

I Wear Jordans to Work

By Jeffrey Dessources, Innovative Programming Planning Committee

I have been working in Higher Education for a little over a decade and there two things that continue to resonate. Despite their role or position, students will always recognize authenticity. Additionally, the Administration, no matter the level, will recognize deliverables. So often, the problem with our field is that in search for high-level deliverables we lose a grasp on the authentic sensibility as well as authentic connection to our students.

The NASPA Innovative Programming Committee does a great job at opening the door for a broader conversation on the topic of Continuously seeking improvement through new and creative approaches. They define innovation through different viewpoints including pedagogical, structural, and technological that move practitioners toward more authentic and relevant ways to teach, engage, and support students along their educational trajectory. Two key ideas that stick out to me, from this definition are authentic and relevant ways to teach.

As we assess, we are often immersed in statistics instead of culture. To truly innovate one must find the connection to the most innovative voices in the room. So often those people are our students. As we continue to grow as professionals and get promoted and gain higher positions of leadership very often, we start to disconnect from the pulse of the campus and consequently get removed from the spaces. Best practices discussed in a boardroom and found in peer-reviewed articles are not enough to innovate, particularly if most of the voices in the room are disconnected. We have to remain relevant.

With that said, the moment I was promoted to a place where committee meetings took up more time than student engagement events, I had to make sure my swag as related to the students and authentic relationships weren't lost. Less time in the student union or residence halls and more time in the rooms with the big conference tables may mean more structural work but it doesn't always equate to innovation. My change was simple and proved to be incredibly valuable.

I started wearing Jordans to work. I'm a low-level sneakerhead who never thought about rocking cool or exclusive kicks to the job but it has moved the needle. Wearing dope sneakers are not only authentically part of who I am but it is a strategic way to keep me locked into the pulse of the campus. We have a number of students from various backgrounds and micro-communities who love sneakers. Beyond sneakers, there are those who celebrate their aesthetic accomplishments in multiple ways. Blue Hair, fly

eyebrows, fresh coats, exclusive henna tattoos and more are all big-time features that help add to the innovation and authenticity of our university.

When I first threw on some Royal Blue Jordan 1s, the students were all in. Their energy within the educational space changed. On the other hand, there were colleagues who provided negative feedback. These are the people who are stunting innovation. While some professionals looked at my Jordan 11s as too bright, there were young black men interacting with me who never spoke to me before. It was more than just sneakers it was the connection after the kicks. It started with conversations about the latest sneaker drops then morphed into educational experiences or student leadership positions. The president of our university complimented my Travis Scott 4s all while discussing student engagement and the implementation of leadership models. It was sad that at that point some colleagues started to get on board. To innovate is to disrupt the norm. To innovate as an educator is to not only disrupt but teach and elevate the students while doing so.

Wearing dope sneakers has helped me link up with students who weren't open to leadership opportunities. We talk about coolest hypebeast Instagram accounts and follow that up with student programming strategies. As I leave events and head into more of those aforementioned meetings, students are still dapping me up and asking about the latest shoe drops. We talk about their shoes, whether new or old which opens the door into unofficial retention practices. NASPA as an organization has set the conference dress code as business casual. This is more than suggested attire. It is an opportunity to intersect aspects of professionalism, authenticity, and swag. We as educators should take this from the conference to the student union and right up to the administrative buildings.

This isn't simply dialoguing on sneakers. As educators where are you finding the alternative connections to your students? For some, it's a hairstyle or cool lapel pins. I've seen people who rap and others who add colorful outfits to a black and white campus. Don't add flavor for your

own selfish ways or to stand out. That is the wrong reason and isn't innovative. Be intentional about connecting to the pulse. Institutions and particular offices are continually taking archaic steps in a world where students are flying around. Aesthetics matter. Swag matters. Innovation takes work. Changing the optics with the intention of authentic teaching and connection will change our field.