A year in, SCF president earning praise

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By Katy Bergen

Carol Probstfeld is watching students in the courtyard dance to a country tune, and looks like she's itching to join. But she's wearing heels, the kids' moves are too fast, and she has more students to meet at this Fall Frolic festival at State College of Florida.

The SCF president moves on, stopping at booths as student club representatives share pamphlets and stories about their organizations. Some ask her about her puppies. Others talk about softball or band.

At the film club table, a new adjunct professor shakes her hand and politely asks her name.

“Carol Probstfeld,” she replies warmly, without hesitation. Another teacher pokes the professor and lets him know who she is.

In the year since Probstfeld took charge of SCF, the former college vice president has helped prep the school for a coming and extensive re-accreditation process. She's pushed through several campus projects, including plans for a new sand volleyball court and a revamped student union. And she's worked to rebuild relationships with the local and school communities.

As Probstfeld prepares for her inauguration at a ceremony planned for Friday evening, many students and faculty say that the president's visibility has made a difference for a college that suffered from high-profile and dramatic politics that led to the departure of former president Lars Hafner.

Probstfeld wasn't sure she wanted this: The jam-packed schedule. Nights and weekends devoted to the college.

When trustees and faculty initially approached her about applying for the position, she told them she wasn't interested.

But later she changed her mind and in January trustees unanimously voted her as president.

“I know me,” Probstfeld said. “If I said 'yes,' I was going to be all in.”
She said she started with trying to restore confidence and pride for a faculty that has watched the institution go through some hard times. That meant focusing on the success of students and faculty and sharing it with the community.

Faculty Senate President Luci Frith remembers Probstfeld visiting with faculty members.

“She said I'm the chief storyteller of SCF,” Frith said. “I want to have stories to tell about your students and what they are doing.”

SCF sophomore Tessa Alyman, a volleyball player, didn't expect to run into her college president when she went to a hall of fame event for athletics. She was more surprised when Probstfeld invited her and a friend to coffee in her office.

They talked about Probstfeld's underwater photography, about Alyman's home country, Canada, and volleyball.

“That had a big impact on me,” Alyman said. “Especially being far from home.”

Soon, Alyman started noticing Probstfeld at volleyball games, including a beach tournament last year at Siesta Key. Win or lose, Probstfeld always came up to the girls after the game. Several times a year, a “Pizza with the President” event is held, and Probstfeld answers questions of her students.

“It's really clear to me that she cares about the student voice,” student Vida Biggins said. “As a president, it's got to be so easy to be disconnected from who you are working for. But she actually takes time to speak to students, listens to what we have to say and acknowledges all of it.”

Many at SCF are hesitant or tired of talking about the circumstances that led to a breach in community trust and the public ousting of Hafner.

But most agree that somewhere along the way SCF appeared to be losing focus. The institution was trying to develop four-year programs and start a collegiate school, and some felt the school was abandoning its first commitment to lower-level and transfer students.

Probstfeld says she understands this. The initiatives at the time were a validation of what the college could do, but the administration had failed to invite faculty or the community into the process.

“The bigger challenge I saw ahead of me was restoring the relationship with our external community that had kind of been put on the back burner as the institution focused on other things,” Probstfeld says.

Several partnerships have formed this year under Probstfeld's watch. The college is sharing a grant with the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee and New College to develop technology graduates.
SCF faculty are pointing their associate's degree arts students to Ringling's Bachelor of Fine Arts program down the road.

And as of this year, SCF is paying for all its students and faculty under 40 to be members of the Manatee Young Professionals networking group.

Probstfeld calls these relationships “small victories” in building a collaborative spirit between SCF, other educational institutions and the community.

New opportunities like this have not gone unnoticed by students such as Evans Rimel, the student government president. He plans to go to his first MYP meeting this month.

“Many students actually know who Doctor Probstfeld is,” Rimel, 19, said.” Getting herself out to the student body has been one of her biggest achievements.”

Others remain to be seen. The college is requesting $17.6 million from state legislators this year to expand and remodel a library and resource center.

Though school leaders won't know if their request will be filled, Probstfeld personally met with local legislators to discuss how to meet the school's needs.

“She has gone right after it,” said Frith, who was invited to attend these meetings with Probstfeld. “We have confidence that she's not going to take us to a place where we aren't going to be able to support our core mission.”

This evening, faculty and other dignitaries are scheduled to gather in academic regalia to celebrate Probstfeld's inauguration. Then a public “Evening Under the Stars” celebration — including fireworks and SCF musicians — follows.

Probstfeld admits she's nervous, but she's also at home here, surrounded by her co-workers. Recently, she hosted a dinner at her home in northwest Bradenton for a committee working on an extensive quality plan for the school's upcoming accreditation process. This day isn't about her, she says.

“I wanted to focus the day on excellence,” Probstfeld says. “The academic excellence of our institution, past, present and future.”
FACTS

Carol F. Probstfeld

Age: 52

Hometown: Whittier, Calif.

Family: Married to Bill Murphy, who works for a government contractor that sells equipment for homeland security. Her “fur children” are Harpo, a smooth-coated red Brussels Griffon, and Nixie, a Portuguese Water Dog.

Hobby: Scuba diving. She has gone on 1,000 dives, including a trip two decades ago where she met her husband.

Favorite book: The Bible

Career: SCF president since January 2013. She was SCF vice president of business and administrative services for 10 years before being named president.

Chief financial officer and treasurer, Notre Dame de Namur University, Belmont, Calif., 1995 to 2001.

Director of finance and administration, Recovery Resources Inc., Cleveland, 1989 to 1995.

Education: Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership from Argosy University

Master of Business Administration from John Carroll University

Bachelor of Science in Accounting and Marketing from California State Polytechnic University

State College of Florida President Carol Probstfeld, left, talks with Priscilla Sosa, president of Biotechnology Alliance for Suncoast Educators on Wednesday at SCF’s Fall Frolic.

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