CaBLAM! A high-contrast bioluminescent Ca^{2+} indicator derived from an engineered *Oplophorus gracilirostris* luciferase

Gerard G. Lambert[1,*], Emmanuel L. Crespo[2,*], Jeremy Murphy[3], Daniela Boassa[1], Selena Luong[4], Junru Hu[5], Brittany Sprecher[1], Maya O. Tree[2], Richard Orcutt[1], Daniel Heydari[1], Aidan B. Bell[4], Albertina Torreblanca Zanca[1], Ali Hakimi[6], Diane Lipscombe[2], Christopher I. Moore[3], Ute Hochgeschwender[2], and Nathan C. Shaner[1,‡]

[*]*These authors contributed equally to this work.*

[1]Department of Neurosciences, University of California San Diego School of Medicine, La Jolla, CA USA
[2]College of Medicine, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI USA
[3]Carney Institute for Brain Sciences, Department of Neuroscience, Brown University, Providence, RI USA
[4]University of California San Diego, La Jolla, CA USA
[5]National Center for Microscopy and Imaging Research, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, CA USA
[6]Scintillon Institute, San Diego, CA USA

‡Correspondence to ncshaner@health.ucsd.edu

Abstract

Ca^{2+} plays many critical roles in cell physiology and biochemistry, leading researchers to develop a number of fluorescent small molecule dyes and genetically encodable probes that optically report changes in Ca^{2+} concentrations in living cells. Though such fluorescence-based genetically encoded Ca^{2+} indicators (GECIs) have become a mainstay of modern Ca^{2+} sensing and imaging, bioluminescence-based GECIs—probes that generate light through oxidation of a small-molecule by a luciferase or photoprotein—have several distinct advantages over their fluorescent counterparts. Bioluminescent tags do not photobleach, do not suffer from nonspecific autofluorescent background, and do not lead to phototoxicity since they do not require the extremely bright extrinsic excitation light typically required for fluorescence imaging, especially with 2-photon microscopy. Current BL GECIs perform poorly relative to fluorescent GECIs, producing small changes in bioluminescence intensity due to high baseline signal at resting Ca^{2+} concentrations and suboptimal Ca^{2+} affinities. Here, we describe the development of a new bioluminescent GECI, "CaBLAM," which displays a much higher contrast (dynamic range) than previously described bioluminescent GECIs coupled with a Ca^{2+} affinity suitable for capturing physiological changes in cytosolic Ca^{2+} concentration. Derived from a new variant of *Oplophorus gracilirostris* luciferase with superior in vitro properties and a highly favorable scaffold for insertion of sensor domains, CaBLAM allows for single-cell and subcellular resolution imaging of Ca^{2+} dynamics at high frame rates in cultured neurons. CaBLAM marks a significant milestone in the GECI timeline, enabling Ca^{2+} recordings with high spatial and temporal resolution without perturbing cells with intense excitation light.

Introduction

Genetically encoded Ca^{2+} indicators (GECIs) play a central role in modern biomedical research, with much of our current understanding of systems neuroscience based on Ca^{2+} imaging. GECIs based on FPs have been the subject of intense engineering efforts for decades, leading to continual improvements to the practical properties of this class of biosensor[1–4]. The GCaMP family of GECIs is currently in its eighth revision[5], with improvements in brightness, sensitivity, and response kinetics continuing to be achieved, and new families of FP-based GECIs continue to push the boundaries of performance[6–9]. Bioluminescence (BL)-based GECIs originated with the *A. victoria* photoprotein aequorin[10–12] and, more recently, luciferase-based BL GECIs have been developed by several groups[13–18], but to date none of these BL GECIs have demonstrated imaging performance remotely comparable to highly optimized FP-based GECIs such as the GCaMP series. Specifically, existing BL GECIs, though often bright enough to image at high framerates, display low contrast between resting and active Ca^{2+} concentrations in cells, especially *in vivo,* limiting their use to observing Ca^{2+} dynamics mainly at the population level. This is due mainly to the high baseline BL emission and often suboptimal Ca^{2+} affinity of these indicators.

Here, we describe the development of a variant of *Oplophorus gracilirostris*[19–21] luciferase (OLuc) engineered to provide increased BL emission *in vitro* along with improved folding and performance in protein fusions. The *in vitro* activity improvement of this variant does not correlate with its observed bioluminescent output in cultured cells, suggesting that diffusion of furimazine (Fz) molecules across the plasma membrane may currently limit the per-molecule light emission achievable with this class of probes. We found that these new variants of OLuc were

highly amenable to sensor domain insertion, making them a favorable scaffold for engineering a BL GECI, "CaBLAM," ("Ca^{2+} BioLuminescence Activity Monitor"). We generated CaBLAM variants exhibiting very high contrast and optimized Ca^{2+} affinity useful for imaging Ca^{2+} dynamics in the cytosol of living cells at high frame rates. The directed evolution process for the luciferase focused on maintaining high brightness while improving solubility of fusions. Optimization of the C-terminal peptide sequence was a critical component of both luciferase and GECI engineering and was particularly important for obtaining the high contrast currently unique to CaBLAM.

The luciferase, "SSLuc" ("Sensor Scaffold Luciferase"), is several-fold more active than NanoLuc *in vitro* using Promega's proprietary Fz substrate and is less prone to aggregation than NanoLuc when fused to other proteins, but paradoxically does not appear brighter in mammalian cells. The BL GECI, CaBLAM has similar maximum light output to other described BL GECIs in cells and displays a ~97-fold full-range contrast *in vitro* and up to 15-20-fold in live cultured cells in response to physiological changes in cytosolic Ca^{2+} levels. We further demonstrate that CaBLAM can be effectively imaged at up to 10Hz in cultured primary neurons on a typical widefield microscope and EMCCD camera and can reliably report the Ca^{2+} signal from a field stimulation equivalent to a single action potential. We anticipate that these probes will enable a much wider array of researchers to harness the unique advantages of BL for imaging, sensing, and integrating biological activities.

Results

Rational design and directed evolution of high-activity soluble OLuc variants

We initially set out to develop a variant of OLuc that could efficiently utilize CTZ, reasoning that NanoLuc was only one of the possible endpoints achievable through directed evolution of this lineage of luciferases. Starting from the OLuc mutant eKAZ[22], we performed multiple rounds of directed evolution consisting of alternating error-prone and site-directed mutagenesis libraries in *E. coli*. For each round, variants were selected based on higher bioluminescent emission and solubility. Subsequent engineering of the intact luciferase included the generation of mNeonGreen[23] fusions for enhancement of emission quantum yield, incorporation of a subset of mutations found in NanoLuc[24] and NanoBit[25], optimization of the C-terminal peptide sequence, and fine-tuning interactions between the C-terminal peptide and the rest of the protein. The final clone, which we named SSLuc ("Sensor Scaffold Luciferase", **Fig. 1A**), can be extracted with nearly 100% efficiency from *E. coli* cultures, retains activity *in vitro* over longer storage periods than NanoLuc, and appears to behave more like a monomer in mammalian cells than NanoLuc. Contrary to our original intentions, SSLuc performs best using Fz as its luciferin, though its activity with other CTZ analogs is also higher than we measure for NanoLuc. Interestingly, we found that SSLuc does not appear brighter in mammalian cells than NanoLuc, despite its high performance *in vitro*, suggesting that availability of the luciferin substrate (e.g., Fz) may limit SSLuc's maximum brightness in cells. SSLuc proved to be a favorable luciferase scaffold from which to generate biosensors, and led us to develop a novel high-performance BL GECI, as described below. A detailed account of our development and characterization of SSLuc can be found in **Supplementary Results and Discussion, Supplementary Table 1, and Supplementary Figures 1-3**.

Development and evaluation of a high-contrast BL GECI

We next explored the design of new BL GECI architectures based on SSLuc. Since the related split luciferase NanoBit[25] was specifically developed as a *reversible* complementation system, we chose the loop between the last two beta strands of the luciferase domain of SSLuc as our split point for insertion of sensor domains, with the goal of generating indicators with a large change in BL output between low and high cytosolic Ca^{2+} concentrations (i.e. [Ca^{2+}] between ~100nM and ~1μM). We trialed several topologies for the sensor, including circularly permuted variants and simple sensor domain insertions of RS20-Calmodulin (RS20-CaM), CaM-RS20, and Troponin C (**Supp Fig. 4**). All versions of the initial GECI displayed readily measurable and fairly large changes in BL between Ca^{2+}-free and high-Ca^{2+} conditions *in vitro*, with the highest contrast consistently observed from variants with RS20 followed by CaM inserted before the C-terminal luciferase peptide (**Fig 1A, B**). Contemporaneously with our exploration of all these topologies, an analogous RS20-CaM configuration was also identified by Farhana et al[14], in which the insertion is an entire GCaMP sensor domain, including the circularly permuted GFP component. In our designs, the fluorescent protein, if present, remains fixed at the N terminus of the luciferase as a FRET partner to enhance the quantum yield of emission[16,17,26,27], and the Ca^{2+}-sensitive signal is restricted to the BL channel, not both channels, unlike GLICO's bimodal signal. Despite this substantial difference and the use of the SSLuc scaffold rather than NanoBit, we found that the tripeptide linker sequences flanking the sensor domains of GLICO were suitable for our new GECI designs as well, and so we adopted these in our final design.

Unexpectedly, the initial clones of our novel BL GECI lineage displayed Ca^{2+} affinities far too high to be practical in living cells, often with K_D < 10nM [Ca^{2+}]. We explored several ways of altering the affinity, including the use of alternate RS20 and CaM sequences derived from existing fluorescent GECIs[28–30] and lower-affinity designed variants of the RS20/CaM pair[31], altering the linker length and composition between the RS20 and CaM, altering linker lengths and compositions between the luciferase and sensor domain, and rational directed mutations to the CaM domain's EF-hand motifs. This combination approach allowed us to select for the brightest clones while also determining which design factors influenced the Ca^{2+} affinity. Ultimately, the best balance of brightness, affinity, and Hill coefficient was achieved using the CaM and RS20 sequences from GCaMP6s coupled with a single point mutation (N98I in full-length calmodulin) chosen from among several naturally occurring mutations in human calmodulins leading to heart rhythm defects[32], producing apparent Ca^{2+} binding affinities around 500nM. This K_D target was selected to align the most sensitive part of the GECI's response curve with a physiologically relevant range of Ca^{2+} concentrations—for example, Ca^{2+} concentrations in the cytosol of rat CA1 hippocampal pyramidal neurons in slices have been measured using small molecule dyes[33] and are estimated to range from 32-59nM when resting and up to >300nM in response to a single action potential. The process of evaluating the many variables contributing to the calcium-binding behavior of this BL GECI architecture generated multiple related BL GECI variants suitable for future optimization and engineering for specific biological use cases requiring higher and lower Ca^{2+} affinities.

To maximize the BL signal contrast between inactive and active cytosolic Ca^{2+} concentrations, we systematically evaluated variants of the C-terminal SSLuc peptide, initially choosing peptides described from the development of NanoBit[25] as we had previously done during SSLuc optimization. We found that the clones displaying the highest contrast in luciferase activity between low and high [Ca^{2+}] contained the low-affinity peptide **VTGYRLFEEIL** ("pep114"). We then designed peptides based on this core sequence, drawing inspiration from the best-performing peptides identified during the evolution of SSLuc (**Supp. Table 1**). Ultimately, this led us to choose the peptide **VTGYRLLEEISN** for the final variant, which we named "CaBLAM." The rationale for the design of this peptide, which contains two glutamate residues substituted for the preferred lysines in SSLuc, was to maintain enzymatic activity (largely from the arginine side chain that forms part of the putative active site[34]) while also reducing affinity for the large piece of the luciferase to increase the contrast in luciferase activity between the unbound and Ca^{2+}-bound states. We speculate this low affinity allows the C-terminus of the luciferase to disengage from the enzyme more fully under low Ca^{2+} concentrations, decreasing luciferase activity at baseline. *In vitro* characterization of CaBLAM indicated that it has a K_D of ~460nM [Ca^{2+}] and an absolute contrast (i.e., the ratio of luminescence emission between saturating Ca^{2+} and zero Ca^{2+}, typically reported for this class of sensor) of ~97-fold (**Fig. 1C, Table 1**). This value compares favorably to other published BL GECIs, all of which display substantially lower contrast than CaBLAM[14,17,18]. The Hill coefficient of CaBLAM is ~3, similar to that of GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480[17] and notably higher than that of CaMBI[18], which displays a Hill coefficient of ~1.2 in our hands (**Fig. 1C, Table 1**). CaBLAM also has a similar Ca^{2+} affinity to GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480, making these two GECIs a well-matched pair for benchmarking in cells. In practice, when a GECI is expressed in a living system, its contrast drops dramatically compared to *in vitro* values, and so we next evaluated the behavior of CaBLAM in cultured cells in comparison with the published GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480 GECI.

Characterization and evaluation of CaBLAM in cells

We first evaluated CaBLAM variants by widefield imaging of U2OS (human osteosarcoma) cells, which display only small spontaneous changes in cytosolic Ca^{2+} concentration in our hands. CaBLAM consistently generated large changes in BL with ionomycin treatment with a dynamic range 5.4±0.1-fold higher (95% confidence interval (95%CI)) than that of GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480 (**Fig. 2A**). Coupled with the *in vitro* characterization data, these results suggest that the larger contrast for CaBLAM over GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480 in cells is due to the lower baseline luminescence of CaBLAM coupled with its favorable Hill coefficient. The contrast achievable in living cells sets CaBLAM apart from existing BL GECIs, and is expected to enable observation of small changes in Ca^{2+} concentration more readily than is currently possible.

To address some potential shortcomings of ionomycin experiments and observe a physiologically generated Ca^{2+} signal, we next evaluated the performance of CaBLAM in HeLa cells, known to undergo large oscillations in cytosolic Ca^{2+} in response to a number of stimuli[35]. We observed strong asynchronous oscillations in single-cell BL signals over varying time scales in HeLa cells treated with L-histamine. In parallel experiments, we were able to observe small changes in cells expressing GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480, with a dynamic range 3.3±0.1-fold (95%CI) lower than observed with CaBLAM, consistent with the results of previous ionomycin experiments (**Fig. 2B**). CaBLAM

revealed a wide variety of Ca^{2+} oscillation phenotypes in these imaging experiments, with periods ranging from seconds to minutes (**Fig. 2D** and **Supp. Movie 1**).

We compared the high-Ca^{2+} brightness (maximal brightness) of CaBLAM compared with GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480 by normalizing the signal to the mNeonGreen fluorescence signal for each. However, as with SSLuc, we observed an unexpectedly weak correlation between fluorescence and BL brightness in all but the lowest-expressing cells for both GECIs, which we suspect is due to rate-limiting substrate diffusion across the plasma membrane. Analysis of the cells with low expression of each sensor indicates that CaBLAM is ~39% ± 19% as bright as GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480 on a per-molecule basis (95%CI). The uncertainty in this estimate is high due to the weak linear correlation between fluorescence and BL intensity for both indicators, even at low expression levels (**Supp Fig. 5**).

Finally, we evaluated CaBLAM in cultured primary rat cortical neurons to determine whether it was suitable for real-time reporting of depolarization-induced Ca^{2+} influx. Neurons expressing CaBLAM were imaged similarly to the U2OS and HeLa cells in the previous assays, with dark background frames collected followed by injection of Fz diluted in medium, imaging for 60s, then injection of concentrated KCl to give a final extracellular concentration of 30mM KCl. Upon injection of KCl, the neurons were expected to depolarize, opening voltage-gated Ca^{2+} channels and subsequently inducing secondary Ca^{2+} release to the cytosol from the ER. Consistent with previous contrast measurements in cell lines, these neurons generated a ~15-fold increase in BL emission from CaBLAM between resting and depolarized cytosolic Ca^{2+} levels (**Fig 2C**). We performed identical experiments using GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480 and observed a 3.8±0.1-fold lower contrast, consistent with ionomycin and histamine experiments in cell lines.

Comparison of CaBLAM to GCaMP8s in rat hippocampal neurons

We benchmarked CaBLAM against a current best-of-class fluorescent Ca^{2+} indicator, GCaMP8s[5], in cultured rat hippocampal neurons transduced with AAV vectors for CaBLAM and GCaMP8s. Based on the characterization experiments performed for the GCaMP series of indicators, we imaged at 10Hz, which we found to be currently optimal for CaBLAM imaging in neurons. BL probes are generally thought to be too dim to image at such high speeds, but we found that we could readily collect quantifiable single-neuron data under these conditions using CaBLAM. Neurons were subjected to field stimulation equivalent to 1, 3, 5, 10, 20, 80, and 160 action potentials (AP). CaBLAM consistently generated BL signals above noise in response to even the 1AP field stimulation when imaged at 10Hz, and spontaneous activity was clearly detectable prior to field stimulation (**Fig 3A, B, Supp. Movie 2**). The median signal to RMS noise ratio (SNR) of neurons responding to 10AP stimulation was ~20 for CaBLAM compared with ~137 for GCaMP8s under identical experimental conditions, consistent with the lower signal intensity of BL emission relative to fluorescence. Some neurons expressing CaBLAM reached a SNR of up to ~50 with 10AP stimulation (e.g., the representative neuron trace shown in **Fig. 3A, B**). The higher contrast of CaBLAM relative to GCaMP8s accounts for at least part of its remarkably reliable performance in detecting small signals (including spontaneous activity) despite the higher baseline noise (lower absolute intensity). Additionally, we observed substantial photobleaching of GCaMP8s during the ~400s imaging period in this

imaging assay, while the CaBLAM baseline signal remained essentially flat throughout (e.g., the single-neuron trace from **Fig. 3A**). In general, CaBLAM and other BL indicators can be imaged continuously for indefinite time periods as long as a fresh supply of luciferin (e.g., Fz) is continuously perfused over the cells.

The response kinetics of CaBLAM are considerably slower than GCaMP8s, as expected since it has not yet been optimized for fast responses (**Fig 3C**). *Because these experiments did not include synaptic blockers*, the true indicator kinetics are likely faster than measured. We determined the rough half-time to peak after field stimulation to be ~700ms for CaBLAM for 10AP stimulations and the half-decay time of >1s. GCaMP8s[5] was reported to have a half-rise time of 80ms and a half-decay time of 198ms, but displayed values of ~200ms and ~800ms under our imaging conditions, again indicating that the inclusion of synaptic blockers would likely lead to faster measured response kinetics for CaBLAM as well. Thus, while CaBLAM does not yet match the state-of-the-art fluorescent GECIs in terms of kinetics or SNR, it also represents a large step forward in BL GECI performance, analogous to the early versions of GCaMP that ultimately led to today's advanced fluorescent GECI ecosystem.

We conclude that CaBLAM's properties as a BL GECI, particularly its high absolute contrast and its practical contrast within a physiologically relevant range of Ca^{2+} concentrations, are uniquely well suited to single-cell resolution imaging and other advanced downstream applications.

Discussion

While the first known GECIs were naturally-occurring bioluminescent proteins[10–12], fluorescent small molecule dyes and FP-based GECIs are the currently most commonly used tools for reporting Ca^{2+} activity in living systems. The primary limitation of bioluminescent probes relative to fluorescent probes has been their lower rate of photons emitted per indicator molecule at saturating Ca^{2+} concentrations. This peak emission intensity can be increased linearly over several orders of magnitude for fluorescent probes simply by increasing the intensity of the excitation light that is delivered to the sample, but is limited by enzyme kinetics in bioluminescent probes. At the same time, all fluorescent probes undergo photobleaching during imaging which worsens as excitation intensity increases. In intact tissues, autofluorescence from endogenous molecules limits detection of weak fluorescent signals, supplying excitation photons becomes a major technical challenge, and confounding effects such as heating from intense excitation are of major concern. Bioluminescent probes hold promise for circumventing these and other limitations of fluorescence, especially when used in deeper tissues.

While the signal-to-noise ratio advantage afforded by elimination of autofluorescent background partially compensates for the low light output of luciferases in imaging, required exposure times have historically been in the tens of seconds, far from what is necessary to observe meaningful Ca^{2+} dynamics and other fast cellular processess. Imaging changes in intracellular Ca^{2+} at high speeds is possible only when the contrast of an indicator is well above the electronic noise in the camera. BL GECIs derived from GeNL imaged at up to 60 Hz in iPS-derived cardiomyocytes[17], which display very large changes in cytosolic Ca^{2+} concentration relative to most cells, displayed a dynamic range of less than 2-fold despite *in vitro* characterization suggesting much higher contrast.

We observe that in HeLa cells displaying smaller swings in Ca^{2+} concentration when responding to histamine stimulation, the high baseline luminescence of the GeNL(Ca^{2+}) sensor family limits the achievable dynamic range (**Fig. 2**). In neurons, CaBLAM reliably reports responses to single action potential stimulation like GCaMP8s when imaged at 10Hz, and can be imaged indefinitely without photobleaching or phototoxicity. Future improvements to CaBLAM's BL brightness are expected to bring it closer to parity with fluorescent GECIs and allow even faster imaging with lower noise.

Biochemical indicators using BL as their output modality hold the promise of enabling less invasive and deeper imaging of these events than is possible with fluorescent sensors. While the spatial resolution achievable using bioluminescence alone is likely to be at the microanatomic level rather than at single-cell resolution, at least initially, higher effective resolution is possible using multi-modal optical imaging approaches. For example, BL sensors with expression genetically targeted to small subsets of cells (e.g., neurons) can be tagged or co-expressed with fluorescent markers to provide anatomical information at subcellular resolution via standard 2-photon imaging, followed by high-speed widefield BL imaging of activity at lower spatial resolution. Recorded activity data from BL imaging can then be mapped onto the high-resolution fluorescence data. Critically, CaBLAM will facilitate this type of imaging because of its low baseline signal, preventing a washout of true signal from scattered out-of-focus emission that is common for both fluorescent and BL GECIs in thick tissues. We also plan to use CaBLAM to drive optogenetic elements such as channelrhodopsins and light-sensitive transcription factors, making them response to changes in intracellular Ca^{2+}, building on previous work fusing bioluminescence and optogenetics[36–42].

Here, we demonstrate that structure-guided engineering and directed evolution can generate large improvements in luciferase solubility and toxicity while maintaining high catalytic activity, and that highly active and soluble luciferases can be used to engineer biochemical indicators with large signal changes in cells. The scaffold and design principles we have identified will be useful in the design and optimization of BL sensors for other biochemical activities as well[43]. In the future, development of improved red-emitting FRET acceptors (such as optimized long Stokes-shift fluorescent proteins) and/or engineering of high-activity, red-emitting substrates for SSLuc/CaBLAM will further enhance the deep-tissue imaging potential of these probes. Continued efforts will also focus on further improving the light production rate of this and other classes of luciferase. Looking forward, if K_m values are maintained at ~10μM, a diffusion-limited luciferase (i.e., $k_{cat}/K_m = 10^8\text{-}10^9\ M^{-1}s^{-1}$) should be capable of generating $10^3\text{-}10^4$ photons per second per molecule, which leads us to hope that there is ample room left for future improvements to these enzymes. Given our current observations, efforts to increase the delivery rate of engineered luciferins to the cytoplasm of target cells will be central to realizing the full potential of bioluminescent imaging probes.

Materials and Methods

General molecular biology.

E. coli strain NEB 10-beta (New England Biolabs) was used for all cloning, library screening, and recombinant protein expression. PCRs were performed using Phusion DNA polymerase (New England Biolabs) and the supplied 'GC buffer' under manufacturer-recommended conditions. DNA oligonucleotide primers were purchased from IDT. Restriction enzymes were purchased from New England Biolabs and restriction digests followed the manufacturer's protocols. All plasmids were constructed using Gibson assembly[44] of PCR or restriction digest derived linear DNA fragments as previously described[23,45]. Unless otherwise noted below, chemicals were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich.

Construction of *E. coli* expression plasmids and libraries.

All *E. coli* expression plasmids were constructed using the pNCST backbone as previously described[23,45]. A linear DNA fragment of the pNCST vector was generated by PCR (primers, **Supp. Data File 2**). Designed luciferase and novel GECI coding sequences were initially prepared as synthetic genes (IDT), as were many designed variants during directed evolution in cases where site-directed mutagenesis would be impractical. Mammalian expression plasmids encoding GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480[17] (plasmid #85205) and CaMBI[18] (plasmid #124094) were obtained from AddGene and amplified by PCR (primers, **Supp. Data File 2**) for insertion into the pNCST expression vector. Error-prone mutagenesis was performed using the GeneMorph II kit (Agilent Technologies) as previously described[23] with a target mutation rate of ~5 base changes per kilobase of amplified product. Site-directed libraries were constructed by Gibson assembly of PCR fragments amplified to introduce mixed-base codons as previously described[23]. Selected clones from library screening were sequenced using standard Sanger sequencing (Eton Biosciences). Libraries were introduced to *E. coli* via electroporation with plating at densities between 10^3 and 10^5 colonies per 10cm petri dish of LB/Agar supplemented with 100µg/mL carbenicillin (Fisher BioReagents) and incubated overnight at 37C. All plasmid sequences are provided in the **Supplementary Sequences** text file.

Luciferin substrates and library screening.

Native coelenterazine (CTZ) was purchased from NanoLight. Furimazine (Fz) stock solution was purchased from Promega as a component of the Nano-Glo® Luciferase Assay System (cat# N1110 or N1120). Because Promega does not disclose the Fz concentration in their stock solution, we hereafter describe Fz concentrations in terms of dilution ratio (typically a 1:500 or 1:1000 dilution of the Fz stock solution for imaging and 1:100 for *in vitro* assays). Error-prone mutagenesis and site-directed libraries of luciferases were screened by spraying a sterile solution of 50µM CTZ or 1:100 Fz in 50mM Tris-HCl pH 7.5 onto individual plates using a small atomizer. For 'manual' screening, the entire screening process was performed in complete darkness or very dim far-red LED light, with care taken to dark-adapt vision prior to starting. Sprayed plates were examined by eye and the brightest colonies were immediately marked. For image-based screening, plates were placed immediately into a light-tight chamber and imaged with a PRIME 95b sCMOS camera (Photometrics), followed by identification of the brightest colonies using ImageJ and manual marking on the plates. Marked colonies were grown individually in 5ml 2xYT medium supplemented with 100µg/mL carbenicillin with shaking at 250 rpm at 37C overnight.

Protein Expression, Purification, and *in vitro* experiments.

The pNCST plasmid is useful for protein library screening and expression because it does not require an inducer in most strains of *E. coli*. For characterization of selected luciferase and GECI clones, 1ml of each overnight liquid culture was pelleted by centrifugation and the supernatant was discarded. The bacteria were then resuspended once in ultrapure water to remove residual culture medium and pelleted again by centrifugation, discarding the supernatant. The washed pellet was then resuspended in 400µL B-PER (Thermo) reagent and incubated at room temperature for 20 minutes with gentle rocking to extract soluble proteins, followed by a final centrifugation to pellet insoluble components and yield a clear lysate. Clarified B-PER lysates were used directly for characterization experiments in most cases, since we observed rapid degradation of some proteins when subjected to additional purification procedures. In all cases, proteins prepared as clarified B-PER lysates were assayed within 6 hours of extraction.

For experiments using purified recombinant protein, B-PER lysates were bound to equilibrated cobalt beads as previously described[23,45], washed, and eluted in 50mM Tris-HCl pH 7.5, 150mM NaCl, 500mM imidazole, then buffer-exchanged into 50mM Tris-HCl pH 7.5, 150mM NaCl using Zeba desalting columns (Pierce). Purified proteins were stored at 4C.

For brightness comparisons *in vitro*, B-PER lysates of mNG-fused luciferase clones were diluted in 50mM Tris-HCL pH 7.5, 150mM NaCl to a peak mNG absorbance value <0.05 and 200µL samples were loaded into a clear-bottom black 96 well plate (Corning) along with B-PER lysates from one or more controls (e.g., GeNL). Fluorescence emission spectra were recorded for each sample with excitation at 480nm (5nm bandwidth) using a Tecan M1000Pro Infinite multimode plate reader. To normalize enzyme concentrations based on the fluorescence, a dilution factor was calculated for each well based on the peak fluorescence emission. Samples were then diluted into new wells to a total volume of 50-100µL and were measured again to verify that fluorescence intensities varied by ≤ 5% over all wells. The plate was then transferred to a ClarioStar multimode plate reader (BMG) to measure luminescence kinetics. Luciferin solutions at 50µM (CTZ) or 1:100 (Fz) were prepared in the same Tris buffer as described above and injected in volumes of 100-150µL individually into wells with concurrent measurement of luminescence intensity for a total measurement time of 50s per well. These sample and injection volumes were chosen to reduce variability in measurements due to uneven mixing, which can occur if the injection volume is smaller than the sample volume. Peak and steady-state intensities were then normalized by dividing by the previously measured fluorescence of each well to account for remaining small variations in concentration between wells, and these normalized values were used for brightness comparisons between clones.

For Ca^{2+} titrations *in vitro*, B-PER lysates of mNG-fused GECIs were diluted ~100-fold in 30mM MOPS pH 7.2, 100mM KCl, 10mM $MgCl_2$ and then dispensed into 3 rows (36 wells) of a 96-well plate, 5µL per well. EGTA-buffered Ca^{2+} solutions with free Ca^{2+} concentrations of 2nM, 20nM, 100nM, 200nM, 300nM, 400nM, 600nM, 800nM, 1µM, 1.5µM, 2µM, and 10µM were then prepared from commercial stock solutions (Invitrogen

cat#C3008MP), also in 30mM MOPS pH 7.2, 100mM KCl, supplemented with $MgCl_2$ to a final concentration of 10mM. The presence of Mg2+ is not expected to alter free Ca^{2+} concentrations in EGTA-based buffers and provides a more physiologically relevant environment for this assay. 100µL of Ca^{2+} buffer solution was added to each well containing sample to produce three identical rows of the same concentration series. A solution of 1:100 Fz in the same Mg^{2+}-containing MOPS buffer was prepared and injected in volumes of 100µL individually into wells with concurrent measurement of luminescence intensity for a total time of 20s per well. The maximum, steady-state, and area-under-the-curve (AUC) luminescence values were calculated for each well and used to plot the Ca^{2+} binding curve for each GECI. Curve fitting to a sigmoid function was performed using the Solver add-in in Excel to determine the K_D, Hill coefficient, and contrast for each GECI tested.

Construction of mammalian expression plasmids.

Mammalian expression constructs were mainly generated by Gibson assembly of PCR-amplified coding sequences (primers, **Supp. Data File 2**) into restriction-digested pC1 (CMV promoter, modified from pEGFP-C1, Clontech) or pCAG (CMV enhancer fused to chicken beta-actin promoter) vector fragments. When vector fragment preparation by restriction digest was impractical, we PCR-amplified vector fragments instead (primers, **Supp. Data File 2**). We observed qualitatively less variable and longer-lasting expression using the pCAG vector in most cases. Both vectors were suitable for all constructs tested. Mammalian expression plasmids encoding GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480[17] (plasmid #85205) and CaMBI[18] (plasmid #124094) were obtained from AddGene. The plasmid pCAG_EGFP_GPI (plasmid #32601) was obtained from AddGene and digested with *Sac*I and *Xho*I to generate a vector fragment for insertion of GeNL and GeNL_SS for GPI-anchored extracellular display. All plasmid sequences are provided in the **Supplementary Sequences** text file.

Cell line culture, Transfection, and Imaging.

HeLa and U2OS cell lines were purchased from ATCC. Cells were maintained under standard culture conditions with incubation at 37C and 5% CO2. Growth medium for HeLa cells was high-glucose DMEM (Gibco) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS) (Gibco), and for U2OS was McCoy's 5a (Gibco) with 10% FBS. For transfection and imaging, cells were plated at a density of 1-2x10^5 cells/ml on coverslip-bottom 35mm dishes (Mattek) or 13mm round coverslips (BioscienceTools) placed in 6-well culture plates and incubated overnight. The following day, cells were transfected using polyethyleneimine (PEI) as previously described[45]. Cells were imaged 24-48h post-transfection.

Prior to imaging non-sensor luciferase constructs and fusions, cells were gently rinsed with fresh medium, leaving 500µL of medium in each dish for Mattek dishes. For cells plated on coverslips, slips were transferred to a low-profile coverslip chamber (BioscienceTools) with a silicone gasket and overlaid with 500µL medium. In either case, cells were transferred to the stage top environmental chamber and allowed to equilibrate for at least 5 minutes prior to imaging.

Image acquisition was performed in a stage-top environmental enclosure (37℃, 5% CO2; Okolab) on a Nikon Ti-E microscope and an Andor iXon Ultra 888 EMCCD camera. Cells expressing bioluminescent constructs

were imaged with a Plan Apo λ 20x Ph2 DM 0.75NA objective (Nikon). For reference fluorescent images in constructs containing mNeonGreen, green fluorescence was excited with a Spectra X LED source (Lumencor) using the 475/28nm channel and a FF495-Di03 dichroic (Semrock) and emission was selected with a FF01-520/35 filter (Semrock). The camera was set to 30MHz EM gain mode with an EM gain setting of 3 for fluorescence acquisition. For bioluminescent signal recording, the illumination source was turned off and emission was collected either with no filter to maximize light collection efficiency or with the FF01-520/35 filter to minimize background light leakage. The camera was set to 30MHz EM gain mode with an EM gain of 300 and exposure times between 50 and 500ms for bioluminescence time series and between 500ms and 10s for single for most datasets.

For Ca^{2+} indicator time series imaging, cells were only plated in Mattek dishes and were not rinsed, a handling method we found prevented induction of extraneous Ca^{2+} signals in the cytosol. Medium was carefully removed to leave 500µL volume remaining in each dish, and 500µL of medium from the dish was reserved and used to dilute the Fz substrate to eliminate small changes in ionic strength and osmolarity that can arise due to evaporation during culture. Baseline images were collected for at least 30s in the dark prior to luciferin addition. Fz diluted in culture medium was added to a final concentration of ~10µM and the BL signal was recorded for 60s. For determination of the maximal contrast in cells, 50µL of concentrated ionomycin was then injected to give a final concentration of 20µM and images were recorded for an additional 60-120s. The concentration of Ca^{2+} in the culture medium was ~1mM (but likely buffered to some degree by other medium components) and therefore expected to produce a "maximal" physiological Ca^{2+} concentration in the cytosol in the presence of ionomycin. For imaging induced Ca^{2+} oscillations, 50µL of concentrated L-histamine was injected to give a final concentration of 50µM and images were recorded for an additional 10-20min.

Primary Rat Cortical Neuron Culture, Transfection, and Ca^{2+} Imaging.

Animal procedures were approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of UC San Diego. Cortices were dissected out from P2 Sprague-Dawley rats and neurons were dissociated using papain as previously reported[46]. Transfection of neuronal cells with pCAG-CaBLAM and pCAG-GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480 was done by electroporation using an Amaxa Nucleofection Device (Lonza) at day-in-vitro 0 (DIV0). Neurons were cultured on poly-D-lysine (PDL) coated 35mm coverslip-bottom dishes (Mattek) in Neurobasal A medium (Life Technologies) supplemented with 1X B27 Supplements (Life Technologies), 2 mM GlutaMAX (Life Technologies), 20 U/mL penicillin, and 50mg/mL streptomycin (Life Technologies) for 2-3 weeks prior to imaging, refreshing half medium every 2-3 days.

For Ca^{2+} imaging with KCl-mediated depolarization, Mattek dishes were treated similarly to cell lines, with removal of all but 500µL medium, equilibration in the stage-top incubation chamber on the microscope, and imaging following the same basic protocol as described above for ionomycin and L-histamine experiments. Dark images were recorded for ~30s, followed by injection of Fz diluted in 1000µL medium at a final concentration of 50µM and incubation for 60s with continuous imaging. Finally, 500µL of 120mM KCl diluted in medium was

rapidly injected to give a final concentration of 30mM KCl, expected to rapidly depolarize all neurons leading to Ca^{2+} influx.

Primary Rat Hippocampal Neuron Culture, AAV Transduction, and Ca^{2+} imaging.

Primary E18 rat hippocampal neurons were prepared from tissue shipped from BrainBits (Transnetyx) following the vendor's protocol. Neurons were seeded on PDL-coated 18 mm glass coverslips (Neuvitro) in 12-well tissue culture plates (1 x 10^5 neurons per well) and grown in Gibco Neurobasal Media supplemented with 2% B27, 0.1% gentamycin and 1% GlutaMAX (all from Invitrogen). The next day, day-in-vitro 1 (DIV1), neurons were transduced with AAV9-Syn (5 x 10^9 gc per well) encoding jGCaMP8s (AddGene 162374) or CaBLAM (in house prep). AAV9-Syn-CaBLAM was generated by triple lipofection of HEK293-FT cells and harvesting viral particles as previously described[47]. Neurons were imaged between DIV 20 – 30.

For Ca^{2+} imaging with electrical stimulation, cover slips were washed three times and imaged in artificial cerebrospinal fluid, containing (in mM): 121 NaCl, 1.25 NaH_2PO_4, 26 $NaHCO_3$, 2.8 KCl, 15 d(+)-glucose, 2 $CaCl_2$, 2 $MgCl_2$ (maintained at ~37 °C, pH 7.3-7.4, continuously bubbled with 95% O_2/5% CO_2 vol/vol). All imaging was conducted in the RC-49MFSH heated perfusion chamber where the temperature was continuously monitored (Warner Instruments). Only cultures where neurons were evenly distributed across the entire coverslip. In addition, only coverslips with minimal neuronal clumping/astrocytic growth were included for Ca^{2+} imaging. A Teensy 3.2 microcontroller was utilized to synchronize the camera frame number with electrical stimulation using BNC cables connected to EMCCD camera and the SIU-102 stimulation isolation unit (Waner Instruments). Custom written scripts were developed in order to generate analog signals for precise control current stimulation as previously described[48]. Briefly, current field stimulation with a 1ms pulse width at 40mA and 83Hz was utilized. The length of time for each stimulation period was varied (12, 36, 60, 120, 240, 960, 1920ms) in order to achieve the corresponding number of action potentials (1, 3, 5, 10, 20, 80, 160 action potentials).

For fluorescent and bioluminescent Ca^{2+} imaging, a 20x objective lens (0.75 NA) and iXon Ultra 888 EMCCD (Andor Technology) camera were used. Furimazine (Fz) (Promega, N1120) was diluted in bubbled ACSF at concentrations of 1:1000 (0.5x) or 1:500 (1x), both of which provided sufficient bioluminescent signal for imaging at 10Hz. Image acquisition parameters were as follows: 0.09s exposure time, 4.33 us vertical pixel shift, normal vertical clock voltage amplitude, 10MHz at 16-bit horizonal readout rate, 1x pre-amplifier gain, 2x2 binning. The EM Gain was set to 300 for bioluminescent image acquisition and it was not enabled during fluorescent imaging. ACSF was continuously perfused in the heated chamber prior to imaging and during bright field and fluorescence imaging to determine a field of view before beginning bioluminescent Ca^{2+} imaging. During bioluminescent Ca^{2+} imaging, fresh ACSF was utilized to dilute the Fz and kept at 37C in a water bath. Bioluminescent imaging included a 60s initial period of ACSF perfusion without Fz followed with ACSF/Fz at the designated concentration for the remainder of the imaging session. Fz concentration in the imaging chamber typically reached equilibrium within 60s after initiating ACSF/Fz perfusion, as judged by baseline bioluminescent signal in the neuron cell bodies.

Image processing and data analysis

All image processing was performed using ImageJ. It is important to note that processing of bioluminescence imaging data requires compensation for the average dark pixel offset arising from the detector's dark current characteristics and by small light leaks in the optical path. For each acquisition setting, dark time series were acquired under identical conditions but without illumination or addition of luciferin substrates. Dark time series with at least 60 frames were used to generate single-frame 'dark' images for each acquisition setting, containing the median value for each pixel over the time series. For single bioluminescence images of fusion proteins, the appropriate dark image was subtracted from the raw image. For time series, the appropriate dark image was subtracted from each frame of the time series. These dark-subtracted time series were summed using the 'Z project' function in ImageJ to create low-noise images for generation of regions of interest (ROIs) for analysis. Additional settings used for image display (e.g., thresholding, output scaling, lookup tables, etc.) are described for individual images in their corresponding figure legends.

To extract data from time series for downstream analysis, ROIs corresponding to individual whole cells were identified from summed time series images using the Cellpose[49] 'cyto' model followed by manual curation. An additional 'background' ROI was drawn manually for each time series in an area devoid of cells. Mean intensities were then measured for each ROI at each time point from the dark-subtracted time series and data transferred to Excel for subsequent steps. The 'background' ROI value was subtracted from each cell ROI at each time point to account for any variable background signal arising from changes in light leakage (for example, when the injection port is uncovered) as well as any bioluminescence generated by extracellular luciferase/GECI molecules that escape from damaged or dead/lysed cells. Note that in cases where cells can be rinsed, the extracellular bioluminescence signal is typically negligible, but baseline shifts from changes in light leakage are inevitable, in our experience, making this step critical for accurate quantitation. For each ROI (whole cell) in a time series, we additionally calculate the mean dark value during the first 30s prior to Fz injection and subtract this value from all time points to bring the dark baseline as close to zero as possible, compensating for any remaining offset in the data not captured by previous processing steps.

For Ca^{2+}indicators, the baseline luminescence emission intensity was determined for each cell by taking the average value of time points in the steady-state phase after initial Fz injection but before ionomycin or L-histamine injection, typically observed between 30 and 40s after Fz injection (following a small transient cytosolic [Ca^{2+}] increase) in most cells. The indicator signal at each time point was then calculated as the change in luminescence relative to the baseline luminescence ($\Delta L/L_0$) for each cell.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing or financial interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, GGL, ELC, DL, CIM, UH, and NCS; Validation, GGL, ELC, JM, DL, CIM, UH, NCS; Formal Analysis, GGL, ELC, JM, NCS; Investigation, DB, JH, SL, BS, MOT, SV, RO, DH, ABB, ATZ, AH, NCS; Data Curation, GGL, ELC, JM, NCS; Writing—Original Draft, GGL, ELC, NCS; Writing—Review & Editing, GGL, ELC, BS, DL, CIM, UH, NCS; Visualization, GGL, ELC, JM, NCS; Supervision, DL, CIM, UH, NCS; Project Administration, UH, NCS; Funding Acquisition, DL, CIM, UH, NCS

Data and reagent availability

Raw and processed data from experiments performed in this study will be made available to other researchers upon request to NCS. Bacterial and mammalian expression plasmids encoding SSLuc, GeNL_SS, and CaBLAM will be deposited for distribution by AddGene (pending); prior to availability from AddGene, plasmids will be shared with non-profit researchers upon request to NCS.

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Tables

Table 1. Properties of selected intensiometric genetically encoded Ca^{2+} indicators

GECI Name	Type	K_D (nM)[a]	Hill coefficient[b]	Contrast[c]	ref.
GCaMP8s	FP	46	2.2	50	5
GCaMP8f	FP	334	2.1	79	5
NEMOf	FP	528	3.2	246	6
NEMOc	FP	557	3.8	422	6
CaMBI_110	luciferase	62 ± 16 (110)	1.2 (2.5)	4.3 (8)	18
GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480	luciferase	444 ± 150 (480)	3 (3)	4.1 (5)	17
CaBLAM	luciferase	464 ± 115	3	97	this work

[a]Binding constant for Ca^{2+} for FP-based GECIs as reported in the original publications; binding constant for Ca^{2+} as measured *in vitro* for CaMBI, GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480, and CaBLAM and (in parentheses) as reported in the original publications. Error margins represent 95% confidence interval for values measured in this work. [b]Hill coefficient (cooperativity) for FP-based GECIs as reported in the original publications; Hill coefficient for luciferase-based GECIs calculated from sigmoidal curve fit to Ca^{2+} titration series and (in parentheses) as reported in the original publications. [c]Contrast between Ca^{2+}-free and Ca^{2+}-saturated indicator *in vitro* for FP-based GECIs as reported in the original publications; contrast for luciferase-based GECIs measured in this work and (in parentheses) as reported in the original publications.

Figures

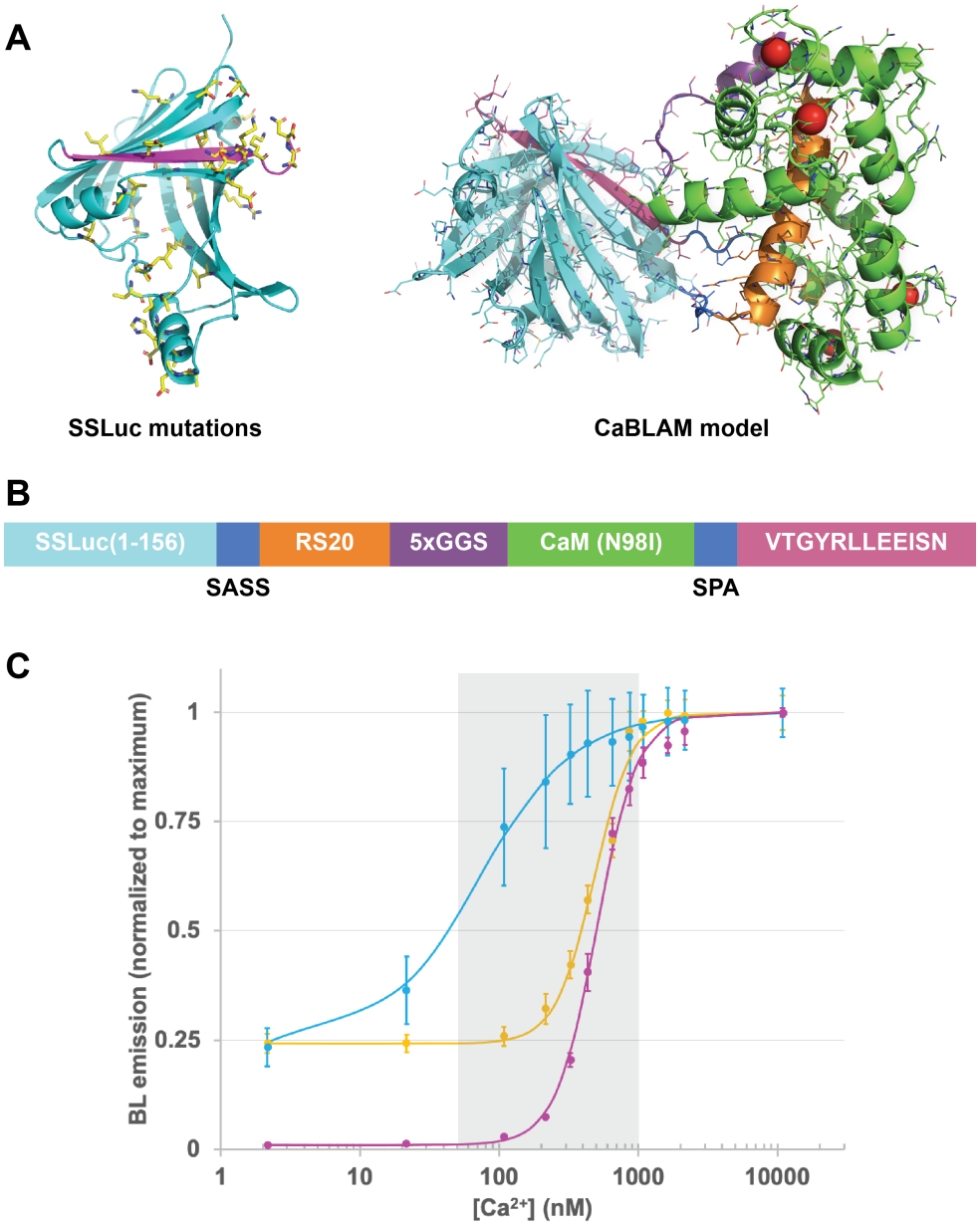

Figure 1. CaBLAM architecture and Ca^{2+} affinity. (A) Structure models of eKL9h and CaBLAM. Side chain positions with mutations relative to eKAZ are depicted as yellow sticks in the luciferase model. The C-terminal peptide is depicted in magenta on both structure models. (B) Architecture of CaBLAM (not to scale), with colors corresponding to the model structure backbone. (C) *In vitro* Ca2+ titration of CaBLAM (magenta) alongside GeNL(Ca2+)_480 and CaMBI_110. The physiologically relevant Ca2+ concentration range between 50nM and 1μM is shaded.

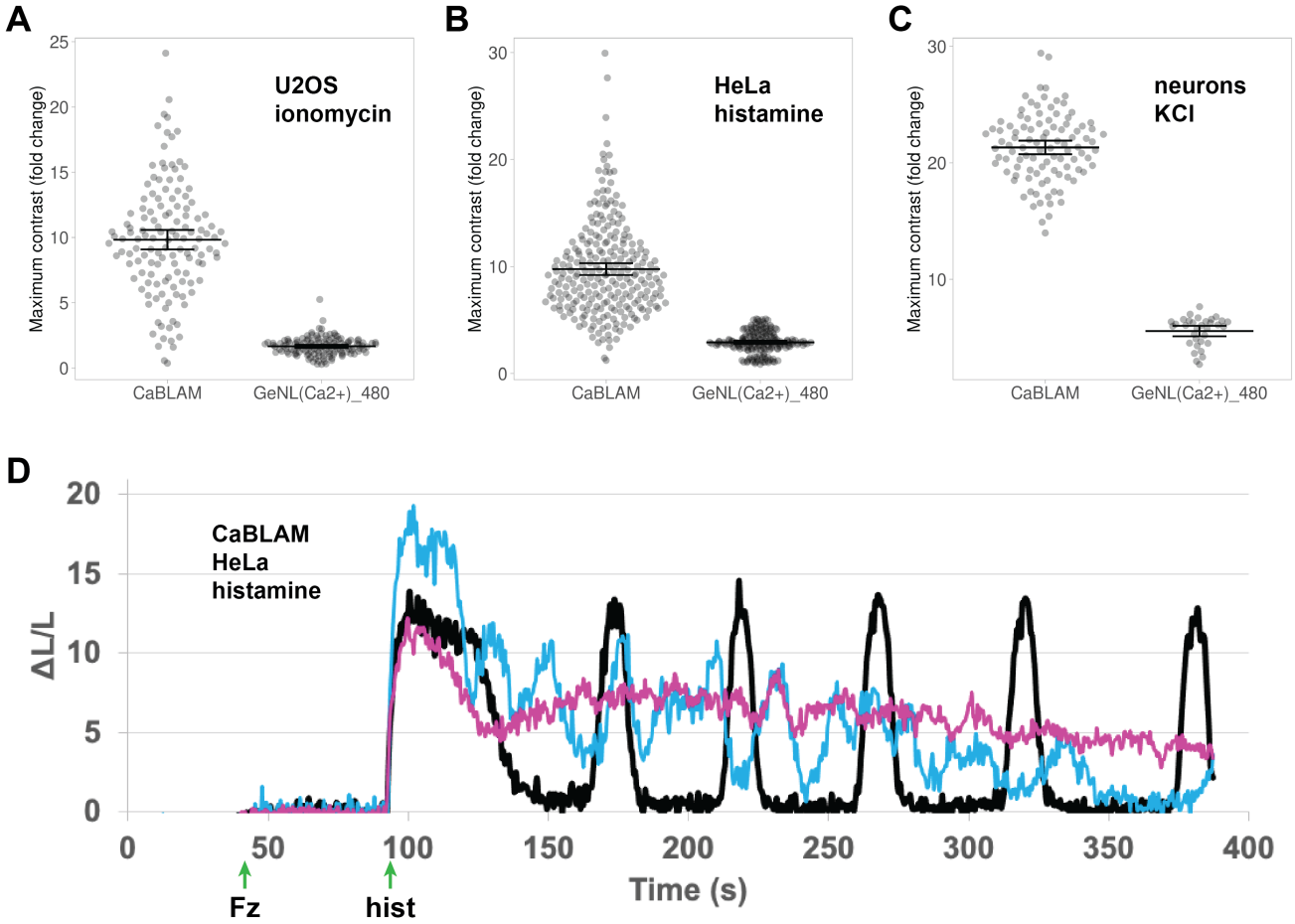

Figure 2. Characterization of CaBLAM in cultured cell lines and rat cortical neurons. CaBLAM and GeNL(Ca^{2+})_480 in (A) U2OS cells treated with ionomycin and 1mM external Ca^{2+}, (B) HeLa cells treated with L-histamine, and (C) rat cortical neurons depolarized with KCl. Data points represent contrast (fold change) between steady-state resting BL GECI signal and peak high-Ca^{2+} GECI signal after treatment. Each point corresponds to a single cell. Mean contrast is shown for each condition with error bars representing the 95%CI for each. (D) Representative CaBLAM signals in HeLa cells treated with L-histamine. Luciferin substrate (Fz) was injected followed ~60s later by concentrated L-histamine, with injection times indicated by green arrows.

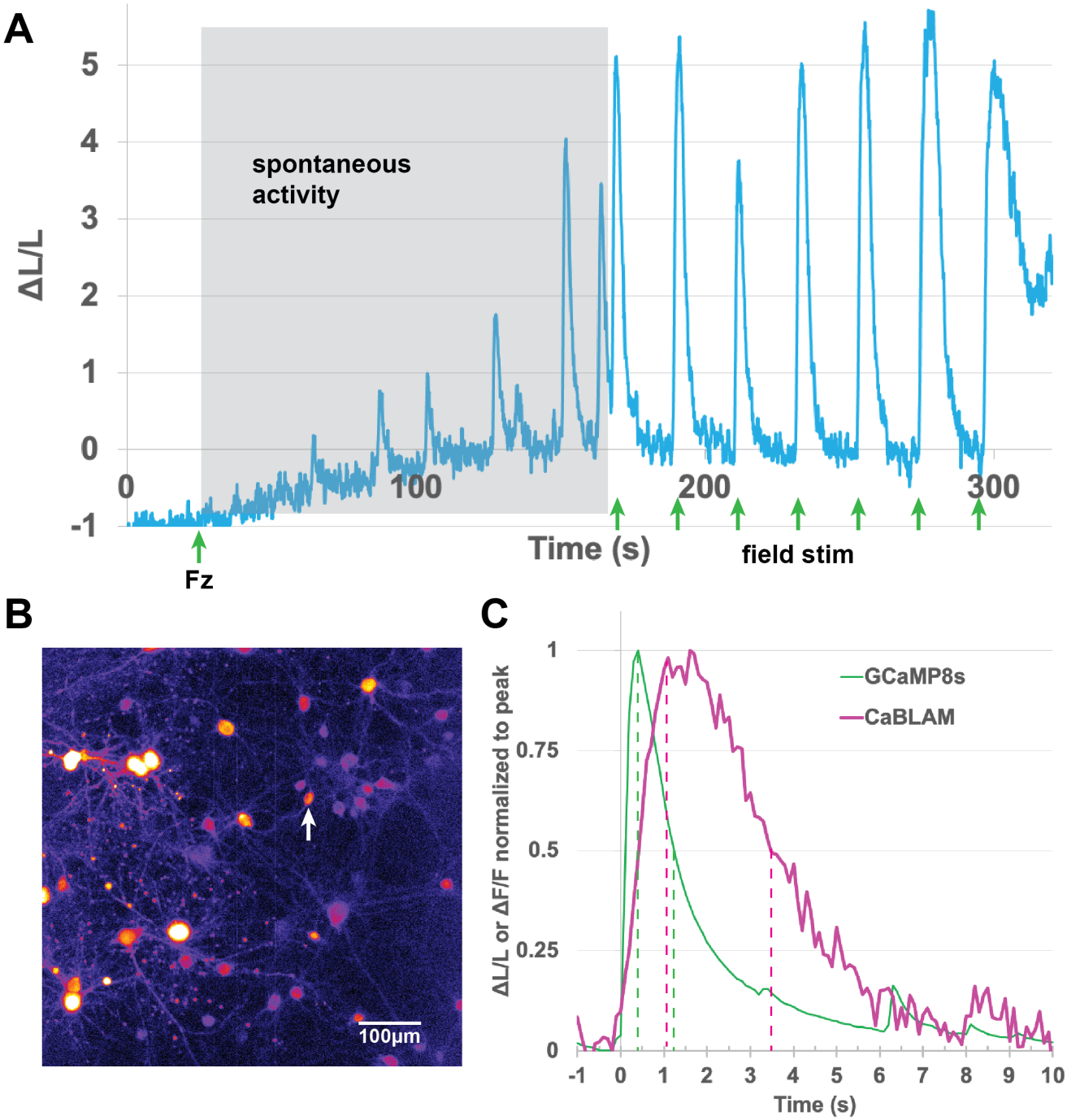

Figure 3. CaBLAM performance in cultured rat hippocampal neurons. (A) Representative trace of a single neuron displaying both spontaneous (grey shaded area) and induced Ca^{2+} signals. Luciferin (Fz) was injected where indicated by a green arrow, with a gradual equilibration of baseline luminescence to its steady-state level as spontaneous activity occurs. Field stimulations equivalent to 1, 3, 5, 10, 20 ,80, and 160 action potentials were delivered where indicated by the green arrows. (B) Summed bioluminescence time series from which the data in (A) was derived. The cell shown in (A) is marked with a white arrow. (C) Averaged responses of 13 responsive neurons each for GCaMP8s and CaBLAM imaged with identical treatment illustrating the slower kinetics of CaBLAM relative to GCaMP8s. Peak locations and half-decay points are indicated with dashed lines.

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