Bustling first day for new SCF president

By Gabrielle Russon

Published: Wednesday, January 23, 2013

On Day 1 of her new job as State College of Florida president, Carol Probstfeld needed to find a chair for her desk, and a new spot for the calendar of scuba pictures she’d shot.

But moving into her new office wasn’t at the top of her priority list as she rushed from meeting to meeting, one at the University of South Florida’s Sarasota-Manatee campus, more at SCF’s campus in Venice, and still more in Lakewood Ranch.

A videographer hired to document her first day on the job had to hustle to keep up.

In just two months, Probstfeld, 51, has been catapulted from the relatively obscure college post of vice president of business and administrative services to SCF’s public face and chief executive.

Along the way, she has been trying to gauge the strength of SCF’s community relationships, and the damage done to the college’s image by months of infighting.

That conflict led to the ouster of former president Lars Hafner in October. Then the vice president of academics quit, making Probstfeld the college’s third leader in a two-month period.

“She doesn’t want the job just to be a president and get an increase in salary,” said Sarah Pappas, the college’s first female president, who hired Probstfeld in 2003.

“She wants the college to get back to the place in the community where it’s respected and trusted.”

By early next year, trustees hope to make a case for more state funding in Tallahassee as the college seeks to expand its degree programs to include biology and biotechnology at a STEM campus — STEM, for science, technology, engineering and mathematics — at its Lakewood Ranch campus.

Also ahead is an accreditation process that comes to a head in 2015, and which could determine the future of the college’s federal financial aid programs.

The urgency is one reason that trustees decided against a national search before giving Probstfeld the job this week.
Board Trustee Craig Trigueiro nominated Probstfeld for the job, says she is a financial wizard who also knows how to communicate with the board and build consensus.

“I just said to myself, ‘Why go out there and look for somebody who will tell you exactly what you want to hear and you won’t know what you’re getting until they get to the job?’” said Trigueiro.

“She didn’t miss a beat when she became interim president.”

Pappas, the college president for 11 years, says she was first struck by Probstfeld’s cool demeanor, and by her ability to glean meaning from columns of figures.

“She didn’t miss a beat when she became interim president.”

Pappas, the college president for 11 years, says she was first struck by Probstfeld’s cool demeanor, and by her ability to glean meaning from columns of figures.

“Her skills in business and finance are just outstanding,” said Pappas, who battled to retain Probstfeld when the Florida College System tried to hire her away about seven years ago.

Initially, Probstfeld told others she did not want to be college president.

That changed at some point during a recent round of community discussions. After one of them, she was talking to Trigueiro in the parking lot and told him she had changed her mind.

He told her he would nominate her at the next meeting.

A month earlier, trustees had spoken highly of her when they asked her to be interim president.

“They were surprised I made the motion,” Trigueiro said. “I wasn’t surprised by how they voted.”

Apart from the move into a new office, Probstfeld’s new contract remains to be completed.

Currently, she is paid $147,404 a year as well as a $5,000 monthly raise that she has been getting as interim president, the board decided last month.

Trigueiro said her contract and pay should be determined in the next few weeks.
Carol Probstfeld catches up with language arts professor Luci Frith, left, on Wednesday, her first day as president of State College of Florida.