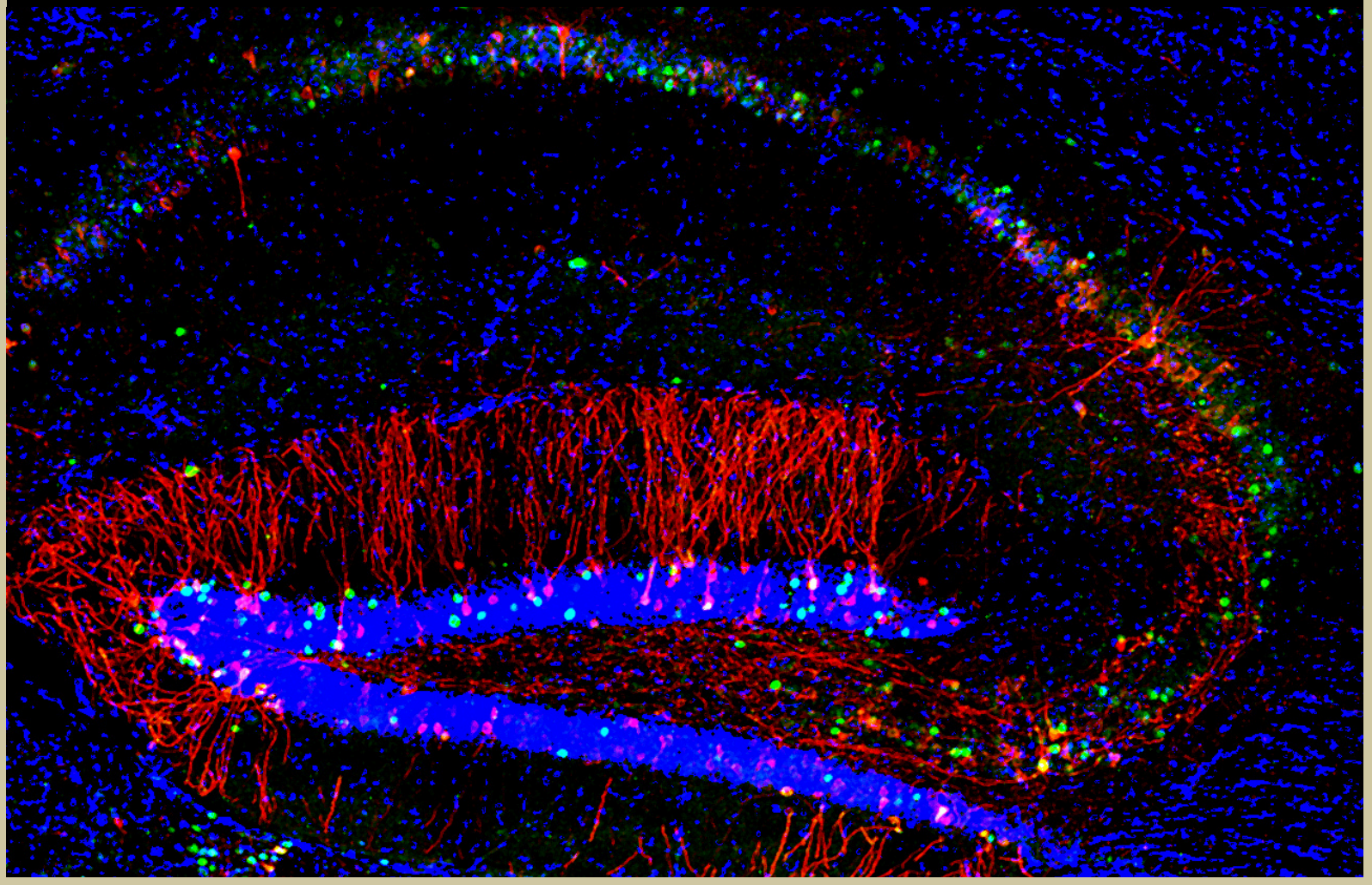
UCLA BRI NEWSLETTER

Advancing Neuroscience through Discovery, Advocacy, Education, and Engagement

SPRING 2026 | ISSUE NO. 07



Cover Story: Connecting Memories

How does the brain decide which memories belong together? UCLA researchers discovered a neural circuit that helps connect related experiences into lasting memories, offering new insight into how the brain organizes what we remember. **Cover image:** Fluorescent imaging of hippocampal circuits from the featured *Nature Neuroscience* study. Read the full story on page 7.

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UCLA Brain Research Institute

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A Defining Moment for Scientific Research

Although SB 895 is unlikely to appear on the November 2026 ballot, the movement it inspired continues to strengthen advocacy for scientific research in California and beyond.

Over the past several months, California's proposed Science and Health Research Bond (SB 895) sparked one of the largest statewide conversations about scientific research in recent memory. Researchers, clinicians, students, labor organizations, patients, universities, and community advocates came together to make the case that sustained investment in research is essential for California's future.

Although SB 895 passed the California Senate, it did not advance through the legislative process in time to qualify for the November 2026 ballot. Nevertheless, the coalition it helped build—and the conversations it sparked—continue to shape advocacy for scientific research at both the state and national levels.

The campaign has evolved into a broader effort to strengthen public support for scientific research. At the same time, growing uncertainty surrounding federal research funding has underscored the importance of sustained public investment and science advocacy.

Where Things Stand Today

- SB 895 passed the California Senate
- Did not advance through the Legislature in time for the November 2026 ballot
- An unprecedented statewide coalition formed in support of research
- UC campuses mobilized thousands of research advocates
- Federal research funding uncertainty continues
- Advocacy efforts extend beyond SB 895

How can we ensure scientific discovery remains strong for future generations?

Thousands of researchers, students, educators, workers, and community members gathered in Sacramento on May 4, 2026, to advocate for sustained investment in science and research.

The proposed legislation highlighted the importance of sustained investment in scientific research, workforce development, and research infrastructure at a time when institutions across the country face growing uncertainty surrounding federal research funding.

At the federal level, researchers nationwide are examining a proposed rule that could significantly change how research grants are reviewed and awarded.

Together, these developments have reinforced a central question:

How can we sustain scientific discovery during a period of unprecedented change?

For neuroscience, the answer has profound implications. Breakthroughs in Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, autism, epilepsy, mental illness, brain injury, sleep disorders, and neurodevelopmental conditions all depend on sustained investment, scientific collaboration, and rigorous peer-reviewed research.

Building a Statewide Movement for Research

Since our last issue, the campaign surrounding SB 895 brought together one of the broadest coalitions in California's recent research history. Researchers, students, clinicians, labor organizations, patients, universities, and community advocates united around a shared commitment to sustained investment in science and health research. Although the legislative path has changed, the campaign elevated public research as a statewide priority, strengthened partnerships across California, and demonstrated the power of a unified scientific community.

State Senator Scott Wiener speaks at the May 4 Sacramento rally in support of SB 895, emphasizing the importance of long-term investment in scientific research, innovation, and public benefit.

During legislative deliberations, the proposed bond was revised from $23 billion to $12 billion while maintaining its central goal of strengthening California's research enterprise through investments in scientific discovery, innovation, workforce development, and research infrastructure.

Strong public research depends on sustained investment, public trust, and continued advocacy.

UCLA Leadership Calls for Action

In June, UCLA leadership encouraged faculty, staff, trainees, and students to support SB 895 while highlighting the importance of protecting California's research enterprise during a period of unprecedented federal uncertainty.

"Together, we built a broad coalition that helped spark a national conversation about science, research, and why it matters to everyone."

— James B. Milliken
President, University of California

What the Campaign Achieved

- ✔️ Passed the California Senate
- ✔️ Built one of California's largest research coalitions
- ✔️ Mobilized thousands of advocates statewide
- ✔️ Elevated public research as a statewide priority

UCLA's message emphasized that research drives scientific discovery, trains the next generation of scientists, supports economic growth, and improves public health throughout California.

It also encouraged members of the UCLA community to continue engaging policymakers and sharing how research benefits patients, families, and communities. While the legislative path for SB 895 has changed, the coalition, partnerships, and public engagement it inspired continue to strengthen support for scientific research across California.

A NEW FEDERAL PROPOSAL SPARKS NATIONAL DISCUSSION

Proposed changes to federal grantmaking have prompted researchers, universities, and scientific organizations nationwide to examine what they could mean for the future of scientific research.

While California continues to explore long-term strategies to strengthen research, an important national discussion is also unfolding at the federal level.

In June 2026, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) released a proposed rule that would make significant changes to how federal grants are reviewed, awarded, managed, and terminated across government agencies.

The proposal has generated extensive discussion among universities, scientific societies, patient advocacy organizations, and researchers across the country.

At the center of many of these discussions is a simple question:

How should scientific research be evaluated and supported?

Peer review helps ensure that research funding decisions are informed by scientific expertise and evidence.

Learn More
NPR Coverage of the Proposed Rule
Stand Up for Science Briefing

Key Proposed Changes

The proposed OMB rule includes provisions that would:

- **Reduce the role of independent peer review** in federal funding decisions
- **Expand political oversight** of federal research funding
- **Increase agency authority** to terminate grants before completion
- **Limit international collaborations and scientific exchanges**
- **Restrict reimbursement of publication costs,** potentially creating challenges for open-access publishing requirements

The proposal is currently open for public comment while federal agencies review feedback from researchers, institutions, and members of the public. **Submit your comment!**
Public comments are accepted through July 13, 2026

Research depends on stable, predictable funding. Faculty, trainees, and research staff rely on long-term grant support to maintain salaries, laboratories, equipment, reagents, and years of scientific work. Increased uncertainty in research funding can disrupt ongoing projects, delay discoveries, and affect the people and infrastructure that make scientific progress possible.

Many researchers and scientific organizations have also expressed concern that reducing the role of independent peer review or increasing political influence over funding decisions could weaken one of the longstanding principles of U.S. biomedical research: that scientific proposals are evaluated primarily on scientific merit by experts in the field.

While the outcome of the proposal remains uncertain, researchers across the country continue to follow these discussions closely because policies governing research funding influence how future discoveries are supported.

Together, these state and federal developments underscore that the future of scientific discovery depends not only on groundbreaking ideas, but also on policies that sustain rigorous, independent, and collaborative research.

SCAN FOR DIGITAL COPY OF THIS PAGE TO ACCESS LINKS

YOUR VOICE MATTERS

How You Can Continue Supporting Scientific Research

Scientific discovery depends on more than experiments. It also depends on sustained public investment, thoughtful science policy, and people who communicate the value of research to their communities and policymakers.

Although SB 895 is unlikely to appear on the November 2026 ballot, the conversations, partnerships, and momentum it inspired continue to strengthen support for scientific research. There are many meaningful ways members of the UCLA neuroscience community can continue supporting scientific research through education, advocacy, public engagement, and community partnerships.

*Faculty, staff, trainees, and students from **UCLA** joined colleagues across the **University of California** system in Sacramento to advocate for sustained investment in scientific research and public higher education.*

KEY ADVOCACY TIMELINE

NOW

Stay Connected

Contact your elected representatives.
Join the UC Advocacy Network (UCAN)

July 13, 2026

OMB Public Comment Deadline

Submit comments on proposed federal grantmaking changes

ONGOING

Public Engagement & Science Advocacy

Share your research story
Support science communication
Participate in outreach activities

Ways to Get Involved

Stay Engaged

- Join UCAN
- Connect with your legislators
- Stay informed about future science initiatives

Submit Public Comments

- OMB Federal Grantmaking Proposal
- Comment Submission Portal
- Deadline: July 13, 2026

Share Your Story

- Save Our Science Research Funding Uncertainly Survey

Help document how federal funding uncertainty is affecting researchers, trainees, staff, patients, and institutions across California.

- Highlight Students & Trainees
- Engage Your Community

Get Involved

- Mentor students
- Volunteer
- Support science education
- Join the BRI Community

Scientific discovery thrives when research, advocacy, education, mentorship, and public engagement work together.

Research Highlights

Connecting Memories

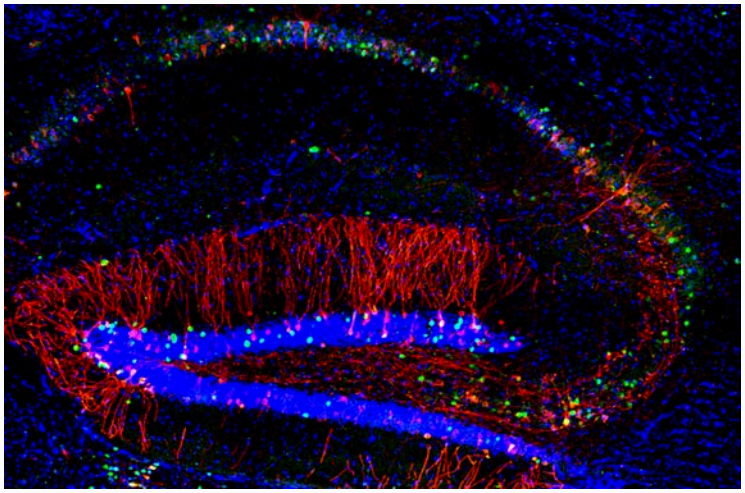
André de Sousa, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral fellow
Department of Neurobiology
UCLA

Alcino J. Silva, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Neurobiology
UCLA

Have you ever noticed that some memories seem to be connected to one another? When you remember one, you almost always remember the other. This is not a bug, but an important feature the brain uses to organize related information. But how does the brain do this? And how does it prevent inappropriate links between unrelated events?

In this study, led by Dr. André de Sousa, a UCLA postdoctoral fellow and first author, together with Dr. Alcino J. Silva, Distinguished Professor of Neurobiology at UCLA BRI and senior author, researchers used mouse models to understand how the brain controls the organization of different memories. They discovered a novel neural circuit that allows one brain region, the prefrontal cortex, to directly influence how memories are encoded in another brain region, the hippocampus. This circuit helps determine whether related memories are stored within the same population of neurons, effectively creating a physical link between memories in the brain. As a result, retrieving one memory can directly activate another.

These findings provide new insight into how the brain organizes information and may help researchers better understand cognitive changes associated with aging and neuropsychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, where inappropriate links between memories can contribute to symptoms including delusions and confabulations.



Fluorescent imaging reveals neuronal populations involved in memory encoding within the hippocampus. The study identified a circuit through which the prefrontal cortex influences how related memories are stored and linked.

The brain rarely stores memories in isolation. Experiences that occur close together in time often become linked, allowing one memory to trigger recall of another. Understanding how the brain organizes these connections may provide insight into normal learning and memory as well as conditions such as aging, schizophrenia, and other disorders where memory associations become disrupted.

Read the full *Nature Neuroscience* (2026) article.

Expecting the Unexpected

UCLA Researchers Reveal How the Brain Tracks Past Decisions and Outcomes

Everyday decisions depend on our ability to learn from past experiences. A brain region called the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) helps us monitor outcomes and adjust our behavior when things do not go as expected.

In a recent study published in Nature Communications, BRI member Dr. Anne M. Churchland and project scientist Dr. Lukas Oesch investigated whether neurons in the ACC continue monitoring previous actions and outcomes even when decision-making rules remain unchanged.

Using a perceptual decision-making task in mice, the researchers found that both individual neurons and large populations of neurons maintained detailed information about recent choices and their outcomes over several seconds. These neural signals were remarkably consistent across animals and could not be explained simply by body movements or posture.

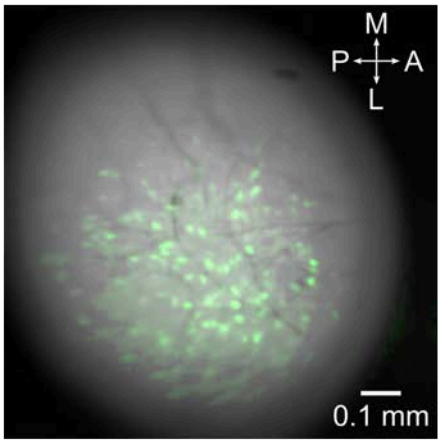
The findings suggest that the ACC continuously maintains an internal record of recent experiences—even in stable and predictable environments.

Lukas Oesch, Ph.D.
Project Scientist, Neurobiology
UCLA

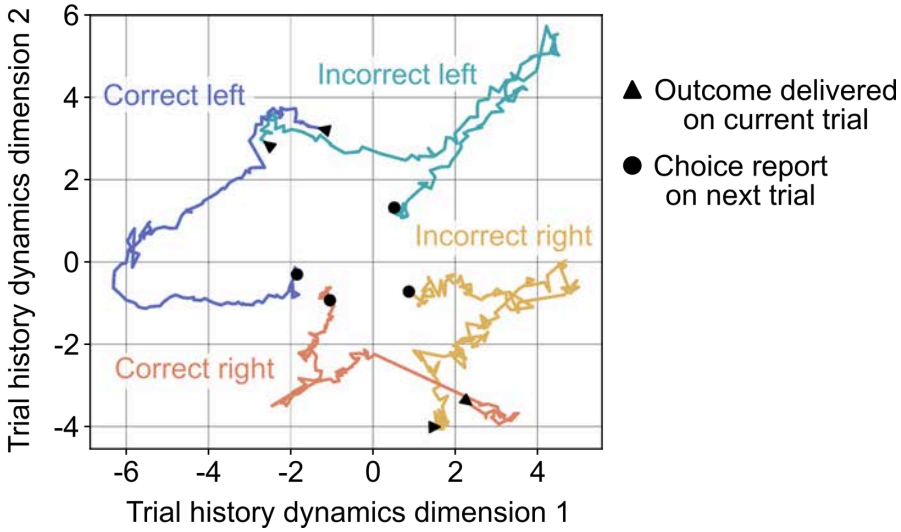
Anne K. Churchland, Ph.D.
Professor, Neurobiology
UCLA

Read the full *Nature Communications* (2026) article.

Snapshot of ACC neuron activity



Unfolding of ACC population activity over time



Neural activity in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) revealed consistent representations of recent choices and outcomes. The findings suggest that the ACC maintains a running record of decision history even in predictable environments.

The brain may be constantly preparing for change—even when nothing appears to be changing. By maintaining a record of recent actions and outcomes, the ACC may help ensure we are ready to adapt when unexpected events occur.

Advancing Brain Health and Restoring Vision

UCLA Study on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Psilocybin for Depression Receives National Attention

Marc J. Weintraub, Ph.D.
Assistant Clinical Professor, Psychiatry & Biobehavioral Sciences, UCLA

David J. Miklowitz, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychiatry in the Division of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, UCLA

Major depressive disorder (MDD) affects millions of people worldwide and remains a leading cause of disability, highlighting the need for innovative treatment approaches.

A recent UCLA study led by Dr. Marc J. Weintraub, with Dr. David J. Miklowitz as senior author, explored the combination of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and psilocybin for major depressive disorder. The study was recently highlighted by the Brain & Behavior Research Foundation (BBRF), bringing national attention to this emerging area of mental health research.

The pilot study examined whether pairing an evidence-based psychotherapy with supervised psilocybin sessions could improve treatment outcomes for individuals with depression. Participants experienced rapid reductions in depressive symptoms, with many maintaining improvements three months after treatment. The findings suggest that CBT and psilocybin may have complementary effects, combining practical tools for long-term behavioral change with experiences that may promote emotional insight and cognitive flexibility. While larger controlled studies are still needed, the results highlight a promising direction for future depression treatment research.

National Recognition

Featured by the Brain & Behavior Research Foundation

"Small Pilot Trial Combining Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) with Psilocybin Yields Rapid, Significant, and Sustained Relief of Major Depression Symptoms"

Read the J Affect Disord (2026) article.

Mapping the Neural Pathways of Vision

Martin O. Bohlen, Ph.D.
Research Scientist, Sommer Lab, Duke University

Greg Field, Ph.D.
Associate Professor-in-residence, Ophthalmology UCLA

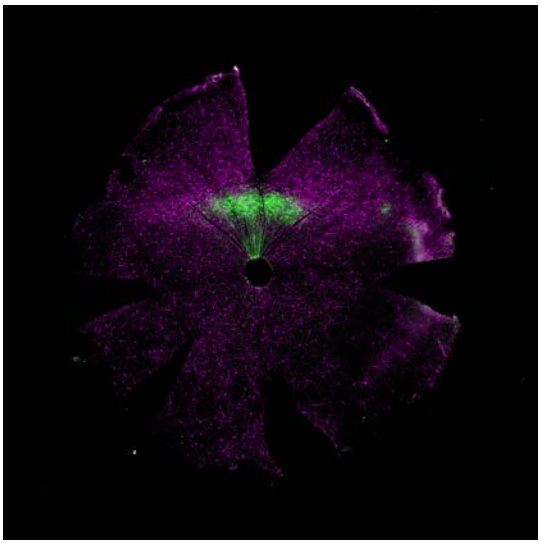
In a study led by Dr. Martin O. Bohlen (Duke University) and BRI member Dr. Greg Field, Associate Professor-in-Residence of Ophthalmology at UCLA, researchers developed a new high-throughput method that connects retinal ganglion cells to different regions of the brain while simultaneously determining the visual information those cells transmit.

These tools can help researchers better understand how visual information is processed in health and disease.

Retinal ganglion cells serve as the eye's output neurons, carrying visual signals from the retina to brain regions involved in image formation, circadian rhythms, eye movements, and other visual functions. Understanding how these cells are organized is essential for deciphering how visual information is processed throughout the nervous system.

The new approach enables researchers to map these connections more efficiently and at a larger scale than previously possible, creating new opportunities to investigate how visual circuits are organized in both healthy and diseased nervous systems.

Read the Cell Rep Methods (2026) article.



Whole-mount retina showing retinal ganglion cell projections. The new UCLA method enables large-scale mapping of retinal neurons and the visual information they transmit to different brain regions.

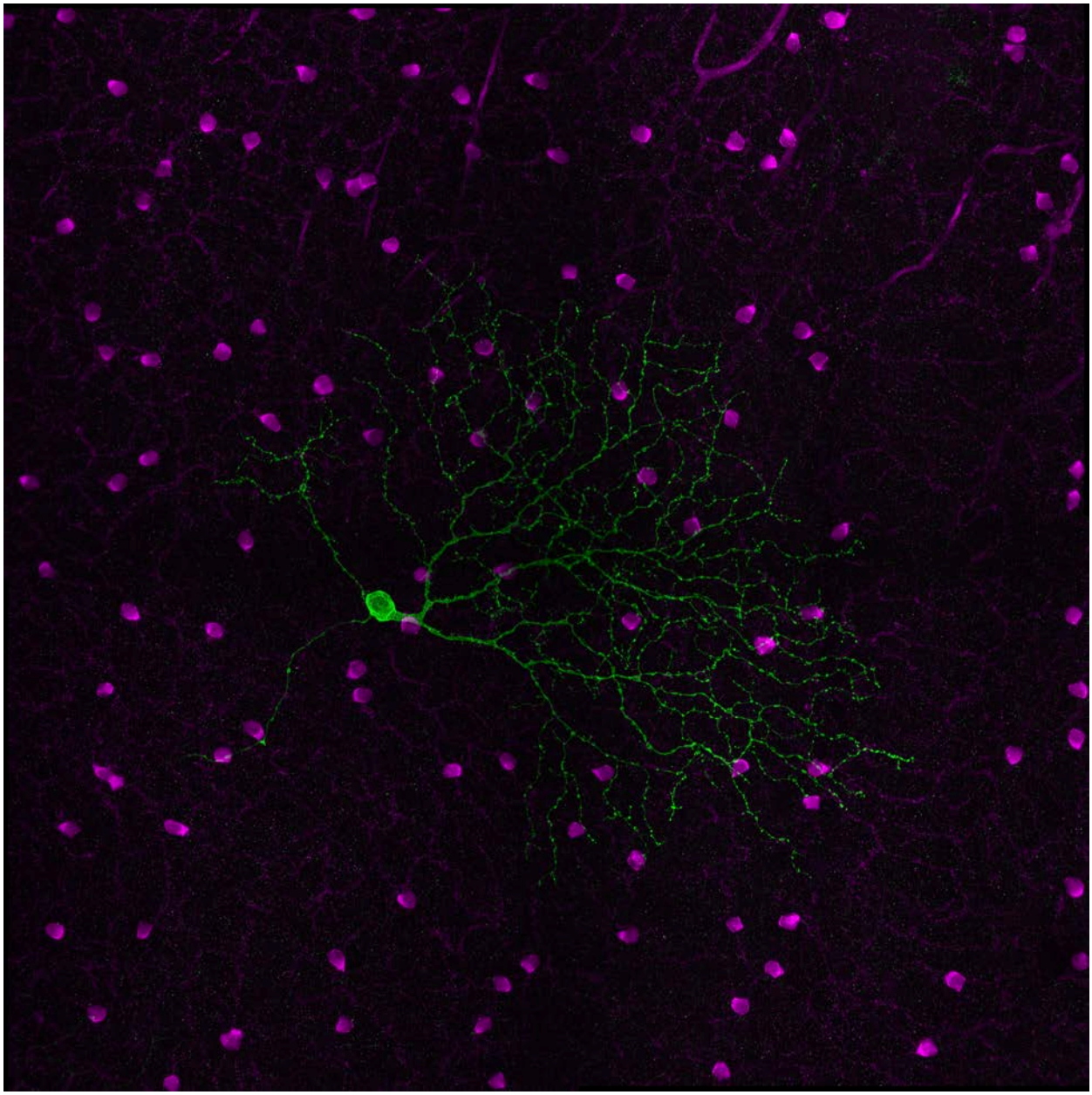
NIH Renews R01 Support for Visual Neuroscience Research

Greg Field, Ph.D., and Alex Huk, Ph.D., received a competitive renewal of their NIH R01 grant, Elucidating Novel Features of Visual Processing and Physiological Connectivity from Retina to Primary Visual Cortex (R01 EY031059).

The award will support continued investigation of how visual information is encoded in the retina and transmitted to the brain.

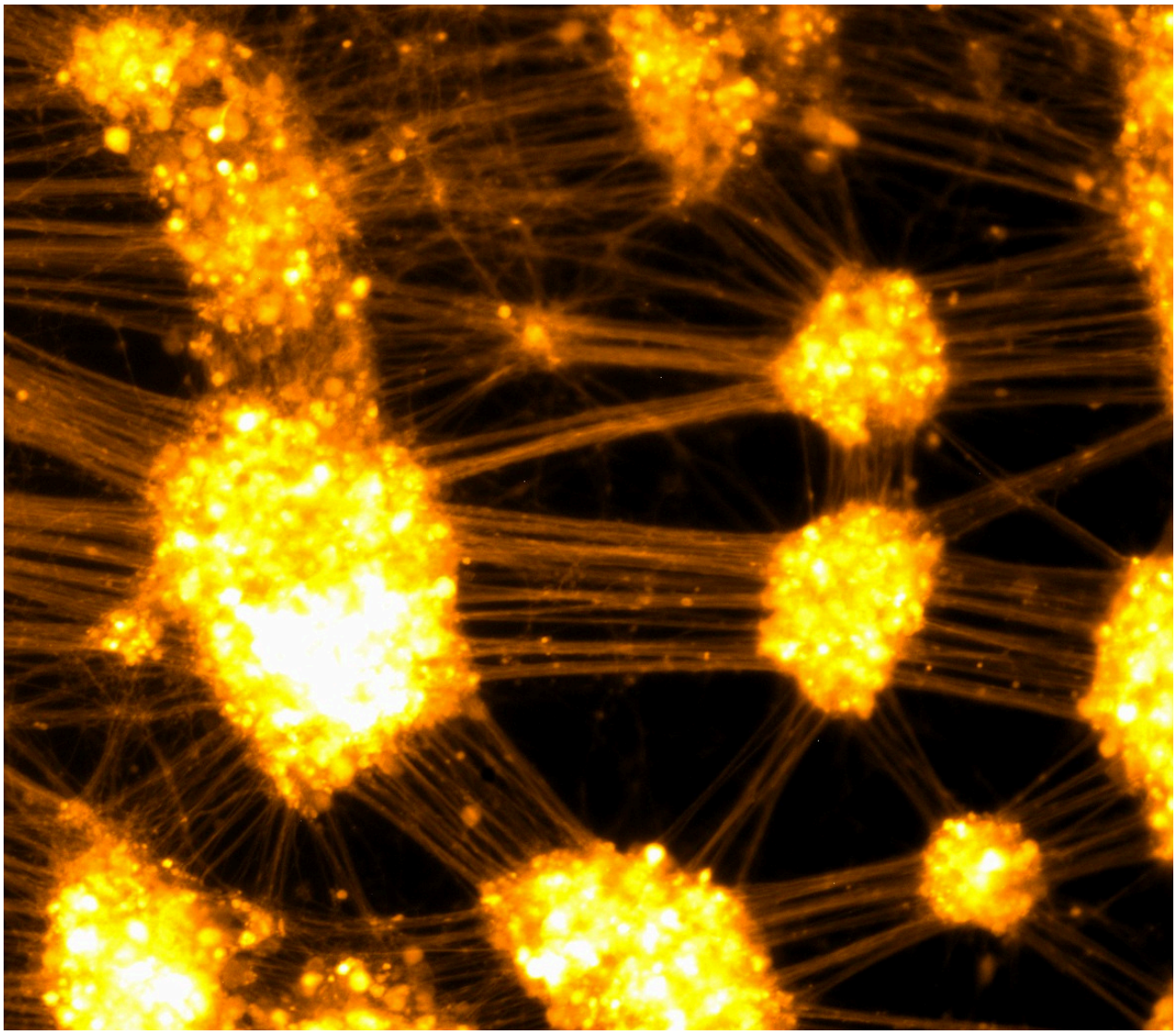
NEUROSCIENCE THROUGH THE LENS

Scientific research often reveals images as remarkable as the discoveries themselves. Featured in the BRI Neuroscience Calendar, these images from UCLA neuroscience laboratories capture the beauty, complexity, and extraordinary cellular architecture revealed through neuroscience research.



An asymmetric macaque retinal ganglion cell labeled with GFP following retrograde viral injections into the superior colliculus (green), surrounded by starburst amacrine cells labeled for ChAT (magenta).

Image by **Anushka Narasani**
Greg Field Lab, UCLA



Doxycycline-induced Kolf2.1 Ngn cells at Day 28 of differentiation, maintained as intact colonies and showing robust axonal outgrowth. Cells were plated on GelTrex, expressing dTomato under the Synapsin promoter and imaged at 10X magnification in the CY3 channel.

Image by: **Anup Khanal**
Ben Novitch Lab, UCLA

Have a research image to share?

Submit your images for consideration in future BRI communications and features. Submitting for the 2027 BRI Neuroscience Calendar? Upload your image and legend by September 4, 2026. Submit to the BRI Calendar.

COMMUNITY ACHIEVEMENTS & RECOGNITION

This season, members of the UCLA neuroscience community received recognition through national and international honors, competitive awards, major research milestones, and institutional achievements.

GABRIEL A. VIGNOLLE, PH.D.

Poster Award at the 2026 Goodman-Luskin Microbiome Center Symposium

BRI postdoctoral scholar Dr. Gabriel Vignolle received **Third Place Poster Presentation Award at the 2026 Goodman-Luskin Microbiome Center Symposium** for his poster, *From Maps to Mechanisms: Geospatial Burden Shapes the Human Brain-Gut-Microbiome.*

Using a multi-omics approach integrating microbiome sequencing, metabolomics, immune profiling, neuroimaging, and geospatial data from 366 adults in the Los Angeles region, Gabriel examined how environmental and social conditions may influence biological systems connecting the gut, immune system, and brain. The study identified coordinated changes in microbial metabolism, immune signaling, and brain networks associated with neighborhood-level burden, providing new insights into how social and environmental factors may become biologically embedded and influence health outcomes.

Read more about the Goodman-Luskin Microbiome Center.

MICHAEL APOSTOL PH.D. STUDENT, NSIDP

Invited Young Scientist, Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting

UCLA Neuroscience Interdepartmental Program (NSIDP) Ph.D. candidate Michael Apostol was selected to attend the prestigious 75th Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting as an Invited Young Scientist and University of California President's Lindau Fellow.

The Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings bring together Nobel Prize winners and outstanding early-career scientists from around the world to foster scientific exchange, mentorship, and international collaboration. Selection as a Lindau Fellow is highly competitive and recognizes exceptional scientific achievement and leadership potential.

Read more about the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings

UCLA-Developed Glioblastoma Therapy Advances to Clinical Testing

A collaborative team of UCLA scientists has advanced a promising new therapy for glioblastoma, one of the most aggressive forms of brain cancer, into early clinical testing.

The investigational drug, KTM-101, was developed through a multidisciplinary effort involving BRI members Dr. David Nathanson, Associate Professor of Molecular and Medical Pharmacology; Dr. Timothy Cloughesy, neuro-oncologist and leader in brain tumor research; and Dr. Michael Jung, Distinguished Professor of Chemistry.

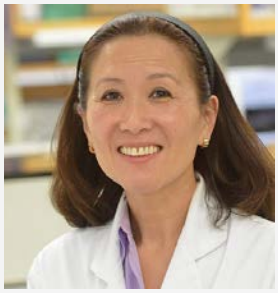
DAVID NATHANSON, PH.D.

MICHAEL JUNG, PH.D.

TIMOTHY CLOUGHESY, M.D.

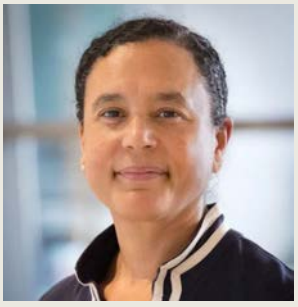
Clinical development is being supported through UCLA's Brain Tumor Program, led by Dr. Cloughesy and Linda Liau, M.D., Ph.D., MBA, Chair of Neurosurgery.

The advancement of KTM-101 to clinical evaluation highlights the power of collaborative neuroscience research to accelerate the translation of laboratory discoveries into potential treatments for patients with devastating neurological diseases.



LINDA LIAU, M.D., PH.D.

Major Investment to Advance Youth Mental Health



HELENA HANSEN, M.D., PH.D.

A new $33 million investment from the Ballmer Group will strengthen youth mental health through expanded training and workforce development programs. The initiative includes support for fellowships in UCLA's Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences under the leadership of Helena Hansen, M.D., Ph.D., Professor and Interim Chair of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences and Interim Director of the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior.

The Ballmer Group's investment is designed to train a new generation of mental health professionals from underserved communities, including South Los Angeles and East Los Angeles, to return and serve those communitites through clinical care, community-based prevention, and mental health systems development. In addition to establishing a new Community Child Psychiatry Fellowship for physicians, the investment will also support a community mental health training track within UCLA's Master of Social Work program and an undergraduate psychology pathway that prepares graduates for certification as mental health counselors.

By expanding training opportunities across medicine, social work, and undergraduate education, the initiative aims to

strengthen the mental health workforce while increasing access to high-quality, evidence-based care for children, adolescents, and families. The investment reflects UCLA's continued leadership in addressing youth mental health through research, education, and community partnership.

"This is an unprecedented opportunity in the midst of a youth mental health crisis. The Ballmer Group fellows will strengthen mental health care and prevention in the communities that need it the most, and will create a cohort of mental health systems leaders who are committed to the well being and agency of the most marginalized young people in our state."

— Helena Hansen, M.D., Ph.D.

CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE: BRI AWARDS

At the 2026 BRI End-of-Year Gathering, members of the UCLA neuroscience community were recognized for exceptional achievements in research, mentoring, outreach, and service.

35th Annual H.W. Magoun Distinguished Lecture

CARLOS PORTERA-CAILLIAU, M.D., PH.D.

The H.W. Magoun Distinguished Lecture is among the Brain Research Institute's highest honors, recognizing internationally distinguished scientists whose work has advanced our understanding of the nervous system.

Selected as the 35th H.W.Magoun Distinguished Lecturer, Dr. Carlos Portera-Cailliau is widely recognized for his pioneering research on neural circuit development, autism spectrum disorders, and neurodevelopmental disease. His laboratory combines advanced imaging approaches with animal models to understand how alterations in brain development contribute to neurological disorders.

Read more about the Magoun Lecture.

Eva Kavan Prize for Excellence in Research on the Brain

CAROLYN AMIR

Carolyn Amir, an NSIDP Ph.D. student, received the Eva Kavan Prize for Excellence in Research on the Brain, recognizing outstanding achievement in basic neuroscience research by a graduate student.

Read more about the Eva Kavan Prize.

The Inaugural Alcino Silva Outstanding Science and Service to the Community Award

MICHAEL RYAN, PH.D.

Neurobiology postdoctoral scholar Dr. Michael Ryan received the inaugural Alcino Silva Outstanding Science and Service to the Community Award, recognizing a BRI member whose contributions have advanced both neuroscience research and service to the broader community.

Named in honor of Dr. Alcino Silva, Distinguished Professor of Neurobiology, Psychiatry, and Psychology at UCLA, Director Emeritus of the UCLA Integrated Center for Learning and Memory, and the Founding President of the Molecular and Cellular Cognition Society, the award celebrates scientific excellence alongside a sustained commitment to community engagement and service.

The Thirty-Third Annual Samuel Eiduson Student Lectures Award

MICHAEL GONGWER, PH.D. AND ERIN MORROW

UCLA-Caltech Medical Scientist Training Program student Dr. Michael Gongwer and Cognitive Neuroscience Ph.D. student Erin Morrow received the Thirty-Third Annual Samuel Eiduson Student Lectures Award. Established in honor of Dr. Samuel Eiduson, the founding Chair of UCLA's Interdepartmental Neuroscience Ph.D. Program, the award recognizes outstanding graduate student research and scholarship in neuroscience.

Read more about the Eiduson Student Lectureship.

Excellence in Academic Mentoring Award

ELLE RATHBUN

JENNIFER LEE

STEPHANIE LEAL, PH.D.

Elle Rathbun, Neuroscience Ph.D. student; Jennifer L. Lee, Neuroscience Student Affairs Officer; and Dr. Stephanie Leal, Assistant Professor of Integrative Biology and Physiology, were recognized with the Excellence in Academic Mentoring Award for their exceptional commitment to mentoring, trainee development, and fostering the success of students and early-career researchers across the UCLA neuroscience community.

FELLOWSHIPS & EARLY-CAREER AWARDS

Prestigious fellowships and early-career awards provide critical support for graduate students and postdoctoral scholars as they pursue innovative neuroscience research. This spring, UCLA neuroscience trainees were recognized through nationally competitive fellowships and research awards.

Friends Research Scholar Award

Neurobiology postdoctoral scholar Dr. Arash Bellafard has been selected as a 2026-2028 Friends Research Scholar by the Friends of the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior.

The highly competitive Friends Research Scholar Award provides $25,000 annually for two years to support innovative early-career investigators pursuing research in neuroscience and mental health.

Dr. Bellafard's project investigates how cell-type-specific mechanisms contribute to working memory instability in a 22q11.2 deletion mouse model of schizophrenia. His research aims to better understand the neural circuit mechanisms underlying cognitive dysfunction associated with schizophrenia.

ARASH BELLAFARD, PH.D.

The award recognizes promising early-career investigators whose research has the potential to advance our understanding of the brain and improve mental health.

National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP)

The NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP) is among the nation's most prestigious graduate fellowships, supporting outstanding students pursuing research careers in science and engineering.

2026 NSF GRFP Recipients

Mika Holtz
Ph.D. Student, NSIDP
DeNardo lab, UCLA

"I proposed to study cell type and circuit specific changes due to stress, and I am excited to pursue these interests in the DeNardo lab. I am grateful to the NSF GRFP in supporting my graduate career."

Syon Mansur
Ph.D. Student, NSIDP
Zylberberg lab, UCLA

"I am a first year NSIDP student in the Zylberberg lab studying biologically plausible learning rules in artificial neural networks. I am profoundly grateful to receive this award."

2026 NSF GRFP Honorable Mentions

Congratulations to these students for receiving 2026 NSF GRFP Honorable Mention recognition.

Rachelle Pamintuan
Ph.D. Student
NSIDP, UCLA

Emily Marzette
Ph.D. Student
NSIDP, UCLA

Nicolette Recchia
Ph.D. Student
NSIDP, UCLA

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH & LEADERSHIP

The UCLA Undergraduate Neuroscience Program provides students with opportunities to engage in research, communicate science, develop leadership skills, and become part of a vibrant neuroscience community from their first year through graduation. This spring, students showcased those experiences through award-winning research, science outreach, scholarship, and community engagement.

Spring 2026 Highlights

100+ Student research and outreach presentations
11 Poster Day & Outreach Day awards presented
14,000+ First-year students welcomed
7,000+ Transfer students reached

A Community of Scholars
Research • Outreach • Leadership • Scholarship • Mentorship

27th Annual Neuroscience Poster Day & 2nd Annual Neuroscience Outreach Day

On **May 20, 2026,** the Undergraduate Neuroscience Program hosted its 27th Annual Neuroscience Poster Day and 2nd Annual Neuroscience Outreach Day at the Hershey Hall Salon and South Courtyard. More than 100 students shared independent research projects, outreach activities, and educational initiatives. A panel of judges recognized outstanding presentations, awarding the top nine research posters and top two outreach projects. Not all award recipients are pictured below. Please see the photo captions and award listings for a complete list of winners.

Project Brainstorm Awardees:
Tucker Gruber & Katya Wardhana

DOPA Team Awardees:
Michelle Bukhman, Shifa Dhar, Gabrielle Elagio, and Dalita Tahmassian

Former UCLA Chancellor Gene Block engages with Melody Shadanloo, an undergraduate presenter during Neuroscience Poster Day, highlighting the importance of undergraduate research and science communication.

Poster Day Awardees:
Raquel Lacabe, Hillary Leeds, Saloni Gune, Mridhula Thyagarajan, Anjana Shriram, Alexander Chatham, Carolina Gura, Natalie Kamp, and Susanna Rivera

"It is uplifting, particularly during these challenging times for higher education, to witness the many ways in which our undergraduate students 'give back' to their communities: from deciphering complex concepts about the brain into easy-to-understand ideas, to pushing the frontiers of scientific knowledge forward through their experiments in our labs, to visiting schoolchildren and seniors across Los Angeles to better understand their perspectives and help guide policymakers."

— Stephanie A. White, Ph.D.
Chair, UCLA Undergraduate Neuroscience Program

Cahill Lab Earns Four Undergraduate Research Awards

Among the many highlights of Poster Day, undergraduate researchers from the Cahill Laboratory received four research awards recognizing outstanding scientific achievement. Undergraduate researchers from Dr. Catherine Cahill's laboratory had an exceptional showing at Poster Day, earning four undergraduate research awards. Their projects highlighted topics in neuropharmacology, chronic pain, opioid seeking, stress-induced reinstatement, and neuromodulation.

Outstanding Poster Award in Undergraduate Research: Hasitha Dangeti and Saba Honarvar, "β-Caryophyllene is not reinforcing in Pain-Free or Chronic Pain States"
Chair's Award for Undergraduate Research: Dylan Cavalheiro, "Vagus Nerve Stimulation Reduces Reinstatement of Drug Seeking of Fentanyl in Rats"
Outstanding Poster Award in Undergraduate Research: Jason Baker, "The Role of the Central Amygdala Kappa Opioid Receptors in Stress-Induced Reinstatement of Opioid Seeking in Chronic Pain"
Chair's Award for Undergraduate Research: Wesley Green, "Cannabidiol and Stress-Induced Reinstatement in Fentanyl-Dependent Mice"

Photo (left to right): Saba Honarvar, Joyce Hao, Yasmin Kaman, Hasitha Dangeti, Dylan Cavalheiro, Isabella Ramos, Samantha Baglot, Shifa Dhar, Dr. Catherine Cahill, Jason Baker, Talan Shuoshuo Li, Janice Wong, Mingyi Wan, Nina Bonaventure, and Bryan Kim. Not pictured: Owen Bella, Chloe Sy Perez, and Wesley Green.

Undergraduate Neuroscience Program representatives welcomed prospective students and families during UCLA's annual Bruin Days events.

Welcoming Future Bruins

The Undergraduate Neuroscience Program welcomed newly admitted students and their families during UCLA's annual First-Year and Transfer Bruin Days on April 11 and May 16. Through an information booth highlighting the neuroscience major and minor, the program connected with more than 14,000 admitted first-year students, 7,000 transfer students, and their guests.

These events provided prospective Bruins with an opportunity to learn about neuroscience at UCLA, explore research and educational opportunities, and connect with members of the undergraduate neuroscience community.

Scheibel Shindig Celebrates Student Scholars

On May 22, the 2025-26 and 2026-27 cohorts of Scheibel Scholars gathered for the annual Scheibel Shindig.

Current and incoming Scheibel Scholars gathered for the annual Scheibel Shindig, a celebration of undergraduate research, mentorship, and community.

Students presented their research, exchanged ideas with peers, and voted on outstanding abstracts while welcoming the incoming cohort of scholars. Neuroscience faculty Dr. Stephanie Leal and Dr. Rafael Romero attended in support of the students' work.

The event helped build community among undergraduate researchers while highlighting the contributions of current and incoming Scheibel Scholars.

2025-26 Scheibel Scholars:
Angela Yang, Daniel Lee, Jay Bhatnagar, Haley Willem, Yixin Wu, Daniel Leal, Irina Kryukov, Emily Lee, Dowson Yang, Olivia Fong, Daniel Jeon, Anjana Shriram, Raquel Schlichting, and Elena Kong

2026-27 Scheibel Scholars:
Elena Kong, Jinheon Choi, Charlene Guo, Roha Thomas, Adeline Sun, Ayush Natarajan, Usayd Ahmed, Fiona Xie, Hayden Zhao, Nina Bonaventure, and Parker Kuo

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UNDERGRADUATE SCIENCE COMMUNICATION SPOTLIGHT

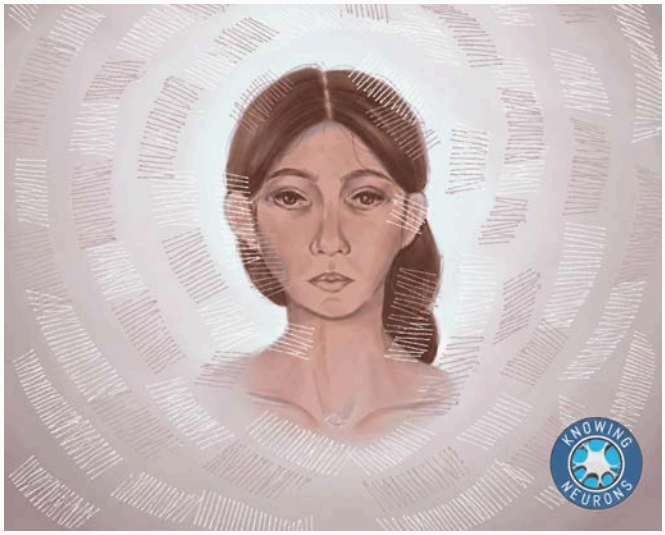
This year, undergraduate students in UCLA's Science Communication Course, **Brain, the Final Frontier: Communicating the Secrets of Our Inner Cosmos,** taught by Dr. Felix Schweizer, Dr. Stephanie White, and Dr. Vidya Saravanapandian, brought neuroscience beyond the classroom through public-facing articles published by Knowing Neurons, an international neuroscience education platform. The course brings together first-year undergraduate students from a wide range of majors, encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration while introducing neuroscience through research, communication, and public engagement.

Featured Student Publications

Screen Addiction in Adolescents

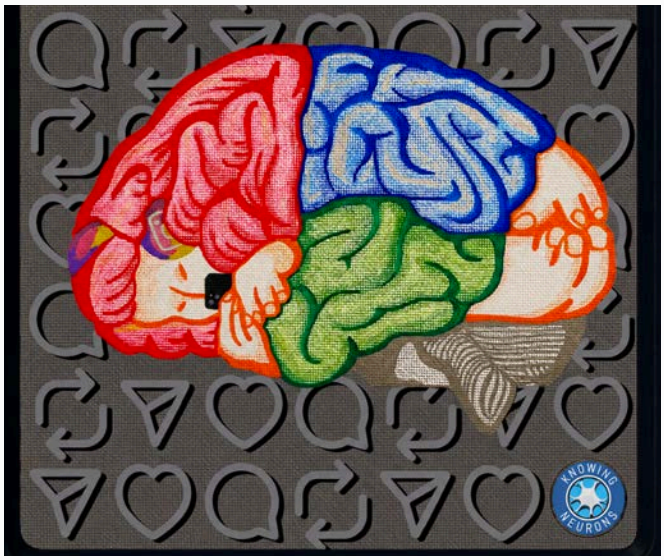
First-authored by *Jasmin Desruisseau and Natalia Medina. Co-authored by Arushi Mishra and Athul Byju.*

Drawing connections between digital addiction and substance addiction, the authors explore how screen dependency may influence brain systems involved in reward processing, impulse control, decision-making, and emotional regulation. The article also discusses why adolescents may be particularly vulnerable and highlights evidence-based approaches for healthier technology use. Read the published article.



research into clear, engaging, and accurate stories for broad audiences. Rather than writing only for specialists, they explored how neuroscience connects to everyday experiences—from adolescent screen use and mental health to sleep, learning, and student wellness.

The published articles featured below showcase the creativity, scientific curiosity, and communication skills of UCLA's next generation of neuroscientists while demonstrating the growing importance of science communication in making research accessible to the public.

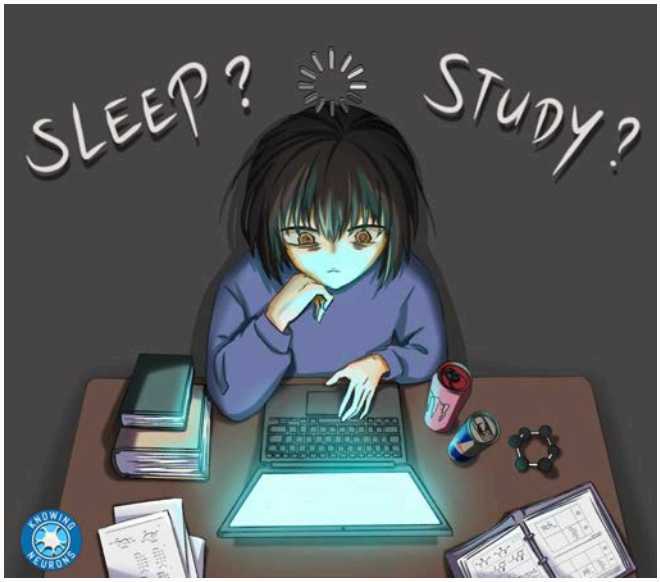


Rethinking Schizophrenia

Written by *Uma Adhye, Nia Banouvong, Caden Gaffaney, and Elliot Stack*

This article explores schizophrenia through biological, cultural, and social lenses. The authors discuss how hallucinations, delusions, and treatment experiences can be shaped by a patient's cultural background, beliefs, and community context. By considering case studies and research on culturally informed care, the article encourages readers to think beyond one-size-

fits-all approaches to mental health treatment and recognize the importance of personalized, socially aware care. Read the published article.



The Ultimate College Dilemma: Should I Study or Sleep?

Written by *Pin Hsuan (Jessica) Yeh, Rumaisa Noorayn Subhani, and Saathvik Kochikar Pai*

Using research on sleep deprivation, mental rotation, EEG, and the P300 brain signal, the authors explain how inadequate sleep slows reaction time, increases errors, and impairs attention and learning. The article demonstrates that sleep is not simply rest—it is a fundamental component of memory, cognitive performance, and academic success.
Read the published article.

Why Science Communication Matters?

Scientific discoveries only improve lives when people can understand and use them. Whether discussing sleep, mental health, technology, or brain development, clear communication helps connect research with educators, families, healthcare professionals, policymakers, and the broader public.

> *"Publishing through this class was one of the first times I had to think about science communication as its own skill, separate from the science itself. Writing about sleep and studying felt like a natural starting point because it's something every college student experiences, but making it scientifically accurate without losing the reader was much harder. I remember asking a friend outside the life sciences to read my draft, and her feedback made me rethink parts I thought were already clear. It made me realize that accuracy is only the beginning. The harder question is whether the science actually connects with someone who has no reason to care about it yet—and that's what this class taught me to think about."*
>
> ***- Pin Hsuan (Jessica) Yeh***
> *Neuroscience, Sci Comm Class Spring 2025*

Through their published science communication articles, UCLA undergraduate students transformed complex neuroscience into accessible, engaging stories while strengthening their skills in critical thinking, scientific writing, and public engagement. Their work demonstrates that tomorrow's neuroscientists are also becoming tomorrow's science communicators.

Brain Awareness Week 2026 Inspires the Next Generation of Neuroscientists

This spring, the UCLA Brain Research Institute welcomed more than 250 middle and high school students, teachers, and chaperones to campus for Brain Awareness Week (BAW) 2026, a week-long celebration of neuroscience education, discovery, and community engagement.

From **March 16 to March 20**, students from *Ascot Avenue Elementary School*, *Virgil Middle School*, *Peary Middle School*, *Gage Middle School*, *Wilmington Middle School*, *and Valley High School*, including several schools participating through Intensive Diagnostic Education Centers, visited campus for immersive neuroscience experiences. Across five days, approximately 50–55 students and educators participated each day.

Through hands-on activities, demonstrations, laboratory visits, and conversations with neuroscientists, students explored topics ranging from brain anatomy and neural communication to sleep, behavior, and neurological disorders. The program provided students with opportunities to engage directly with researchers while learning how neuroscience impacts health, medicine, education, and everyday life.

Students and educators from participating Southern California schools gather outside UCLA during Brain Awareness Week 2026 before a day of neuroscience exploration and discovery.

- **5 days of neuroscience exploration**
- **6 participating schools**
- **250+ students, teachers, and chaperones**
- **Research laboratory tours and hands-on learning experiences**
- **50+ faculty, staff, postdoc, and student volunteers supporting education and outreach**

Hands-On Discovery at UCLA

One of the most valuable aspects of BAW is the opportunity for students to interact directly with scientists and experience research environments firsthand. Whether examining brain specimens, participating in demonstrations, exploring laboratory spaces, or discussing career pathways with researchers, students gained exposure to the many ways neuroscience is studied and applied at UCLA.

(Left) Visiting students explore neuroscience research firsthand through laboratory tours and hands-on demonstrations with UCLA researchers. (Top) Interactive activities introduced students to brain anatomy, neuroscience research, and the tools scientists use to study the nervous system.

Supported by UCLA BRI and UCLA SOLE, Brain Awareness Week 2026 was led by Dr. Vidya Saravanapandian and made possible through the collective efforts of UCLA faculty, trainees, staff, and student volunteers who generously shared their time and expertise. Special thanks to NSIDP graduate students Maddie Bacon and Jennifer An for their assistance coordinating activities throughout the week and helping ensure a successful experience for participating schools.

We also extend our gratitude to Joe Quintero, Patricia Lowe, Priyanka Samra, and Aaron Michner for their support during BAW 2026 and making it a success.

A highlight of the week was the opportunity for students to visit UCLA research laboratories and interact directly with neuroscientists. Special thanks to Drs. Daniel Aharoni, Carrie Bearden, Dean Buonomano, Laura DeNardo, Jeff Donlea, Vidya Saravanapandian, Andrew Wikenheiser, and Chunni Zhu for hosting laboratory tours and research experiences that gave students a firsthand look at how discoveries are made and how neuroscientists investigate the brain, behavior, sleep, and neurological disorders.

Students examine preserved brain specimens during a hands-on neuroscience activity, one of the most popular experiences of BAW

These experiences provided students with firsthand look at how neuroscience research is conducted and the diverse questions scientists investigate to better understand the brain, behavior, and neurological disease.

Community Partners & Volunteers

BAW 2026 was further strengthened by the participation of Cell Scholars, InterAxon, undergraduate students, graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, faculty, and staff volunteers who led demonstrations, answered questions, and helped create memorable experiences for visiting students. Watch highlights from this year's event at BAW movie 2026.

(Left) Students step into the role of neuroscientists during a hands-on neuroanatomy experience, examining real brain specimens and exploring how brain structure relates to behavior, health, and disease.

Now in its 17th year, Brain Awareness Week remains one of the UCLA Brain Research Institute's flagship outreach initiatives, uniting faculty, trainees, staff, and community partners to inspire the next generation of scientists through hands-on neuroscience experiences.

Neuroscience on Tap

Community members gather for a Pint of Science event, where researchers shared cutting-edge discoveries and engaged audiences in conversations about science beyond the university campus.

Over three lively evenings in May, neighborhood venues across Los Angeles transformed into hubs of curiosity as the international Pint of Science festival returned to the city. More than 300 attendees gathered to explore some of science's most intriguing unanswered questions and meet the researchers working to address them.

Pint of Science Brings Research to Neighborhood Bars Across Los Angeles

At the heart of Pint of Science is a simple but powerful idea: for research to truly resonate, it must step beyond the lecture hall and into everyday spaces.

From **May 18–20**, graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and faculty from UCLA and beyond embraced this mission, bringing their work directly to the public in informal and accessible settings.

Presentations spanned a wide range of topics, including neuroscience, health, human decision-making, meteorites, and artificial intelligence. Rather than traditional lectures, the events encouraged conversation and interaction, giving attendees a rare opportunity to engage directly with scientists and learn about current research in a welcoming environment.

The UCLA BRI was proud to support this year's festival. As one of the event's major sponsors, BRI helped advance the shared goal of making science accessible to broader audiences. Many members of the organizing committee are also part of the BRI community, reflecting BRI's ongoing commitment to public engagement and science communication.

Members of the Pint of Science Los Angeles organizing team celebrate another successful year of bringing science directly to the community.

LA Brain Bee Champion Finishes 7th Nationally

After winning the 2026 Los Angeles Brain Bee, co-hosted by UCLA and USC, Aanya Karthik (Redondo Union High School) advanced to represent the Los Angeles chapter at the USA National Brain Bee Championship held at the University of California, Irvine.

The national competition brought together 54 students representing Brain Bee chapters from 33 states across the country. Competitors participated in written and practical neuroscience examinations, demonstrating their knowledge of brain structure, function, disease, and current neuroscience research.

Participants and organizers of the 2026 Los Angeles Brain Bee gather following a day of neuroscience competition, discovery, and community building. The annual event is co-hosted by UCLA and USC.
Photo credit: USC Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute.

Aanya earned an outstanding 7th-place national finish, placing among the top young neuroscience scholars in the nation. Her achievement reflects not only her dedication and enthusiasm for neuroscience, but also the strength of the Los Angeles Brain Bee community and its commitment to inspiring future scientists.

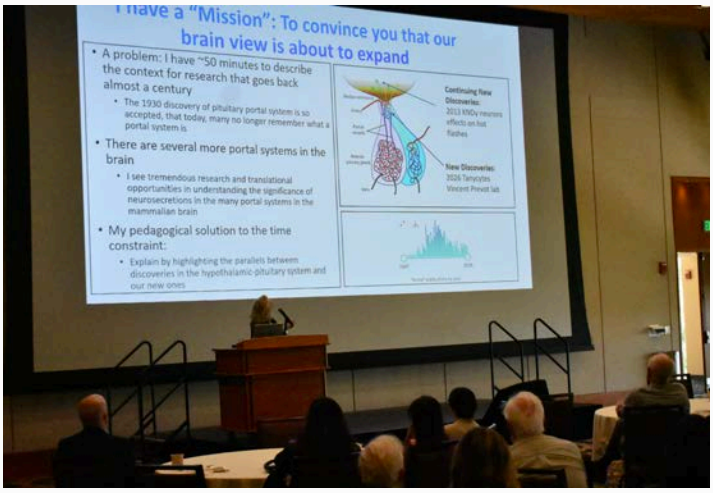
Congratulations to Aanya on this remarkable accomplishment!

Researchers Gather for the 2nd Annual ICSP Spring Symposium

The Integrative Center for Sleep and Performance (ICSP), a center within the UCLA Brain Research Institute led by Dr. Ketema Paul, ICSP Director and Professor of Integrative Biology & Physiology at UCLA, hosted its 2nd Annual Spring Symposium on **June 1**, bringing together researchers, trainees, clinicians, and collaborators for a day of scientific exchange focused on sleep, circadian biology, health, and human performance.

The symposium showcased emerging discoveries from UCLA and beyond while creating opportunities for collaboration across disciplines united by a common goal: understanding how sleep and circadian rhythms shape health, behavior, cognition, and performance.

The program featured keynote presentations by Dr. Rae Silver of Columbia University and Dr. Katja Lamia of Scripps Research, who shared new insights into the neurobiology of sleep, circadian regulation, and metabolism. Additional presentations highlighted innovative research spanning neuromodulation, light-based therapies, athletic performance, neural plasticity, and translational approaches to improving health and well-being.



(Top) Researchers, trainees, clinicians, and collaborators gather for the 2nd Annual ICSP Spring Symposium on June 1, 2026.. (Bottom) Symposium attendees heard keynote presentations from leading experts in sleep, circadian biology, and metabolism.

Trainees presented posters and Data Blitz talks showcasing innovative research across sleep and performance science.

A highlight of the symposium was the strong participation of trainees, whose poster presentations and Data Blitz talks showcased creativity, rigor, and innovation across a wide range of research topics. The lively discussions generated throughout the day reflected ICSP's commitment to fostering the next generation of scientists while strengthening connections across UCLA's growing sleep and performance research community.

From K-12 outreach and public science festivals to student competitions and scientific symposia, UCLA BRI's community engagement efforts continue to connect people with neuroscience at every stage of the educational and professional pipeline. Together, these programs help inspire future scientists, support emerging researchers, and strengthen public understanding of the brain and its impact on society.

OPPORTUNITIES

Join the Alward Lab Undergraduate Research Opportunity

Dr. Beau Alward, Assistant Professor in UCLA's Department of Integrative Biology and Physiology, is recruiting two undergraduate research assistants beginning Summer 2026.

Students will investigate the neural and molecular mechanisms underlying social behavior using the African cichlid fish (Astatotilapia burtoni), a powerful model for understanding how the brain controls behavior.

Two Undergraduate Research Positions Available
Opportunities include:

- Social behavior neuroscience
- Molecular biology and genetics
- Hands-on laboratory research
- Faculty mentorship

Who should apply?
Motivated UCLA undergraduate students interested in neuroscience, biology, behavior, or related fields.

To learn more:
Contact Dr. Beau Alward at balward@ibp.ucla.edu

Research Participants Needed: Women's Health Hormone Monitoring Study

Dr. Anne Andrews, Professor of Psychiatry, Chemistry & Biochemistry, and Bioengineering at UCLA and a faculty member of the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, is recruiting participants for a research study evaluating innovative wearable technology designed to monitor ovulatory hormones through passive sweat collection.

The study aims to advance women's health research and support the development of next-generation hormone monitoring technologies. Participants will visit the laboratory for approximately 45 minutes each morning throughout one menstrual cycle.

Eligibility: Women ages 18–35 years
Compensation: Up to $599

By participating, volunteers will contribute to research at the intersection of neuroscience, engineering, and women's health.

To learn more: Contact Saga Vallow sagav@ucla.edu

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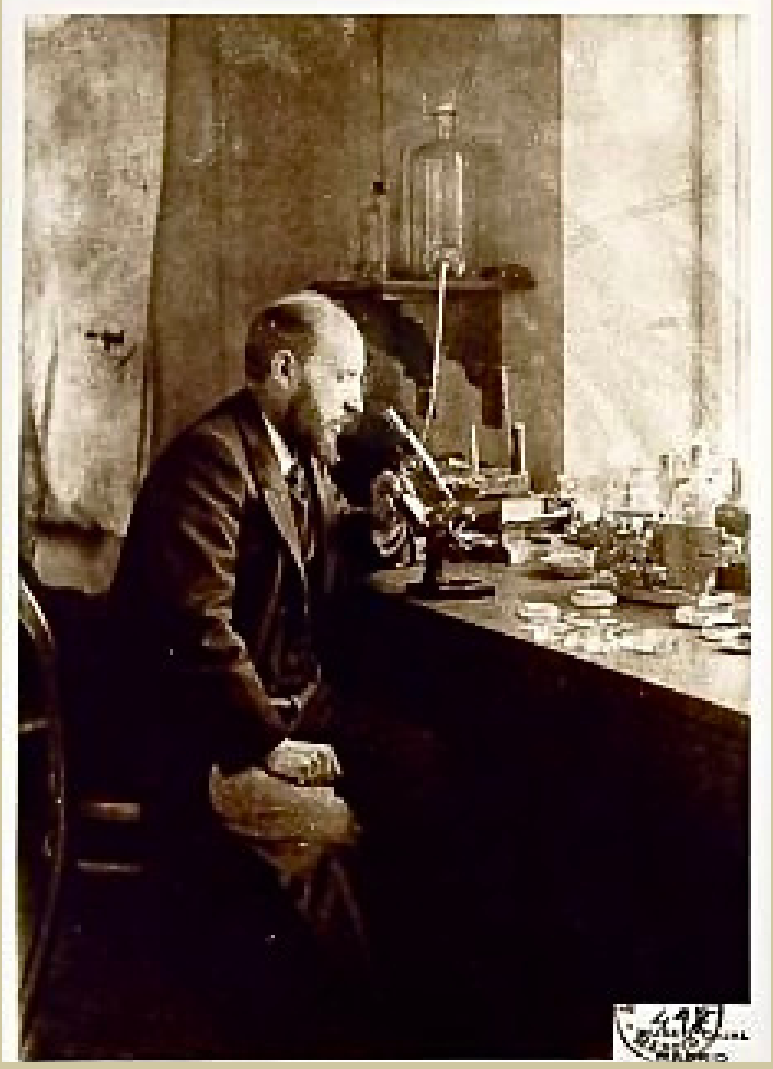
Neuroscience Pioneer

Santiago Ramón y Cajal: The Father of Modern Neuroscience

Long before fluorescent microscopy and modern brain imaging transformed neuroscience, Santiago Ramón y Cajal revealed the remarkable organization of the nervous system through careful observation, extraordinary artistic talent, and relentless curiosity. His discoveries established the neuron as the fundamental unit of the nervous system and laid the foundation for modern neuroscience. As this issue celebrates discovery, education, mentorship, and advocacy, it is fitting to reflect on one of the pioneers whose curiosity and careful observation helped shape modern neuroscience.



Spanish neuroscientist Santiago Ramón y Cajal in his laboratory, where careful observation and remarkable artistic skill helped transform our understanding of the nervous system.

Did you know?

Cajal originally aspired to become an artist. That artistic training later became one of his greatest scientific strengths, allowing him to create the detailed neuron illustrations that transformed neuroscience.

In his laboratory in late 19th-century Spain, Cajal meticulously examined nervous tissue using Camillo Golgi's silver staining method. What he observed—and captured through remarkably detailed hand-drawn illustrations—transformed scientists' understanding of the brain forever.

From these observations emerged the Neuron Doctrine, demonstrating that the nervous system is composed of individual nerve cells communicating through specialized connections rather than forming one continuous network. This revolutionary insight became one of the central principles of modern neuroscience.

Awarded the 1906 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, Cajal is widely regarded as the Father of Modern Neuroscience. His extraordinary scientific illustrations remain both valuable research records and celebrated works of scientific art.

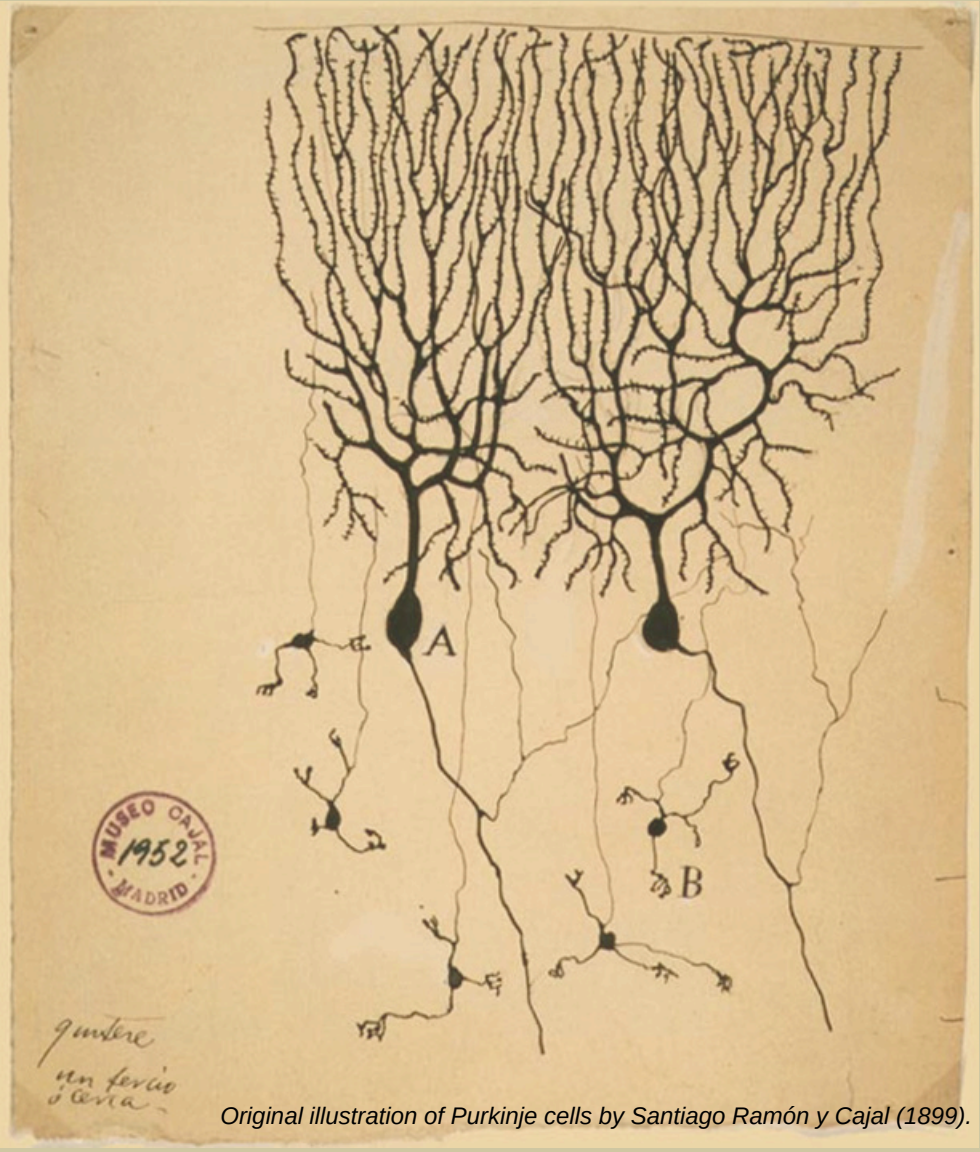
More than a century later, neuroscientists use advanced imaging technologies to visualize neural circuits with unprecedented detail. Yet the spirit of discovery remains unchanged: asking careful questions, observing closely, and transforming observations into knowledge.

Today, Cajal's original neuron drawings continue to appear in neuroscience textbooks, museums, and classrooms around the world, serving as enduring symbols of careful observation and scientific discovery.

Looking Ahead

"Ideas do not last long. They need someone to put them into practice."

Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852–1934)
Father of Modern Neuroscience



Original illustration of Purkinje cells by Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1899).

From groundbreaking discoveries and scientific recognition to mentorship, advocacy, education, outreach, and community engagement, every story in this issue reflects our shared commitment to advancing neuroscience, fostering the next generation of scientists, and improving lives.

Thank you to our faculty, trainees, staff, alumni, collaborators, community partners, and supporters for making this vibrant neuroscience community possible. We look forward to continuing this journey together and sharing new discoveries, achievements, and opportunities in future editions.

Thank you for being part of the UCLA Brain Research Institute community