David Schlessinger, PhD, is an NIH Distinguished Investigator at the Laboratory of Genetics at the National Institute on Aging (NIA) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). He is highly recognized for his pioneering work in basic molecular biology, including the mechanism of action of antibiotics and the application of human genetics and genomics to gain a better understand of diseases.

Schlessinger received his doctoral degree from Harvard University in 1960, where he worked for DNA co-discoverer and Nobel laureate James Watson. Following two years of postdoctoral training at the Pasteur Institute with another laureate, Jacques Monod, Schlessinger joined Washington University, where he served as professor of molecular microbiology, genetics and microbiology in medicine until his move to the NIA in 1997.

In addition to his groundbreaking research at Washington University, Schlessinger was a popular teacher, training more than 300 fellows at the School of Medicine, many of whom have taken on leadership positions around the world. Promoting values of fairness and equal opportunity, Schlessinger also worked to increase the acceptance rate of minority students to Washington University graduate programs.

Schlessinger obtained funding for the earliest genome analysis center and established it at Washington University. He positioned the school to be at the forefront of human genetics research, generating and sharing important sequencing tools. One of the Human Genome Project’s leaders, he headed the team that mapped the human X chromosome and chromosome 7. In collaboration with the infectious diseases division, he also used his knowledge of nascent molecular biology technologies to help uncover the function of anti-bacterial and anti-fungal antibiotics.

After firmly establishing human genome analysis at Washington University, Schlessinger began applying large-scale genomics and genetics to aging and several pathological conditions. This prompted his move to the NIA, where he created the Laboratory of Genetics to contribute to developmental- and aging-related genetics.

Schlessinger’s contributions to the scientific literature have resulted in nearly 500 peer-reviewed publications in prestigious journals and countless advances to the understanding of cell and molecular biology. In addition, he has held leadership roles at the American Society for Microbiology and the internationally recognized Human Genome Organization, as well as becoming editor for multiple prestigious journals and textbooks.

The Washington University Medical Center Alumni Association is pleased to present its Distinguished Service Award to Dr. Schlessinger.