

My Path through Bass Connections

How junior neuroscience and philosophy major Clara Colombatto found a new perspective.

Q: What led you to Bass Connections?

A: I explored a number of different subjects at Duke, including linguistics, economics, chemistry, and computer science. When I took a “Philosophy of Mental Illness” class, I was absolutely fascinated with the material, and my interest in the workings of the mind both from a scientific and humanistic point of view led me to decide on a double major.

[When I came to Duke from Italy], I was looking for opportunities to explore “the real world” from the Duke classroom. I made it a point in my education to go beyond the simple learning of “facts” in a vertical passing of knowledge that is so typical of European education, and put a lot of thoughtfulness (with great help from my advisors) into creating my own educational path enriched with practical application, research, and career exploration.

“This step beyond academia’s ‘ivory tower’ is really an incredible educational experience that made me grow from the academic, professional, and personal points of view.”
- Clara Colombatto

I have grown to believe that bridging the gap between advanced discoveries in biological sciences and collective issues in social sciences is a necessary step that fills research with meaning and scope. Bass Connections was thus a natural and perfect fit for my expectations: I have the opportunity to work under the mentorship of incredibly open-minded scholars, and observe professionals from different disciplines work together on real world problems.

Q: How has your educational pathway focus shifted due to Bass Connections?

A: What I realized is the value of an education focused on skills on top of pure factual knowledge.

For example, in my research on the use of metaphor in psychoanalysis, I conducted



Junior neuroscience and philosophy major Clara Colombatto was a member of the “Trauma and Timing” team.

extensive scholarly research in trauma narratives and conceptualization of figurative language; but I also had the opportunity to meet with librarians and scholars in different schools and institutes of the university to learn about qualitative research and innovative text mining techniques. So I envisioned my project to be not just a way to learn about post-traumatic stress disorder, but also an opportunity to think like a researcher and be an active member of the research community in the university.

Noticing the importance of cultivating my intellectual flexibility and curiosity, I shifted my Duke education from a classroom-centered experience to a more comprehensive exposure to different disciplines and methods, which ultimately gave me instruments such as analytical thinking and critical evaluation that allow me to return to the

classroom and get so much more out of the traditional lecture.

Q: How does your participation in Bass Connections influence your current Duke experience?

A: Bass Connections made me a much more active and contributing member of the Duke community, especially for my role as co-chair of the Student Advisory Council. I am much more aware of the diversity of scholars and students working on campus, and I am fascinated by the diversity of their interests and passions.

Working in such a new and flexible organization has definitively been a challenge, but it has also been an incredibly rewarding experience: I have learned to lead students in different stages of their careers and collaborate with professionals from the most diverse fields, from the Career Center staff to the fundraising team.

Q: How do you think your participation in the program will shape your future endeavors?

A: Even though I still haven't committed to a specific career, Bass Connections helped me develop an insight into my skills and interests that will be crucial in guiding my future choices. Through my involvement in the program I realized the power of collaboration and the importance of problem-based work; these will definitively be guiding criteria in choosing a doctoral program that matches my goals.

When I look back to my undergraduate experience before Bass Connections, I realize how differently I think about my future: I am no longer seeking just for an activity or research topic that suits my interests, but rather I look forward to a whole environment and research method that allows collaboration and team work on complex problems. So I know that whatever work I will be doing, the value and meaning I will attribute to my career will be based on the passion for solving a problem, but also on the intellectual flexibility that allows collaboration with diverse scholars and across different disciplines.

Q: What do you find to be the most rewarding aspect of the Bass Connections program?

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A: I believe that the most innovative and avant-garde aspect of the program is the bringing together of scholars from different disciplines and across educational boundaries.

I first realized the power of this type of collaboration when, early in the summer, three faculty members and the four students on the team sat together to discuss the significance of flashbacks in trauma survivors. The Freudian psychoanalyst, the psychiatrist/neuroscientist from the Veteran Affairs Hospital, and the Romance Studies professor all had amazing insights into the philosophical, medical, psychological, and neurobiological aspects of this unique kind of memory, and all presented cases of patients or populations they had experienced in first person. I would have never learned this in class, and in no other context would I have had the occasion to observe so closely what it means to approach a problem from the point of view of a psychiatrist, a doctor, or a humanities scholar. This kind of exposure is an invaluable educational experience, and it's really beyond any expectation I had for my education when I came to the States.

The type of student drawn to Bass Connections is a very independent, creative, and thoughtful one. The program has the unique feature of providing all the means by which students can create their own path, make of their education what they expect, and reach the goals they set for themselves. Having seen the great value and potential in this first pilot year I cannot but be proud of being part of such a program, and amazed at its impressive growth.



The “Trauma and Timing” Bass Connections team celebrates a successful semester.