

THE *Current*

April 10, 2025

Marge Perko

Promising cancer research earns top honors at 2025 Grad Slam

With three minutes, one sticky problem and a standout performance, Kirstin Rollins won the 2025 UC Santa Barbara Grad Slam.

A PhD student in the Department of Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology, Rollins bested a competitive field of more than 40 graduate students and eight finalists to claim the \$5,000 top prize for her presentation, “A Sticky Situation: Target Cell Adhesion Inhibits Macrophage Therapy.” Her win was announced at the final round of the campuswide competition [Grad Slam](#), held April 3 at Campbell Hall.

“I am honestly in such shock because of the caliber of all of my other competitors,” said Rollins, whose talk described a technique for battling tightly bound tumor cancers by loosening their bonds with a protein before treatment with macrophage therapy. “It has been such a kind of camaraderie, and I wanted every individual to win.”

Yuting Ma, a PhD student in statistics and applied probability, won \$2,000 for second place. Selected by the audience, Tiffany Ta, a PhD student in the Department of Music, won the People’s Choice \$1,000 prize.

“As a Gaucho alum and a representative of the university’s namesake city, I felt honored by the invitation to participate,” said Santa Barbara Mayor Randy Rowse, who served on the judges panel. “The size and enthusiasm of the audience was impressive, as were the presentations. I’ll admit it felt awkward to sit and judge

these incredible people, but getting to engage with them at the reception made me not only proud of the products of our university, it also enhanced my optimism for the future.”

The systemwide [UC Grad Slam](#), featuring winners from all 10 campuses, takes place on April 29 at UC Center Sacramento. Runner-up Ma will represent UCSB, as Rollins will be in France, presenting her lab’s research at the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) conference, “Immunobiophysics: From fundamental physics to understanding the immune response.”

Emceed by UC President Michael V. Drake, UC Grad Slam will be livestreamed, and viewers will be able to vote online for an overall People’s Choice.

“Kirstin will be putting the public speaking skills she honed at Grad Slam to good use on the international stage,” said Leila Rupp, interim Anne and Michael Towbes Dean of the Graduate Division. “And we will be cheering for Yuting, who will delight the UC Grad Slam audience by explaining how functional regression will keep the lights and AC on as California gets hotter. Both will be making UC Santa Barbara proud.”

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