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UC-systemwide graduate student showcase started at UCSB reaches a milestone anniversary

The only thing harder than spending years specializing in a field of study might be explaining it in three minutes or less to a live audience.

That’s a challenge UC Santa Barbara graduate students will face as they vie for a chance at top honors — and big cash prizes — at this year’s Grad Slam Showcase.

It’s the 10-year anniversary of Grad Slam, the UC Santa Barbara-born showcase for the competitive art of the three-minute research talk. Grad Slam now takes place on nine UC campuses and culminates with a systemwide competition.

“That we are celebrating the 10th anniversary of Grad Slam is testimony to the brilliance and creativity of our graduate students,” said Leila Rupp, Interim Anne and Michael Towbes Graduate Dean and a distinguished professor of feminist studies. “Year after year, they present their research to enthusiastic audiences, showing how much what they do matters.”

Rupp also noted that the event has been redesigned this year “to showcase a wider variety of disciplines and topics, so you won't want to miss it.”

Grad Slam has been revamped for 2023, but some things will remain the same. Competitors will still present their research in 3-minute talks; Graduate Division will give out over $20,000 in prizes; and the campus champion will represent UCSB in the system-wide competition.

There are a few big changes though, said Shawn Warner, Graduate Division's director of graduate student professional development. "Our preliminary rounds are being grouped by disciplines this year, so students will have the opportunity to present their research amongst their peers at that stage," she said.

Another change: Graduate Division will hold several workshops on presentation skills to help students prepare (January's offerings can be found here). Additionally, registration is now open for students to sign up to present, and it will stay open until the Sunday before their disciplinary round is scheduled. Finally, Warner said, there is a new simplified judging rubric and graduate and undergraduate students will be part of the judging panels.

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"Grad Slam forces you to distill what you're working on into the most digestible and interesting version and because of that, I would recommend that other grad students try it," said Geoff Meyerhoff, last year's UCSB Grad Slam winner, "to build enthusiasm for what you're working on and share it with other people."

For some, it was an opportunity to share research in less common fields, such as historical linguistics or the entrepreneurial side of environmental science.

"A lot of people don't know much about what linguistics is and I thought this was a great opportunity to share it with folks," said Di Caminsky, a former doctoral student in linguistics and a past Grad Slam finalist. "People hear about the neuroscience of it and my topic is much more historical and humanities focused. So I thought it was a great way to share."

And for Veronica Laos, a chemist and Ph.D. alumna, it was a chance to get exposure to different kinds of research and researchers. “You all become experts in a very narrow thing,” she said at a recent graduate student forum with other Grad Slam alums, “and it’s likely that you’ll keep doing that. Broadening your horizons and talking to other people is really valuable.” Laos also liked learning about what other people did on campus and thinking about potential collaborations.

Preliminary rounds will be held in the Student Resource Building and the Engineering Science Building on Thursdays and Fridays throughout February. Winners from each preliminary round will receive $1,000 and go on to represent their disciplinary grouping at the Final Round in Campbell Hall on April 7. Finalists will have a chance to win more cash prizes and the champion will represent UCSB in the systemwide competition. Audience members can also vote for their favorite presenter in the People’s Choice category. The winner of the People’s Choice audience vote will receive a $500 prize.

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