

BASS CONNECTIONS

INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING.
REAL-WORLD ISSUES.

IN JANUARY, the university announced the creation of the *Bass Connections* initiative, named after Robert and Anne Bass who have generously pledged a \$50 million foundational gift to launch it. But three months later, many faculty and students are still wondering: What is *Bass Connections*?

It's a good question, and there are good reasons why it's not easy to answer. But at an abstract level, here is one way to think of it: Over the past few decades, three pillars have come to be viewed as central to Duke's identity as an institution:

- *Excellence in Education*—
undergraduate, graduate and professional,
- *Cross-Disciplinary Engagement*—
in problem areas that transcend disciplines
- *Knowledge in the Service of Society*—
with a focus on problems of societal importance


There are, of course, many ways in which these pillars already intersect at Duke. But unlike previous initiatives, *Bass Connections* attempts to explicitly and substantially connect all three pillars while boldly inviting these connections to cross all schools, institutes, and initiatives throughout the university. It therefore isn't so much another new initiative—rather it is a framework for connecting the various elements of Duke that have grown up all around us.

And that is precisely why it has been hard to articulate what “it” is. What “it” is will invariably emerge rather than be defined up front—“it” will be shaped by those who engage with and help forge the web of connections that is *Bass Connections*.

While some of what will emerge will come in familiar form—new courses, speaker series, workshops—the most unique

(and most challenging) aspects of *Bass Connections* center around the idea of bringing the three pillars together in the form of project teams that engage problems in the world. These teams will focus on problems of societal importance (Pillar 3) that, by their nature, require disciplines to come together (Pillar 2) while engaging learners at all levels (Pillar 1). They are vertically integrated in the sense of engaging undergraduates, graduate and professional students, post-docs and faculty; and they are horizontally integrated in that they engage multiple disciplines within the university as well as (potentially) representatives from outside academics.

Initially, *Bass Connections* and the accompanying *Bass Connections Teams* will be piloted around five themes that

have strategic priority for Duke: (1) Global Health, (2) Energy, (3) Information, Society and Culture, (4) Brain and Society, and (5) Education and Human Development. In the long run, however, the initiative is envisioned to expand beyond these themes, with teams connected to and integrated with other activities in the research and teaching space at Duke. For an increasing subset of the faculty, this could provide an opportunity to more fully align teaching and research while at the same time orienting student involvement away from a purely traditional course-based curriculum and causing departments to re-think what it means to develop disciplinary expertise and to contribute to solving problems. And places like SSRI will play a critical role in developing the infrastructure to support the teams that lie at the core of *Bass Connections* and that epitomize what interdisciplinarity at Duke is about: the coming together of strong disciplines to solve problems that require more than one type of expertise. 

: Additional information about
: *Bass Connections* can be found at:
: www.interdisciplinary.duke.edu/

