



Robert C. Malenka, M.D., Ph.D.



Suzanne N. Haber, Ph.D.

Interview with Fellow ACNP Member,

Robert C. Malenka, M.D., Ph.D.

Interviewed by Suzanne N. Haber, Ph.D.

Dr. Robert C. Malenka is the Pritzker Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Director of the Nancy Pritzker Laboratory and a founder of Stanford University's Wu Tsai Neurosciences Institute for which he was Deputy Director for 10 years. After graduating from Harvard College, he received an M.D. and a Ph.D. in neuroscience in 1983 from Stanford University School of Medicine. Over the ensuing 6 years he completed residency training in psychiatry at Stanford and 4 years of postdoctoral research at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). In 1989, he was appointed Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Physiology at UCSF, at which he reached the rank of Full Professor in 1996. He returned to the Stanford University School of Medicine in 1999. He is an elected member of the United States' National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Medicine as well as an elected fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology. He has served on the National Advisory Council on Drug Abuse and as a Councilor for the Society for Neuroscience and the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology. He is the co-founder of MapLight Therapeutics (Nasdaq) and has served on the scientific advisory boards of numerous non-profit foundations, biotechs and pharma. His honorary awards include: the Society for Neuroscience Young Investigator Award (1993); the Daniel Efron Award from the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology (1998); the Kemali Foundation International Prize in Neuroscience (2000); the CINP-Lilly Neuroscience Basic Research Award (2002), the Perl/UNC Neuroscience Prize (2006), the NARSAD Goldman-Rakic Prize for Outstanding Neuroscience Research (2010), the Pasarow Foundation Award for Extraordinary Accomplishment in Neuropsychiatry Research (2011), and the Society for Neuroscience Julius Axelrod Prize (2016) and Peter Seeburg

Integrative Neuroscience Prize (2022). His extensively cited (>125,000) papers have provided foundational knowledge about the mechanisms of synaptic plasticity and modulation in the mammalian brain. His laboratory continues to conduct research on the circuit mechanisms that mediate motivated behaviors of relevance to a range of brain disorders including addiction, autism, and depression.

What was your position when you joined ACNP and how has your career advanced to your current position?

I attended my first ACNP meeting in 1988 courtesy of an ACNP travel award and then joined soon thereafter as an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry & Physiology at UCSF. In the 1990's I progressed through the academic ranks at UCSF and became a tenured full professor. I established myself as a leader of synaptic plasticity research while beginning to take small leadership roles at UCSF. In 1999, I was recruited to Stanford to become the Pritzker Chair of Psychiatry and Director of the Nancy Pritzker Laboratory, positions which I still hold. At Stanford I helped found and direct two neuroscience institutes including the university wide Wu Tsai Neurosciences Institute.

When you joined ACNP, what was your main reason for becoming a member?

I wanted to be exposed to research relevant to understanding the pathophysiology and treating major neuropsychiatric disorders. I also wanted the opportunity to meet and network with colleagues from different disciplines and different generations.

In your perspective, how has ACNP changed throughout the years?

It has become larger and more diverse, which is good. The quality of both the pre-clinical and clinical science has improved significantly. I am less enthusiastic about the reduced involvement of biotechs and pharma. I think ACNP should make a concerted effort to bring biotechs and pharma into the ACNP ecosystem in a serious way and think about increasing the communication and collaboration between academia and industry.

Have you served in any ACNP leadership roles, and if so, what motivated you to do so?

I served on ACNP's Council for 3 or 4 years. I wanted to give back to the organization in some manner and also have influence over important decisions that the ACNP needed to make.

What accomplishment are you most proud of and why does it stand out in your long-distinguished career?

I'm most proud of my contributions to advancing the understanding of the mechanisms and functions of synaptic plasticity and how it contributes to a wide range of adaptive and pathological motivated behaviors. I believe my body of work has influenced many different fields and is cited in textbooks. I'm also proud of the work my lab has done on the actions of neuromodulators including dopamine and serotonin—in the context of models of brain disorder. This work has led to the development of several drugs that are currently being tested in phase 2 trials. Finally, I'm most proud of the trainees who worked with me and are now tenured professors at institutions throughout the world.

What do you foresee to be the main challenges for the field going forward?

First and foremost is maintaining adequate funding for pre-clinical foundational neuroscience research, so-called translational neuroscience research, and clinical human subjects research including therapeutic trials. The competition for funding is fierce and there are not sufficient resources available. The other major challenges include the development of precision medicine approaches for the diagnosis and treatment of neuropsychiatric disorders. Progress is hindered by the poor nosology we currently use for diagnosing mental illnesses. Therapeutic interventions will never be as effective as they could be until we are able to get the right treatment to the right patient as efficiently as possible.

Looking back, what have you valued the most about being an ACNP member?

The friends and colleagues I have made—who often share many of the same passions. And the meetings in Hawaii—which were more memorable than the meetings elsewhere.

What memories stand out about your experiences or your colleagues?

Having intense, fun discussions late into the night while at the local bar or even better at the swimming pool or beach.

What recommendations would you have for junior members of ACNP?

Join as soon as you can and get involved by joining committees. Introduce yourself to colleagues whom you want to meet. Have fun while at the meeting.