SCF trustees tap interim president for permanent post

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Rather than embark on a national search for a new leader of State College of Florida, trustees quickly tapped interim college President Carol Probstfeld for the job on Tuesday.

The move bypasses a search that could have taken more than a year and cost up to $25,000. It also gives SCF the second female president in its 55-year history; Sarah Pappas led the school from 1997 to 2008.

“I think this is the most important decision I’ll make as a trustee so I don’t do it in a flippant manner,” said board member Craig Trigueiro before he moved to name Probstfeld president. “I don’t know that this college can afford to lose eight to 15 months . . . and the person I really think can do the job is here.”

Probstfeld, 51, has been interim president since Nov. 27 following the tumultuous ouster of former President Lars Hafner. She had initially told the board she was not interested in the top job. But Probstfeld said her attitude evolved as she spent time with community groups and at public events representing the college.

“I came to realize this isn’t a situation where we have an adversarial relationship between the community and the institution. The community loves this institution,” she said. “Internally and externally, they’re looking for someone who can bring us all together like we used to be.”

During Hafner’s tenure, a rift developed between the college’s administration and the board of trustees, several of whom had been appointed by Gov. Rick Scott over the past 18 months.

The college’s vice president of business and administrative services since 2003, Probstfeld was sometimes cast in the middle of the rift, and came away with the respect of both sides.

In particular, Trigueiro and Probstfeld clashed in mid-summer over questions about SCF’s charter school and how to compute its startup costs. Trigueiro repeatedly asserted the college had overspent on the school’s startup; Probstfeld held fast in asserting to the board that the charter school was developing exactly as board members had been told.
Trigueiro said Probstfeld’s way of conducting herself during that dispute was part of what impressed him.

“She’s not aggressive, and she’s not alienating,” Trigueiro said. "But she’s firm. It impressed me that she didn’t hesitate to tell a board member what she thought.”

Triguiero described her as a “velvet hammer” and compared her to Margaret Thatcher. Eric Robinson, the newest SCF trustee, called Probstfeld’s communication skills superior.

Several staff members who attended Tuesday’s meeting stood to describe Probstfeld as “caring,” “responsible” and deeply committed to SCF.

Details of Probstfeld’s contract will be worked out in coming weeks. Her current salary of $147,000 with a $5,000 a month stipend for the interim post will increase, but not to the level of Hafner, who was making $284,000 a year.

Probstfeld said Tuesday that salary level was high compared to other similar institutions.

The committee of community members and staffers that was to guide the search for a new president will now be asked to be an advisory committee to Probstfeld.

At Tuesday’s meeting, Probstfeld said she was excited that SCF had such a positive relationship with the community and thanked the trustees and staff.

“The confidence you’ve shown is something I know I need to earn every day,” she said.