UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB ranks fifth in prestigious Putnam Math Competition

UC Santa Barbara earned its highest-ever finish in the William Lowell Putnam Mathematical Competition, placing fifth among 477 universities across North America. College of Creative Studies (CCS) student Pico Gilman ’27 led the team with an individual ranking of sixth out of nearly 4,000 competitors. The results, announced in February, mark a significant milestone for UCSB, surpassing its previous best finish from 1978.

The Putnam competition, one of the most challenging undergraduate mathematics contests, tests students’ problem-solving skills through a rigorous six-hour exam. UCSB’s team, organized by CCS and mathematics faculty member Karel Casteels, included top scorers Gilman, Om Mahesh ’28 and Victor Bernal Ramirez ’27. Their combined results placed UCSB ahead of institutions such as Caltech and Princeton.

“We are very proud of our top-ranked team and our high-scoring individuals, led by Pico Gilman at No. 6 out of nearly 4,000 students,” said Chancellor Henry T. Yang. “This is a wonderful accomplishment for all of our Putnam Competition participants and an inspiring testament to the vigorous, creative and supportive academic environment fostered by our dedicated professors and mentors.”

UCSB’s official ranking was determined by the combined scores of its three highest-scoring participants: Gilman (CCS, mathematics), Mahesh (CCS, mathematics; College of Engineering, computer science) and Bernal Ramirez (Letters & Science,

economics and accounting). In total, 26 UCSB students participated.

In addition to Gilman's top-10 finish, Bernal Ramirez placed 180th, and Mahesh, a freshman, placed 272nd. Other strong performances came from Yifan Dai '27, Andrew Sylvester '27, Yuluo Cheng '28 and Runze Li '25 – all CCS mathematics majors.

"UCSB's success this year is a testament to their strong mathematical foundation, creative problem-solving skills, perseverance and grit," Casteels said.

The Putnam competition, administered by the Mathematical Association of America, is one of the most prestigious and challenging mathematics contests at the university level. Held annually since 1938, it brings together thousands of students from colleges and universities across the U.S. and Canada. This year's competition, proctored in person in December, featured two three-hour sessions with six problems each. Due to the competition's extreme difficulty, the median score was just two out of 120.

UCSB's rise from 20th place last year to fifth marks a significant milestone. The university's previous best result was a top-10 finish in 1978.

"Math problems and research questions have always fascinated me — I love the process of understanding the inner workings of a problem," said Gilman, who led UCSB's team. "Placing sixth in the Putnam is exciting, and I'm looking forward to taking it again this winter.

"I'd like to congratulate Victor and Om for placing excellently this year and helping our UCSB team place fifth," he said. "I'd also like to thank Professor Karel Casteels for being my CCS advisor and running the Putnam year in and year out. Finally, I'd like to thank mathematics Professor Francesc Castella for all the mathematical help he has given me since I came to UCSB through class, research and directed readings."

CCS Dean Timothy Sherwood praised the team's accomplishment. "Congratulations to our students for their outstanding performance in the Putnam Competition — phenomenal work! Much appreciation to Karel Casteels for organizing our entry into the competition, and to all the students, faculty and staff who help each other find new and creative ways to solve problems."

Chair of the Mathematics Department Björn Birnir thanked the excellent mathematics training the CCS students were receiving in their program taught jointly by top mathematics and CCS faculty: “Congratulations to the students whose mathematical talents shine through their accomplishment in the Putnam Competition.”

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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.