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A Grander Grad Slam

It’s a TED talk on steroids. The Grad Slam, UC Santa Barbara Graduate Division’s national award-winning three-minute talk competition for graduate students, will be marking its third year April 6-17. Nearly 70 graduate students have signed up to participate in a campuswide competition for the best three-minute presentation about their research or other big ideas. The participants are judged on such factors as clear and compelling presentation; intellectual significance; and the ability to gear the talk to a general audience.

The eight preliminary rounds; three semifinal rounds; and one final round to select a grand prize winner are all open to the public. Panels of judges including local city and elected officials will determine the winners of these rounds, with the exception of one new category, the People’s Choice Award. Prizes, which have been increased in number and dollar amount this year, range from $50 for preliminary-round winners to $5,000 for the grand prize winner. The grand prize is made possible by a donation from Santa Barbara-based Yardi.

In a first this year, UC Santa Barbara’s grand prize winner will advance to a UC-wide competition on May 4 in Oakland where the top prize is an additional $5,000. At the event, hosted by UC President Janet Napolitano, UCSB’s representative will go up against winners from other UC campuses. The event will be live-streamed in the multipurpose room of UCSB’s Student Resource Building.

“The Grad Slam gives the UC community and the general public broad access to the very best of our graduate students, and so to the very best of our university,” said

Carol Genetti, dean of the UCSB Graduate Division. “These three-minute talks are fascinating and satisfy our inherent curiosity about the world around us. This year the People’s Choice round and expanded prizes have amplified the excitement, but the crown jewel is knowing that our grand prize winner will be UCSB’s champion in the UC-wide competition on May 4,” she added.

Genetti said the Grad Slam offers graduate students much more than just the chance to win prizes. “It provides an opportunity for students to practice explaining their work to a non-specialist audience, a skill that will benefit them throughout their professional careers,” she said. “And it is also just plain fun: a great chance to meet people from other parts of the university and to appreciate the extraordinary intellectual richness of our campus.”

Topics for this year’s local competition are all over the disciplinary map. They range from kelp forests to ponderosa pine forests; invasive species to sacred spaces; snail parasites to the slave trade; online learning to malicious software; and gecko-inspired adhesives to transgender identity. The schedule of rounds and speakers may be found at the GradPost’s Grad Slam 2015 page. And more information about the Grad Slam may be found on the Graduate Division’s Grad Slam page.

Confirmed judges for the semifinal rounds include: Paula Perotte, mayor of Goleta; Doug Lynch, executive director of Goleta Entrepreneurial Magnet (GEM); Ken Oplinger, president and chief executive officer of the Chamber of the Santa Barbara Region; Santa Barbara Mayor Helene Schneider; Mona Miyasato, chief executive officer of Santa Barbara County; and Paul Casey, Santa Barbara city administrator.

UCSB’s inaugural competition in 2013 earned the national Award for Excellence and Innovation in Graduate Education from the Western Association of Graduate Schools (WAGS) and the Educational Testing Service (ETS). UC Santa Barbara's Grad Slam was such a hit that other institutions, including UC San Diego and UC Riverside, followed suit with their own contests.

UC Riverside launched its Grad Slam last year. Maggie Gover, director of graduate student academic and professional development at UC Riverside, said the Grad Slam requires students to think about how to communicate what they do as graduate students to a diverse audience. “They also are forced to think about why the audience would care about the project,” she said. “In an environment where higher education is often maligned, I think it is very important for us to be able to

communicate why public research universities are absolutely essential. The competition at UCR last year helped our students do that.”

The UCSB Graduate Division’s annual Grad Slam is the centerpiece of its Graduate Student Showcase, events held each spring that are designed to bring UC Santa Barbara's remarkable graduate students out of their labs, classrooms and studios, to give them a spotlight and to celebrate their accomplishments.

For more information about the Grad Slam, contact Robert Hamm, the Graduate Division’s director of graduate student professional development, at (805) 893-2671 or robert.hamm@graddiv.ucsb.edu.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.