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O U R O P I N I O N

Refreshingly ambitious

*Luis Proenza has led the University of Akron for 10 years.
His voice and vision have made a difference*

A few years after Luis Proenza arrived at the University of Akron, speculation surfaced about his leaving to serve as president at another school, larger perhaps or more prestigious. Fortunately, he has remained here for the decade, reinforcing a message essential for the city, the region and the state to apply: Ohioans must embrace the changing economy. They must pursue knowledge and innovation if they want to improve the quality of their lives.

Change certainly has visited the campus. The place has been transformed, a \$300 million investment resulting in 10 new buildings and more of the feel of a traditional university, an oasis at the urban center, the new splashes of green complemented by the steady presence of energetic students. The make-over isn't complete. The new football stadium opens in three months. Among other things, a research facility for polymer science will be constructed.

Ultimately, the university will pour \$500 million into the campus. Yet for all the physical changes, the most compelling thing about the Proenza years has been the attitude. In her Sunday assessment of Proenza at 10 years, Carol Biliczky, a Beacon Journal staff writer, used the apt word "audacious." The UA president has brought a refreshing jolt of ambition to the scene, looking to leverage the school's strengths into something greater for the university and the community, a local version of "Yes, we can."

Proenza may trigger rolling eyes elsewhere when he talks about UA as a leading research center or sets

the goal of pushing research dollars from \$34 million a year to \$200 million a year. The university isn't the sweeping Ohio State. Still, the school and the community benefit from reaching higher, and aggressively so. More, there is a firm foundation, the university having a national reputation in polymer science and engineering, achieving excellence in such areas as chemistry and intellectual property law.

The university recently was recognized as one of the strongest schools in transferring research into products, and there resides another advance for the university under Proenza's leadership.

The joke is, the university is swallowing downtown. Not exactly. Rather, Proenza sees the critical role of collaboration, the university serving as an engine for the regional economy, whether through the transformation of University Park or the development of the BioInnovation Institute, the marrying of polymer materials and orthopedics into new products, procedures and prosperity.

This isn't to say Proenza has operated flawlessly. He has had his share of stumbles and messes, most recently, the embarrassing presence of Jack Morrison on the board of trustees. He and other university presidents need the help of the governor and state lawmakers in routing additional resources to students and faculty. The outstanding benefit the past decade has been his enlightened and persistent voice, prodding, bold, pointing the way to where the city, the region and the state must go.