Our Conversation with Bruno Semenzato

Bruno Semenzato, a Duke senior studying Public Policy with a certificate in Markets and Management Studies, was first drawn to Duke’s combination of excellent academics and top varsity tennis program. During the spring semester of his freshman year, he took Tony Brown’s class, Social Entrepreneurship in Action, and tackled a community problem. Bruno’s team developed Connect Fellows, a summer program for first and second year undergraduate students, to explore business and entrepreneurship through internships in Brazil. Connect Fellows gives young students business experience based on “spark,” initiative, and motivation, as opposed to previous credentials.

Duke I&E: Tell me more about how Connect Fellows got started and the influence of Tony Brown’s class, Social Entrepreneurship in Action.

BS: The purpose of the class was to solve community problems through, not only teaching the steps of establishing a program and developing a program proposal, but also actually starting a program. The “action” component of the class was very important, and we were graded on our execution of our idea, not just the planning. Our target was young students who wanted real world, hands-on experience in business, but who did not have the credentials to get into a business group at Duke or to be part of a business-related program.

Initially, the idea was to exchange internships between students with successful parents who are entrepreneurs. We wanted the students to provide an internship for their friend and their friend would provide an internship for them, however it’s hard to just ask people if they have successful parents or not. We thought it would be better to use the resources I had in Brazil to find internship opportunities there and connect Duke students with unique work experience in Brazil. The summer following the class in the spring, we hosted 10 students in Brazil.

Duke I&E: Have you had any other classes or experiences at Duke that have helped shape Connect Fellows?

BS: Yes, definitely! I think every class. My economics classes and management classes focused on cost, helping me learn how to make the program feasible and sustainable. Also, It’s a lot about problem solving and adapting to the situation. Students face problems every summer, and I have to make sure the problems are solved, even though I’m not there. I have to make sure they are set, that they have a safe place to live, good transportation, good work environment, good relationships with their bosses, and overall good experiences. There’s no specific class that stands out, but the problem solving ability I’ve developed throughout these four years is crucial.

Duke I&E: What’s next for Connect Fellows? Are there any plans to scale this program to other universities?
BS: Right now we’re establishing the groups of people who will take care of the program after I leave. I graduate in December, and, after Duke, I plan to go back to Brazil to start my own business. I’m excited to continue with the program from Brazil, but I need make sure the program will be sustainable on Duke’s end. In Brazil, it will be easier for me to develop the connections with companies and helping students over the summers. Right now we’re working to continuously improve the program and work with some academic departments, like I&E, to get the internships approved as required internships. For now, we are not interested in scaling. In the future, I think there’s definitely room for expansion and we’ll consider that. I think we would expand the program at Duke first and then expand elsewhere. Right now, our budget allows us to connect 4-6 students with opportunities every summer.

Duke I&E: Do you have any advice for other undergraduate students who are interested in pursuing their own venture?
BS: I would recommend that they participate in our program! They see what these entrepreneurs are doing and learn from their experiences, then they would be encouraged to come back and do it themselves.