UC SANTA BARBARA

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Julie Cohen

The Elevator Pitch Perfected

When the standing-room-only crowd at UC Santa Barbara's 5th annual Grad Slam quieted, Leah Foltz began her three-minute presentation about personalized medicine.

But hers wasn't the usual academic, sometimes dry, explanation.

Foltz, a graduate student in biomolecular science and engineering, delivered an engaging summary of recent strides in stem cell research and how her lab uses this biological material to study blinding diseases. Her research explores whether scientists will one day be able to use someone's own cells to cure their blindness.

Foltz's lively delivery earned her a first-place finish in the campuswide competition. Now she's headed to San Francisco to test her mettle Thursday, May 4, against participants from the nine other University of California campuses.

UC President Janet Napolitano will emcee the contest, which will be judged by a panel of leaders in industry, media, government and higher education. The event will be live-streamed at 10:30 a.m. at https://gradslam.universityofcalifornia.edu. For the first time, this year's event features a $1,000 audience choice award. Viewers can vote online for their favorite speaker. The winner will be announced along with the first, second and third place winners chosen by the panel of judges after the 40-minute post-contest voting period closes.

Foltz was one of 71 graduate students who participated in this year's competition. Each of the nine preliminary rounds produced three winners, two determined by a

panel of judges and the third, the “people’s choice,” as selected by the audience. Those presenters went on to the semifinals where nine finalists were chosen.

Topics for this year’s finalists ranged from chemical engineering to theater studies, the disciplines from which the two runners-up hailed. Max Nowak explained how he uses models of the blood-brain barrier to study how physical properties, such as size shape and flexibility, affect the ability of a nanoparticle drug to cross from one side to the other. Eric Jorgensen delivered a passionate speech about art as activism and the ways in which live theater chronicles history, citing the corpus of plays that have explored the AIDS crisis.

The tournament began in 2012 as an effort to better profile graduate students and to raise their visibility on campus. It has grown into the premier showcase for graduate students in more than 30 disciplines, running the gamut from environmental science, materials and mathematics to art and architecture, global studies and philosophy.

Presenters are timed and docked points for exceeding the three-minute limit. To emphasize the actual talk and level the playing field between all participants in terms of resources, visual elements are limited to three slides with no animation, although short internet videos are allowed. Presentations are judged on clarity, organization, delivery, visuals, appropriateness, intellectual significance and engagement.

“It is possible and it’s important to be able to talk about your research in a clear, concise, compelling manner,” said Carol Genetti, dean of the Graduate Division. “It’s a skill that you can develop and learn to do, and it’s one that any student can do if they practice.”

Grad Slam, she noted, is the premier showcase for the amazing range of research conducted by graduate students. “They’re part of this broader UC Santa Barbara graduate student community,” Genetti said. “And they have the opportunity to make friends and to hear about how remarkable our entire campus is through this process.”

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.