



## Meet the Brain Institute Director of Community Engagement

**Boca Raton, Fla. (August 17, 2016)** – Nicole Baganz, Ph.D., research assistant professor of biomedical science in the Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine, has been appointed director of community engagement and programming for FAU's Brain Institute. Baganz is based on the Jupiter campus, where she investigates how immune system activation can modulate brain serotonin signaling and serve as a mechanism to translate early-life stress into risk for behavioral disorders.



“Nicole’s work in animal models has shown us that peripheral inflammation can translate into anxiety- and despair-like behavior by triggering specific cell signaling cascades inside serotonin neurons,” said Randy D. Blakely, founding executive director of the Institute. “Her work is revealing new targets for medications that may one day represent the front-line in our treatment of mood disorders.”

In her role with the Brain Institute, Baganz will spearhead efforts of the Institute to communicate the promises and progress of brain research to the general public, business community and government leaders through outreach programs, public lectures, lay-friendly scientific exhibits and workshops, and other special events.

Baganz grew up in Wisconsin and received her M.S. in Traditional Chinese Medicine in Chicago. After obtaining her Ph.D. in Physiology from the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, Baganz served as a postdoctoral fellow and research instructor at Vanderbilt University. For over 10 years, she has pursued research into the proteins that control chemical signaling in the brain, with a particular focus on the serotonin transporter – a brain target for the antidepressant Prozac. In recent years, she turned her attention to investigating whether mechanisms that regulate the transporter are particularly vulnerable to early-life stress, leading to a life-long propensity for mood disorders such as depression. Baganz’ article describing some of her current research interests was featured as the first guest writing piece for Scientific American’s SciCurious blog, which can be found [here](#).

Baganz was recognized in 2015 by the Society for Neuroscience, the largest body of scientists focused on brain research and brain disorders, with its [Next Generation Award](#) for her extensive community outreach and public event programming.

The inspiration behind all of Baganz’s work is her own sister’s struggle with mental illness. “Watching what my sister went through, what my family went through ... I thought there has to be something we can do to help alleviate the pain — and offer empathy — to people suffering from mental illness and to the families suffering along with them,” she said. To read her award-winning piece about her personal experience, click [here](#).

“I was raised with a sister with severe mental illness, which eventually claimed her life. My experience growing up with her and observing her daily struggle with her disorders fueled my motivation to pursue a career in neuroscience research to eliminate the stigma that remains attached to mental illness. Now, I am thrilled to be at FAU to continue my research and connect with the community.”