Renu Khator Named Provost

With her permanent appointment as provost in February, Renu Khator became USF’s chief academic officer and number two administrator. She’s the university’s first female provost and, possibly, the only Indian-born provost at a major metropolitan university.

Challenges are nothing new for Khator. She was only 18 when her parents announced that she would marry a complete stranger. Though she was convinced an arranged marriage would end her dream of getting an advanced degree, nothing was further from the truth.

While her new husband, Suresh, pursued his doctoral degree at Purdue University, Khator earned a master’s in political science. They returned to India to raise a family before coming back to the States when Khator was admitted to Purdue to pursue her doctorate.

USF was their next stop. Suresh accepted a job as an industrial engineering professor and Renu began to dig her heels into what she saw as “a university ready to go places.”

In 19 years at USF, Khator has been a faculty member, president of the Faculty Senate, faculty assistant to former USF president Betty Castor, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and, most recently, interim provost. She’s published four books and countless articles along the way.

Her priorities are set: Empower faculty, increase faculty salaries, admit more doctoral students, raise the caliber and diversity of undergraduate students and guarantee students a seat in the classes they need to get their degree in a timely manner.

And, she’s taken on challenges, like the debate over standardized testing for Florida’s college students—something she adamantly opposes.

“Standardized testing will never capture what universities are supposed to do,” Khator says. “We don’t want students to blindly accept any answer in front of them. We want them to reject, explore and question what they see.”

Khator foresees a deeper footprint for USF in the national higher education scene and a more impactful role in the community. She envisions the true character of a research university.

“A research university is about learning, discovery and engagement,” Khator says. “It produces lifelong learners, engrossed in discovery for the benefit of the community. It’s more than a place for passive teaching.

So much more. Khator points out that USF is uniquely positioned to be fully engaged in the community.

“We don’t just sit in our ivory tower, we interact with the community.” USF is what she calls a “globalized” university, globally oriented with local roots. Its new research park is one manifestation of that concept.

“USF is an intellectual magnet for the Tampa Bay community. Submitting multi-million dollar grant proposals is something that now goes on regularly here.”

Yet for all the similarities to other major metropolitan research universities, Khator says one thing about USF is dramatically different—the way faculty care for students, a fact that comes out year after year in surveys. USF faculty, she says, are “top-notch.”

“As dean, I had the privilege to hire 145 of them myself, and I can put them up against any faculty at any university.”

Khator’s style is anything but autocratic. “I believe in giving as much empowerment as possible; I’m very people-oriented.”

She holds monthly coffees with faculty and is getting ready to launch a faculty chat room. Twice a semester she meets one-on-one with department chairs.

“I believe I need to have face-to-face interaction because they need to hear directly from me, to see my desire, my vision and my effort in their eyes. And I need to see theirs in my eyes.”

Khator says she’s living a life beyond her dreams. She is grateful for the “fantastically supportive” husband she married in India some 30 years ago and their two daughters, both training to be ophthalmologists.

“I am so proud of USF, and so very happy to be here.”

—ANN CARNEY