FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

VALUABLE ADDITION

In high school, Irma Becerra-Fernandez, a native of Cuba growing up in Puerto Rico, showed a facility for math. She was tested, and a guidance counselor gave her the result: She would do well in mechanical engineering in college. Problem was, neither she nor the counselor had a grasp of what a mechanical engineer did. “I don’t think so,” she told the counselor. Becerra-Fernandez laughs about it now, but it’s partly the reason that she went off to the University of Miami as a math and computer science major. Only “sort of by chance, really” did she take up engineering — electrical engineering.

She went on to get the first engineering doctorate at Florida International University in 1994. She stayed on after graduation, teaching in the business school. In 1997, with NASA backing, she founded a knowledge management lab where students make $7 to $12 an hour doing work for NASA and others in data mining, knowledge capturing and knowledge application systems. An example: A searchable database of Florida college and university grants and contracts that researchers have received — so that NASA (and anyone else now) can search by keyword, funding organization or researcher to find an expert (www.sage.fiu.edu).

In founding the lab, Becerra-Fernandez, 43, says she wanted to build something “that has permanence” and give students the inspiration to pursue a graduate degree, especially at FIU, where the majority of students are minorities.

Becerra-Fernandez has brought in $1.6 million in grants and contracts as principal researcher. She got tenure this year. “I love what I’m doing. I really enjoy working with students, being around fresh ideas.”

IRMA BECERRA-FERNANDEZ
Associate professor, director, Knowledge Management Lab / FIU MIAMI

EDUCATION: Doctorate, electrical engineering, FIU, 1994; master’s (1986) and bachelor’s (1982), electrical engineering, University of Miami.

FAMILY: Husband, Vince Fernandez; son, Anthony, 15; daughter, Nicole, 13.


TRAVEL SPOT: “I’m in love with Hawaii.”