I began my journey last spring as a non-traditional graduate student at Florida Institute of Technology. What I mean by “non-traditional” is that the gray hairs significantly outnumber the brown ones without the help of Clairol. After retiring from nearly 30 years in business, I found both the time and energy to extend beyond my comfort zone and joined the Industrial/Organizational Psychology Graduate Program.

I was continually asked why I would take on such a venture. My comment was, “You don’t know what you are missing!”

At my age, there certainly have been a few additional challenges. I showed up to my first class joined by a group of approximately 10 very cheerful students, who all seemed to know each other, feeling like the “elephant in the room” when I sat down in the front row.

I soon realized that nobody sat in the front row because all the electrical outlets for charging the fading batteries from a day’s worth of lectures, are in the back row. Luckily, I arrived at class
with a fully charged laptop and confidence in my computer skills as the clicking of computer keys sounded during the first lecture.

My first “angst” began when the professor indicated the syllabus and the coursework materials were posted on “Angel.” (Oh, no: what is Angel?) I soon found the program through the help of the professor. I managed to muddle my way through the website and effectively used the library for my first paper with a feeling of incredible success.

I was grateful for my previous computer skills but I found the students able and very willing to help me with valuable shortcuts and any difficulties I had.

Study habits were also a continual challenge but I learned to adapt my own style based on a few limitations of my age. I won’t minimize the amount of reading, studying and work that was involved, but the students formed collaborative groups for the reading which was helpful and they were valuable team players for special projects. I also didn’t have as much time to spend with my family and friends, but they were all anxious to hear about my daily tasks and were very supportive and proud of me.

I was welcomed and included by the students and felt an understanding of the unique aspects we all had to offer to the learning experience. I brought practical experience and offered a perspective on how the real world works in relationship to the science and methodology, while the younger students brought questioning and analytical minds that pushed the learning to new heights. The real lesson learned is that there does not have to be a traditional route to learning and education. This was an experience I am glad I did not miss.

Wendy Fisher is the. She is a graduate student in FIT’s Industrial/Organizational Psychology program as well. Wendy is also a Board member for the Women’s Business Center (WBC) and a mentor and facilitator for the WBC IGNITE 360 Program for Second Stage Businesses. Columnist series sponsored by the Women’s Business Center at Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne. Visit http://wbc.fit.edu/.