State College of Florida picks Probstfeld as new president

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MANATEE — LAKEWOOD RANCH

In a stunning development, the State College of Florida's Board of Trustees voted 7-0 Tuesday to offer a contract to interim President Dr. Carol Probstfeld to be the school's next president.

Probstfeld accepted the offer during Tuesday night's special board meeting to discuss aspects of the presidential search on the Lakewood Ranch campus.

Probstfeld becomes the second woman president in SCF history. Sarah Pappas was president from 1997-2008. The 51-year-old Probstfeld, who was born in Wittier, Calif., has been at the college for 10 years, all in the position of vice president for business and administrative services, also known as chief business officer.

"I would like to say thank you to the board for the unanimous vote and to my colleagues for their comments," Probstfeld said immediately after the vote. "I promise you that when I wake up every morning, the college will be in my head and my heart."

The first thing Probstfeld did after the vote was to text a message to her husband, William A. Murphy, who is on work assignment in Peru.

Murphy sells explosive chemical and drug detection equipment for U.S. Homeland Security applications.

The couple has no "human" children but two "fur doggie kids," specifically Harpo, a smooth-coated red Brussels Griffon and Nixie, a Portuguese waterdog.

Pappas sent a text message to Probstfeld shortly after the surprise vote.

"She said, 'Congratulations. Let's get together. I'm proud and happy for you,'" Probstfeld said. "Dr. Pappas hired me."
When the meeting opened, trustee Craig Trigueiro surprised the crowd of about 20 in attendance when he said he would like to make a motion to offer Probstfeld a contract.

"I don't do this in a flippant manner," he said. "I just felt everything we've been hearing in the visioning sessions, made me think, 'Well, that's Carol.'"

SCF's former president, Lars Hafner, had resigned Oct. 30 with a $363,000 settlement agreement after months of conflict with some trustees, who consistently questioned his financial judgment on school construction projects.

Probstfeld was named acting president after the administrator appointed to become acting president, Vice President of Academic Quality and Success W. Jack Crocker, declined, announcing his resignation.

Under the school's guidelines, Probstfeld was next in line. She had been acting president since Nov. 2 and interim president since Dec. 18. Probstfeld had said all during three presidential visioning sessions that she would not seek the job of president.

But after the final session held at the Bradenton campus recently, Trigueiro walked Probstfeld to her car and asked her if she would reconsider her position.

"I said, 'I know you said you didn't want to be considered for the job, but I get the feeling you have grown to like it,' Trigueiro said after Tuesday's meeting. "She agreed. Then, I told her I intended to nominate her. She said, 'OK.'"

"There was very little hesitation among those in attendance regarding Trigueiro's motion.

Trustee Charlene Neal, who supported Probstfeld, voiced concern that the college was short-circuiting its selection process and how would that be perceived in the community.

Board Chairman Carlos Beruff and roughly a dozen speakers from the audience all backed the idea of naming Probstfeld immediately rather than going through a 12-to-18-month search process.

"I feel comfortable giving the reins to Carol," Beruff said. "She has the capacity to manage the finances of the college and she has the trust of the staff. I am sensitive to what Charlene says about short-circuiting the process. But, in my opinion, if Carol wants this job, we should offer it to her. This college needs a touchy-feely person and a numbers person is usually not touchy-feely, but Carol is."

Rick Hager, owner of Bradenton's Goodwood & Stone Builders and an SCF alumnus, told the audience that he felt the board's decision would be backed by the business community.

"My friends are very interested in outreach," Hager said speaking of the Manatee and Sarasota business community. "If this board feels Carol is the embodiment of Sarah Pappas, Sam Neel and Steve Korcheck, then I don't think the advisory committee will have any problem at all."
Hager was speaking of a community advisory committee that was supposed to help in the presidential search. Neel, Pappas and Korcheck are former SCF college presidents who gained reputations for being highly visible in the community.

"I have been with Carol in tense situations dealing with sensitive matters and she has demonstrated grace under pressure and the highest integrity," Kathy Walker, the college's director of public affairs and marketing, told the audience.

"I think this is a great idea," said faculty member Luci Frith.

"From what I have seen, I think she will do a good job," said Danny Fuerstman, faculty senate president, who stressed he was giving his personal opinion, having not consulted with his constituents. "I share Charlene's feeling of how this would look, but I don't think it will serve the college if we have a search when we have found the best candidate."

Perhaps Probstfeld, formerly the college's official business officer, may have already saved the college some money in the first moments of her presidency.

When asked about Hafner's annual salary of $284,000, she immediately replied, "That is beyond the range of comparable institutions."

In her former position Probstfeld earned $147,000. She received an extra $5,000 monthly stipend during her time as acting president.

The board will now negotiate a contract with Probstfeld and, it is hoped, have it finalized by the February board meeting, Trigueiro said.