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Grad Slam Showcase finalists to compete in final round on April 5

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From K-pop feminism to the impact of Madagascar rodents, topics in this year's UCSB Grad Slam Showcase represent the diversity of graduate student research at UC Santa Barbara. In less than two weeks, finalists Royce Olarte (education), Nākoa Farrant (environmental science & management), Kacie Ring (ecology, evolution & marine biology), Daniella Walter (mechanical engineering), Tiffany Ta (Music), Abdullah Salehuddin (communication) and Austin DuBose (chemistry) will compete for the best 3-minute pitch and the title of 2024 UCSB Grad Slam Champion at the f inal round on Friday, April 5, at 4:30-6 p.m., in Campbell Hall.

"You really need to be in the room where it happens to see how amazing these students are," said Leila J. Rupp, Interim Anne and Michael Towbes Graduate Dean, who will be emceeing the event. "Across all the disciplines, our students are engaged in impactful research that will fascinate you."

Students, staff, faculty and community members are invited to attend in-person to learn more about graduate student research and to vote for their favorite presenter

to win the $500 People's Choice award. The UCSB Champion will take home a $2,000 grand prize, while two runners-up will each receive $1,000. The champion will also go on to compete at the UC Grad Slam on Friday, May 3.

The fully in-person format of this year's competition was a big draw for Grad Slam alum Royce Olarte, a dedicated researcher and mathematics educator who will be representing the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education. "I participated in the Grad Slam back in 2022 but it was done remotely," he noted. "I wanted to participate in one that was in-person — and this time around, I'm sharing work from my dissertation. It's a lot more personal and I thought that this year's Grad Slam would be the perfect opportunity to share a bit of my work."

Other former Grad Slam participants in the final round line-up include 2023 Grad Slam alums Farrant, a Bren School Ph.D. candidate who was the runner-up in his qualifying round last year; DuBose, who presented in his round; and Salehuddin, who took home the runner-up prize in last year's Slam Final Round.

"I decided to join Grad Slam this year because I wanted to redeem myself for not making it to the final round last year," said DuBose. "I learned a lot from that experience and the other presenters. I knew exactly what I had to do this year to make my talk more effective."

The training from last year's Grad Slam and debate coaching helped Salehuddin achieve success in other public speaking events. "I feel honored to have made the finals amongst some of the most diligent, intelligent and innovative graduate student researchers at UCSB," he said. His winning talk from the social sciences round this year centered on his doctoral research on how family history impacts our ability to navigate life stressors.

"Because this event has historically been dominated by graduate students in STEM, I would be rather shocked if I won the Grad Slam," he said. "If I did win, however, then I would celebrate by going to dinner with my immediate family and fiancée. In addition, I would also give my earnings to my mom, who has sacrificed a lot to give her children a better life."

Other finalists vying for the championship prize are similarly focused on building their communication skills and sharing winnings with family and friends. "I decided to join the Grad Slam this year to further my public speaking skills and receive valuable feedback, as well as to learn how to effectively communicate and present

my research in an engaging manner," said Walter, who shares the Grad Slam "first-timer" status with other finalists Tiffany Ta and Kacie Ring. "I am looking forward to learning about other students' work across interdisciplinary fields at UC Santa Barbara," she said.

Ta, a Eugene Cota-Robles Fellow and doctoral student in music theory, is looking forward to representing her discipline with her talk on K-pop group Blackpink. "I am deeply honored to get to represent the humanities and fine arts in the final round. It's validating and encouraging to know that others enjoy learning about my research and find it valuable.

Grad Slam finalist Ring is also looking forward to celebrating the contributions of all UCSB graduate students on the final round stage. "It's not often that a graduate student is acknowledged for achievements, big or small," she said. "This event feels grand and validates and celebrates the research we do… While research can be collaborative, a lot of our day-to-day work is spent alone or with few people in the field, lab or on our computer. So, to stand and be composed in front of a large audience seems a bit scary, but exciting nonetheless."

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