ahead of the game.”

“Miguel’s comments reflect the efforts that STC undertakes to serve all students,” said Dr. Alejo Salinas, Jr., Trustee. “Because of extreme hardships experienced by veterans, STC strives to provide guided pathways from initial enrollment to post-graduation. Instructors and support personnel are always ready to help the students.”

Dr. Salinas elaborates, “STC is recognized for its efforts to serve all students in a caring and nurturing environment. They provide one-on-one help to ensure success on the learning journey. Access for equality for all students is guided by “*experience exceptional*.”

Mireles has come a long way from the day he dropped out of high school, and overcome many hardships in life. From joining the Navy in 1985, to completing his Associate degrees in 2018 with plans to return and get a Bachelor’s, he is living proof that lifelong learning can be for everyone.

“It’s never too late to accomplish this. I’m 54, and to finish with all these degrees is an accomplishment. It was not easy, but I did it.”

## Hashtags

#VeteransDay #Veteran #Veterans #Service #Navy #usnavy #veteransupport #veteransusa #thankyou #technologymanagement #STEM #Cybersecurity #informationtechnology #Tech #computerscience #encryption #networking #networksecurity #itsecurity #Infosec #privacy #itsupport

## Bureau of Labor Statistics

*[Statistics and information taken verbatim from the BLS]*

**Computer Support Specialists**

* 2018 Median Pay: $53,470 per year
* Job Outlook, 2018-28: 10% (Faster than average)
* More support services will be needed as organizations upgrade their computer equipment and software.
* Texas is #2 in the nation for states with the highest employment level in this occupation.

**Database Administrators**

* 2018 Median Pay: $90,070 per year
* Job Outlook, 2018-28: 9% (Faster than average)
* Growth in this occupation will be driven by the increased data needs of companies across the economy.
* Texas is #1 in the nation for states with the highest employment level in this occupation.

**Information Security Analysts**

* 2018 Median Pay: $98,350 per year
* Job Outlook, 2018-28: 32% (Much faster than average)
* Demand for information security analysts is expected to be very high, as these analysts will be needed to create innovative solutions to prevent hackers from stealing critical information or causing problems for computer networks.
* Texas is #2 in the nation for states with the highest employment level in this occupation.

**Network and Computer Systems Administrators**

* 2018 Median Pay: $82,050 per year
* Job Outlook, 2018-28: 5% (As fast as average)
* Demand for information technology (IT) workers is high and should continue to grow as firms invest in newer, faster technology and mobile networks.
* Texas is #2 in the nation for states with the highest employment level in this occupation.