

A gentleman and a scholar: Luis Proenza is ready to take The University of Akron to the next level

BY KATIE BYARD

It's almost 7 p.m. and much of the Purdue University community is winding down for the day. Most classrooms and offices are dark. The smell of fast food wafts from the restaurants in the basement of the ornate student union.

Students are busily eating. Some sit cozily in oversized chairs quietly studying. But in a crisp, white shirt and well-tailored suit, Luis M. Proenza is all business.

Proenza is circulating through an elegant meeting room at a reception for minorities considering the Indiana university for graduate studies. He stops and intently speaks in Spanish, his native language, to a Puerto Rican student, then shakes more hands and asks other prospective students about their home schools.

It's been a day full of presentations, meetings, phone calls and e-mails for Luis Proenza, dean of Purdue's graduate school and vice president for research at the university. Proenza's day usually starts at 7 a.m.; meetings and professional events often dot the night hours.

For the past several weeks, he also has been preparing for his departure to Northeast Ohio where, on Jan. 1, he will become the 15th president of The

University of Akron, the third-largest of Ohio's 13 state-supported universities.

Arguably the most academically diverse and best-traveled person to head UA, Proenza owns a resume that lists extensive research in his specialty, neurobiology, and administrative credentials at three universities. He has taught and presented papers in Mexico; he helped direct a Washington, D.C., agency that advised the government on vision research; and he has traveled as far as the South Pole, Eastern Russia and Greenland to conduct research on polar regions.

Associates describe Proenza, a native of Mexico, as cultured, sophisticated, "European" and an excellent communicator.

Nanne Myers, assistant vice president for academic affairs at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, where Proenza worked for seven years, attributes his polish to his international background.

"There's a certain formality to Mexico — it goes with the culture — but there's also a joy of living," she says.

In flawless English, Proenza says he considers himself a "citizen of the world."

Actually, he is a U.S. citizen whose world next will center on a Midwestern community whose university does not enjoy the size or stature of the one he is departing.

Purdue, one of the nation's leading research institutions, has more than 65,000 students. That compares with 23,500 students at UA's Akron and Wayne County campuses. At Purdue, Proenza oversaw research programs with a total annual budget of about \$200 million — an amount equal to UA's entire operating budget.

Still, Akron has several professional attractions for Proenza, chief among them the opportunity to oversee an entire institution. On the personal side, Proenza mentions Akron's hills and its proximity to Lake Erie, where he and his wife, Theresa Butler Proenza, can indulge their passion for sailing their 44-foot sailboat, *Apogee*.

First, though, they must complete a number of mundane tasks associated with a 320-mile move — Theresa Proenza will be bringing her giant cookbook collection; Luis Proenza will cart along his stand-up desk, which is destined for the UA presidential suite.

"This way my colleagues

can't accuse me of sitting down on the job," he laughs.

Scoring points

Proenza probably has not encountered that kind of criticism in West Lafayette, Ind., or during his previous professional stops in Fairbanks and at the University of Georgia.

On this day at Purdue, he bounces from task to task with the same drive and enthusiasm that seems to have characterized the many directional changes of his 27-year academic career.

"I sometimes feel like career development is more like a trip through a pinball machine," says Proenza, 53, as he hurries to his next appointment.

"You're headed in one direction, bounce off of an opportunity, and you head in another direction — and that opens up another opportunity." The goal is to "keep moving and hope you're scoring points" along the way.

Co-workers say he's scored points at Purdue University since assuming his current position in mid-1994.

He is credited with, among other things, actively recruiting companies to Purdue's research

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park, home of more than 70 businesses, reducing the red tape for faculty to apply for grants, and securing health insurance for graduate students.

Dennis Depew, assistant dean of the graduate school, says Proenza's ability to connect with faculty members, students and the public is among the best Depew has seen in higher education.

"He is so approachable, extremely respectful," says Viviana Abreu-Hernandez, president of Purdue's Graduate Student Association. "I feel free to go into his office and tell the secretary I need to talk to Dr. Proenza right now," she added.

At an afternoon meeting of the Greater Lafayette Progress Board, an economic development group, Proenza connected with business leaders by spicing up a talk about how Indiana lags other states in high-technology job creation.

"If you don't have sex, you don't have a kid," he joked. "In economic development, if you don't have research and development, you don't have the conception of new ideas and you won't have job creation."

J. Mike Brooks, president of Greater Lafayette Progress Inc., describes Proenza as a rare breed of academic who has a "comprehensive view of the role of the university in economic development. ... I would certainly encourage the economic development office in Akron to get to

know Luis quickly."

Proenza's colleagues and former associates are not surprised he was lured away from Purdue. "I knew that he had aspirations of becoming a president someday," Depew says. Wendy Redman, a vice president at the University of Alaska, concurs: "He's got a lot of ideas, a lot of energy and a lot of enthusiasm and that's where you can best play those things out — when you're the guy in charge."

If Proenza had had his way, his ascension probably would have occurred earlier.

In the past six years, he has been a finalist for top jobs at Texas A&M, the University of Vermont, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and Oakland University.

Given Proenza's obvious ambition, some UA officials and faculty members wonder how long he'll remain at Akron. But Proenza dismisses any suggestion that his Akron stay will be short-lived. "I'm really not looking for another job," he says. "The trustees and I are looking for a very long-term relationship."

To that end, UA trustees have offered a financial incentive: In addition to a \$215,000 annual salary, Proenza's UA contract stipulates a bonus if he is still president after five years.

UA officials say Proenza's experiences at Purdue and Alaska will be a key asset in the push to improve UA's profile as a research university and attract more federal funding for research projects. At

Purdue, Proenza helped secure large grants for such disciplines as biomedical engineering and computational science, and for engineering partnerships with corporations. At Alaska, Proenza helped to win a \$20 million contract that involved analyzing ice layers for clues of ancient weather patterns and global warming in the polar regions. That contract led, in 1989, to the trip to the South Pole.

"I've been able to have experiences through my work that I might have, under other circumstances, never even imagined," he says.

A life in academia

An only child born to older parents, Proenza was 11 when he left his hometown of Mexico City to attend Riverside, an all-male college preparatory school in Georgia's Blue Ridge Mountains. His parents, now deceased, owned jewelry stores in Mexico City and Acapulco.

Proenza half-jokingly says that his parents chose a boarding school in Georgia because "if I'd gone much farther north it would have been too cold, and if I'd gone farther south I'd have never learned English," a reference to the large Spanish-speaking population in Florida.

At competitive Riverside, Proenza graduated as his class's highest-ranking officer, then went on to Emory University in Atlanta for a bachelor's degree in psychology. At Emory, he almost veered off into the horse business.

"I just had a lot of energy ... besides, a girl I was dating at the time liked horses," he laughs. "That probably had something to do with it."

But owning a horse proved impractical and expensive. Proenza sold his steed, abandoned the notion of going into business, and instead earned a master's degree in psychology from Ohio State University followed by a Ph.D. in neurobiology from the University of Minnesota. That year, 1971, he also began research involving the retina, an interest he would pursue for years.

And, in the Land of 10,000 Lakes, he learned to sail.

With a newly minted doctorate, Proenza became an assistant professor at the University of Georgia, where he continued his retina research and also accepted a directorship on the Committee on Vision of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C.

Also at Georgia, Proenza met and married Theresa Butler, an honors graduate in biology who speaks fluent Spanish. The couple have no children.

He launched his administrative career in the early 1980s by participating in a one-year training program of the American Council on Education, followed by a few years in various management positions at Georgia. In 1987, Proenza accepted the post of vice chancellor for research and dean of the

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graduate school at the University of Alaska, where Theresa Proenza earned an M.B.A.

That job required considerable travel to win federal funding and other sources of money, and Proenza was criticized for being away from the campus so often — by his own estimate, he was out of town for nearly three of the seven years he worked in Fairbanks.

He regrets all the time spent in travel, and says if he could change anything about the Alaska years, "I would have wished to have had a chance to do other things" for the school.

As for his accomplishments there, Proenza says he helped to make the University of Alaska a key player in polar-region research and led the effort to bring a \$25 million supercomputing center, housing the super-fast Cray computer, to the university. Proenza insists the Cray computer does not deserve its reputation as a prime example of "academic pork," noting that the university's unit is being used for a number of research programs and by outside agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Defense.

Despite his achievements in Alaska, there was no room for him to move up; he left for Purdue in 1994. Almost five years later, he is headed for The University of Akron.

Theresa Proenza leaves a Purdue post as administrative director for the university's technology transfer initiative; in

Akron, she hopes to put her background in education to use in the volunteer arena.

"She has really been a partner throughout our marriage. ... She's been very, very supportive of my career and I hope I've been equally supportive of hers," Proenza says.

Building on strengths

As UA's chief executive, Proenza will oversee an institution well known for its polymer science and polymer engineering programs, and one that, Proenza notes, "has aspirations of moving up in the research arena."

He declines to reveal a specific agenda, but says UA's polymer programs are among the "crown jewels" of the campus and he wants to build on their strengths. He also cites the intellectual property program at UA's law school and the university's education program as two areas with growth potential.

Proenza notes that the tuition at UA's Community and Technical College is higher than at similar area technical colleges, even though university enrollment overall has dropped by more than 6,500 from 1989 to 1997. He suggests that enrollment might be stabilized and even increased by identifying what the community wants from the university.

"It's important that UA look to what its particular capabilities are" rather than "try to do everything for everyone. We can't be an Ohio State. We can't be a Case Western Reserve. We have to

decide what it is we can do better than everyone else and do that."

He advocates affirmative-action programs aimed at increasing minority access to higher education. However, he says, such programs also should focus on educational achievement. "We are remiss as a nation if we don't address the issue" beginning at the elementary level, he says.

Proenza was one of three finalists for the UA job, which opened after months of fighting among former president Peggy Gordon Elliot, faculty members and trustees. Elliot resigned in April 1996 and now is president of South Dakota State University; Marion Ruebel filled the post on an interim basis during the search for her replacement.

Each finalist visited the UA campus and met with an assortment of educators, administrators, trustees and students. Proenza impressed each group with his style and substance. According to one employee, the social skills of the other finalists "weren't even in the same ZIP code."

"His genuineness, warmth and sincerity fill a room when he enters," says Alex Arshinkoff, chair of the UA Board of Trustees. "People are drawn to him by the graciousness of his style."

"You can see it in his eyes that he cares," says Brian Mormino, president of Associated Student Government. "He just grabs ahold of you and pulls you right in."

Former trustee Lee Tobler,

the board's point man on the search, says Proenza "thinks broadly and deeply about subjects. I liked the way he thought strategically about matters."

Michael Cheung, a UA professor of chemical engineering, says Proenza is a "very dynamic individual ... high energy. He certainly has a wide view of what a university is, which I think is good because he can appeal to a large portion of the campus that way."

Proenza describes his managerial style as "open, encouraging and enthusiastic." Those who have worked with him say he's a "big picture" person who doesn't micro-manage.

Proenza says he may have had reservations about taking the UA job if he were arriving on the heels of Elliott's resignation. But he succeeds Ruebel, who is credited with restoring calm to the campus. A key attraction to the UA job, Proenza says, is the community's commitment to the university.

Ruebel says that very same community support sometimes coats UA with a veneer of provincialism, which isn't necessarily bad. "It creates a feeling of coming together," Ruebel says. "I think that's very special."

Ruebel won't offer any public advice for Proenza. But, he says: "I know in my conversations with him already that he has the feeling that it's a very special place, and he'll be successful."