



# GORDON JONES RETHINKS HIGHER EDUCATION

# Delivering a Promise

BSU's College of Innovation and Design leads the way forward

By Greg Stahl

**G**ordon Jones is a student and teacher, hockey player and skier, freethinker and pragmatist. But perhaps most of all, he's a man with a penchant for thinking outside the box.

In 2015 Jones traded Harvard for Boise State to help rethink higher education. He appears poised to continue on an already-developing trajectory of success.

"I love the idea of challenging conventional wisdom," he said during a late-July interview in Boise. "That type of thinking fuels me."

Jones is the inaugural dean of Boise State's new College of Innovation and Design, a difficult-to-define entity that exists along the fault lines of traditional education. It's a combination of degree-track programs, professional certificates and badges that show records of accomplishment and competencies. It's all designed to synthesize the university's various academic disciplines and give students a competitive edge in today's rapidly evolving professional marketplace.

"We've had an industrial-revolution education model where we go to college, get out, get a diploma and then we hope you buy football tickets and give us money for the rest of your life," Jones said. "The whole presumption was aligned around careers that would last 30 years doing the same thing. You were on your way once the university was done. We know that's not the case for Millennials who are going to have eight different distinct

roles. What do universities do to address that? Where are we in partnership with individuals?"

In 2011, after 15 years as a business leader for companies like Gillette, Proctor & Gamble and several prominent start-ups, Jones became founding director at the Harvard Innovation Lab, a unique entity that seeks to thread the Ivy League university's 13 disparate colleges and offers students a vehicle to practice their learning in hands-on ways. It was incredibly successful. By 2014, one in four Crimson students was using the i-lab to incubate new ventures.

Jones found himself wondering, however, how that model would benefit a public university—even how it might work for students nationwide. Because of the school's pedigree, he explained, "Harvard is fundamentally going to be immune to these conditions that are going on in the industry," such as mounting tuition and debt concurrent with less value placed on a standard, specialized undergraduate degree.

"I believe there are 50 colleges and universities that are immune," Jones said. "I'm ultimately of an entrepreneurial mindset. I'd rather go where the action is, and to where it has the highest chance of succeeding."

For Jones, that is Boise State.

Jones is tall, relaxed and well-pressed. His glass-walled office on the second floor of BSU's Albertson's Library is simultaneously professional and casual. It's situated within the College of Innovation and Design's array

of modern desks and smattering of busy staff.

On a waist-high shelf behind his desk, Jones has on display an assortment of products he's helped conceive or bring to market during his 15 years in the business world.

He slips a finger into a small sleeve that looks like a medical implement. When he was heading Oral B for Proctor & Gamble, a company approached him with a high-density surgical filter, which was said to also have properties that could clean teeth. The problem was, the filter had the texture and taste of a cotton ball.

Jones put his creativity to work. He sourced the elastic backing from a diaper to create the sleeve, and he drew on flavoring technology from dental floss to make the product palatable. The end result was an invention called Brush-Ups.

It's an anecdote that shows Jones's business sense and penchant for creative thinking, but it doesn't show how an established business leader became an educator. It turns out, though, that he was an educator first.

Born and raised in Connecticut, he attended Brown as an undergrad and later went to Stanford to earn an MBA. But his time at those universities was interspersed with additional formative experiences in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia and the Sonoran Desert of Arizona—experiences that helped draw him back to the West 20 years later.

Jones got his first "taste of big spac-



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es” while playing semiprofessional hockey in northern British Columbia during a semester off from his undergraduate studies. So he took another semester off to work at a private preparatory school north of Phoenix. It’s an experience that connected enough for him to return after graduating from Brown, and that was at least part of the reason he went to Stanford to earn a business degree.

With encouragement from the prep school’s director of placement, he’d started mulling questions about the educational system and how it could deliver better value. “I didn’t have the tool box to frame and synthesize the solutions or answers,” he said. “I had lots of hypotheses, but it wasn’t clear to me what was better. I didn’t know where to start.”

Several seeds were planted during those initial forays into the West. Like many transplants before him, Jones found it easy to appreciate the region’s wide-open spaces and staggering mountain vistas, but he also observed that the spirit of the West was more pragmatic than his native New England, particularly as it pertained to education. That notion was reinforced, he said, attending Stanford.

“In that D.C. to Boston corridor, education is almost the currency of your social value,” he said. “In the West it’s a place where you meet people where they’re at. Each person’s an individual. I can’t think of the last time I’ve been in a conversation in Boise where anyone’s asked me where I went to college. Here your currency is: Do I have a connection with the individual in front of me. That’s it.”

Those are formative experiences undertaken by Jones when he was a 20-something, but he said they’re among the reasons he agreed to bring the Harvard i-lab approach to Boise State. It’s a great community, but also an apt setting to put such pragmatic



Photos by Woods Wheatcroft

‘ ADDRESS IN OUR CURRENT DISCIPLINE-BASED SYSTEM. I’M TRYING TO ADDRESS INNOVATIVE IDEAS. I’M ALMOST LIKE A VENTURE CAPITALIST.’ — Gordon Jones, *Dean of the College of Innovation and Design*

educational practices to work.

Before World War II, higher education was a luxury that few people could afford, and its focus on liberal arts education was a luxury.

“You had the time in life to reflect on the human condition,” Jones said. “The ability to access that was reserved, and it wasn’t necessarily vocationally-centered.”

Things changed after World War II. College became more of a public right, and for decades the system benefitted steadily-increasing numbers of Americans.

“That worked great when Cal Berkeley cost \$980 a semester in 1986,” Jones said. “The need for a university to focus on your outcome wasn’t there. If you drove a cab majoring in Shakespeare out of Berkeley you probably weren’t going to blame Berkeley because you didn’t necessarily owe any money.”

From 1994 on, however, college tuition began to outstrip average household incomes by two to one, and those are the atmospherics in which Jones is working. The old model doesn’t promise anything to graduates; he’s working on a model that does. To use his own example, he’s working to make sure that Shakespeare majors can find jobs when they graduate.

The College of Innovation and Design was conceived by Boise State President Bob Kustra, who obtained approval from the state board of education in the fall of 2014. “The CID will leverage the speed, collaboration and risk-taking of a start-up to re-imagine the way the university teaches, learns and conducts research at Boise State,” the college touts in its marketing literature.

It’s powerful language that’s simultaneously kind of vague. In part that’s because the college is doing so much that’s so new. For people who came up through the traditional college model, it’s literally difficult to get your head around the array of programs, part-

nerships and certificates on offer and in development.

Jones packages the college’s work into three distinct areas of opportunity: innovation within the university, imagining the university of tomorrow and inspiring the university-community connection.

An example of innovative building within the university is the college’s new Gaming, Interactive Media, and Mobile Technology major, which draws from the fields of art, psychology and computer science to build IT applications, virtual reality environments and other devices that can offer innovative workplace solutions. In its inaugural year, 65 students signed up. This year, another 130 enlisted. Another example is a new leadership certificate program.

The second area of focus, imagining the university of tomorrow, means ensuring the pursuit and attainment of an undergraduate degree includes the acquisition of skills that meet the demands of emerging workplace needs.

One example is the new Venture College, a program that allows motivated students to hone expertise and skills using support from 400 volunteer experts from the community. Venture College is the first Boise State program to award badges to students who learn particular skills. Five hundred students participated in its inaugural year.

“I don’t care whether you’re going to be a nurse, a teacher or a symphony player, or if you’re a writer at the *Statesman*, if you can appreciate how that organization operates, you can have a voice not only how to contribute to the organization, but also know ‘what’s best for me?’” Jones said. “I want to increase the ability for people to be inoculated so they don’t end up being victims. I believe in self-agency. That’s real individual health. That’s the spirit of the West as well.”

The third area of focus, implement-

ing stronger connections between the university and the community, includes an array of programming designed to sync Boise State with the people of Boise and surrounding regions. The College of Innovation and Design has built partnerships with St. Luke’s, Albertsons, Zions Bank and others. Jones has also pioneered partnerships with Harvard Business School and the Stanford Center for Innovations in Learning. Both are the first partnerships of their kind and offer unique access to highly acclaimed academic resources outside of Idaho.

“There are things we can’t address in our current discipline-based system. I’m an entity that can look at trying to address innovative ideas. I’m almost like an academic venture capitalist.”

Jones moved to the City of Trees to be an educator, but he quickly found himself in the limelight in Boise’s bustling business community. He’s been meeting with hundreds of the city’s business leaders, and in November 2015, after only a few months on the job, was the featured speaker at the City Club of Boise, where the community’s movers and shakers gather to discuss issues of the day.

Jones is passionate about his work at Boise State, but he’s equally enthusiastic about his new home city. He’s on the board of directors at Trailhead, a startup incubator that “helps Boiseans start and scale businesses and high-impact projects” with a co-working space downtown and access to tools and connections needed to “build something with impact.”

“We have a fairly robust economic engine for such a small state,” Jones said. “Boise has a high aggregation of fairly active individuals. It’s amazing to me the fabric of community that exists here in a metropolitan area of 700,000 people. There’s a lot of action, and it’s slightly pre-emergent.” ■