

### QUESTIONS:

## TOM NECHYBA SITS DOWN AND DISCUSSES THE LATEST ON SSRI WEST

**Bass Connections, a new university-wide initiative launched by a \$50 million gift from Anne and Robert Bass, was recently announced. What role will this initiative play with SSRI West?**

**Nechyba:** SSRI West is almost ideally suited for supporting a variety of *Bass Connections* projects that intersect with the social sciences. The layout provides physical space for teams to engage and then to linger in subgroups within what we are calling *The Connection*—a large open and welcoming area for spontaneous meetings and engagements. At the center of *The Connection*—right next to the cookies and coffee—is the help desk we are calling *The Connection Bar*.

Any *Bass Connections* group that relies on social science methods and data support—everything from ethnographic work to big data computation—will find *The Connection Bar*, as well as the various workshops offered in *The Connection* very useful. We are also planning data and methods “bootcamps” specifically targeted to meet the needs of research and project teams, essentially providing backbone support to enable students at all levels to become highly productive team members. So we are

here as an infrastructure resource in multiple dimensions, all of which are directly relevant to the Bass mission.

**The Information Initiative Duke (iID) and SSRI's Data Information Services will both be housed in Gross Hall in an effort to help researchers work with their large datasets. How would you describe “big data” and how can these two groups help researchers?**

**Nechyba:** “Big data” can mean lots of different things—everything from very large traditional datasets to data derived from audio, video or text coming through old and new media. In some cases it means data on lots of people; in other cases it means data with lots of dimensions even if the sample itself is small. It is in this sense that the old distinction between “qualitative” and “quantitative” social science breaks down. For instance, rich ethnographic data on a small number of families may in fact be “big”, just as data on social networks from text messaging or Twitter data are big. The work of Guillermo Sapiro and Helen Egger (more on page 2) applies “big data” methods to an initially small sample of a few hundred videos, but then holds the promise of developing applications that can be applied in truly groundbreaking new ways around the world. Then there are data derived from virtual environments—such as those generated by the work of Jeff Taekman (more on page 4). And, as previously disconnected data sets like those contained within our Census Data Center are merged, these data too can become “big” pretty quickly. The time really is ripe for productive new collaborations between social scientists and “big data” methods to emerge, and having SSRI in the same space as the iID is very promising.

**Social and behavioral scientists often work together on research projects, but SSRI West plans to be the home of “research teams” with faculty and other researchers from various disciplines working together. What types of projects would you like to see held at SSRI West?**

**Nechyba:** The best collaborative projects for SSRI West will ultimately not be the ones I envision, but will be driven by the interests of faculty and students who engage with the space and the infrastructure resources we offer. That is the vision for SSRI West—that it gives the intellectual, physical and infrastructure space for innovative ideas to emerge in collaborations that otherwise would be difficult to conceive and carry out. But there are things (other than providing infrastructure and cookies) we can do to facilitate collaborations. For instance, together with the iID and our Duke Network Analysis Center, we hope to use information on what faculty are writing about and proposing in grant applications, to create an intellectual map of unexplored potential faculty networks that may then become actual collaborations in SSRI West.

**SSRI West will be home to research teams instead of actual affiliates and programs—the way SSRI is currently structured. Do you anticipate these teams being long running or once the problem is solved, a new team project being created?**

**Nechyba:** We live in a world that is changing more and more rapidly, and I think it is important for universities to find ways of becoming more nimble. Not everything worth doing right now has to become a permanent center that takes on a life of its own, and so I hope SSRI West can be an incubator of projects that will evolve and change and yes, even end. Sometimes a problem will be solved,



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other times progress will have been made giving rise to new projects that can push the frontier.

**SSRI currently offers workshops and a help desk but the space at SSRI West will enable education and training for social and behavioral scientists to be revamped. We've heard about the possibility of an app as well as a staffed help desk with "experts" in various software and data programs. Who do you envision utilizing these services?**

**Nechyba:** The problem right now is that we try to bring many of our workshops to West Campus but, since we have no permanent location there, they move around and it's hard to keep track. Our help desk is at our off-campus location, and so few students or faculty take advantage of it. But our SSRI West help desk—*The Connection Bar*—and the related workshops and "bootcamps" will all be located in the same place near the heart of the West Campus and within a newly renovated building buzzing with activity. We are still working out how exactly it will all function, but yes, we are thinking of a SSRI West app that will enable students and faculty to always know what is available and when, allow appointments to be made from anywhere, and stream online help on common issues. Who do we envision utilizing the services? We'll have workshops to train undergraduate and graduate RAs who can then rely on *The Connection Bar* for back-up; projects that draw on *The Connection Bar* for expertise and advice; faculty who feel more at ease forming interdisciplinary teams with the knowledge that *The Connection Bar* can assist. And I hope it will be a draw for our affiliated centers, a place to launch new collaborations and connect to new faculty and students with the support of *The Connection*. 



Tom Nechyba  
Director, SSRI



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Bass Connections

**Managing Editor:**

Courtney P. Orning  
courtney.orning@duke.edu

**Contributors:**

Paul Dudenhefer  
Whitney Howell  
Michele Lynn  
Nancy Oates  
Mary-Russell Roberson

**Designer:**

Regina Barnhill-Bordo  
regina@bdesign-studio.com

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