Irma Becerra-Fernandez has forgotten her keys to the Knowledge Management (KM) Laboratory at Florida International University. She taps a foot on the linoleum and looks down the hallway where two university housekeepers shuffle toward her. They recognize her, she speaks to them in Spanish, and they open the door to the lab, a 20-by-25-foot room crammed with tables, chairs and whirring servers.

The lab is empty this day, a holiday, but it's easy to imagine it on a regular day - students hunched at the monitors, tapping out code for ExpertSeeker, an expert repository for NASA–Kennedy Space Center, or beta-testing enterprise software for Stratasys. Seventeen undergraduate and graduate students work in the lab, implementing the projects Becerra-Fernandez spearheads and secures funding for.

"I don't undertake a project unless there's something innovative about it," she said, noting that she rejects straightforward database work in favor of problem-solving systems that require innovative data-mining techniques and artificial intelligence. "My vision is to build the lab into a professional research center like CalTech's Jet Propulsion Lab, where it's able to offer full-time opportunities to students who want to continue doing research as a career path."

The typical KM Lab student works a nine-month stint before moving on to do programming or consulting for companies such as IBM, Lucent Technologies, Goldman-Sachs, Motorola and Peat Marwick.

Becerra-Fernandez's own career - she's part professor, part researcher, part manager, part textbook author - began at Florida Power & Light, where she wrote programs to monitor the reliability of the power system. In the '80s, when FP&L went through a reorganization, Becerra-Fernandez volunteered to teach quality control courses to employees as part of the company's effort to become more customer-centric. She loved teaching so much that she decided to return to school for a doctorate in electrical engineering.

"My daughter was six months old at the time," she said. She also had a young son. She recalls the timing of this and laughs - as if to say, "What was I thinking?" But, you know, I would like to meet somebody who has a plan for their life. My life has been a lot of redirecting.

It's easy to mistake Becerra-Fernandez for a student, except that her clothes are nicer. It might be why - when she walked past a room where some of her students were huddled around a computer - one woman greeted her with, "Hola, Princess."

Becerra-Fernandez waved at the student and laughed. When asked about the nickname, she shrugged and offered a modest smile. It's clear her students adore her.

Her biggest challenge is having the energy to do everything her job requires. And learning to delegate - something that helps her both on the job and at home.

"This is a silly example, but [our family] just moved into a new house, and we have a new dishwasher," she said. "My husband was trying to load the dishes the other night, and he said, 'I can't do this.' And he's looking at me, and I'm like, 'Guess what? Neither can I.'"

"I've learned to accept that it's not going to come out like [I] would have done it, but it doesn't matter."