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Margo Perko

UCSB graduate student researchers vie for title of 2026 Grad Slam champ

With $5,000 on the line for the winner, graduate student researchers across a variety of disciplines at UC Santa Barbara will compete at the campus's 2026 Grad Slam championship event. Free and open to the public, the competition begins at 4:30 p.m. on April 9 in Campbell Hall. The event will also be livestreamed on the UCSB YouTube channel.

Now in its 14th year, the campus-wide competition showcases three-minute talks by grad student researchers, scored for communicating the central points of their projects in a clear, direct and interesting manner before a judging panel and live audience.

Advancing from six early rounds organized by discipline, plus a second-chance round for runners-up, the finalists are: Komal (chemistry and physics), Jordan Bream (materials), Ashley Diedenhofen (Bren School Of Environmental Science & Management), Kaylee Laub (Gevirtz Graduate School of Education), Jakob Romine (Spanish and Portuguese), Michaela Sten (marine science) and Celine Tsoi (psychological and brain sciences).

"Each year, I'm continually impressed by the caliber of research and the thoughtfulness our graduate students bring to communicating their work," said Anna Theogarajan, director of Graduate Professional Development. "This year, I've seen an added level of clarity and refinement in the presentations, reflecting the

excellence of our students. Bringing our campus and broader community together to uplift graduate student voices is both exciting and an honor.”

This year’s final also marks a pair of firsts, as Chancellor Dennis Assanis will provide opening remarks as Janine Jones, the Associate Vice Chancellor for Graduate Affairs and Anne and Michael Towbes Graduate Dean, takes the stage as the emcee.

“I’ve been incredibly inspired by my first experience with UCSB Grad Slam,” Jones said. “Watching our graduate students translate innovative, high-impact research into compelling stories has been deeply educational. The preliminary rounds were exciting and engaging, and I can’t wait for the campus community to experience the final — everyone is in for something special.”

Thousands in cash and prizes have been provided by Grad Slam corporate sponsors, including Yardi Systems Inc., the event’s presenting sponsor. Champion sponsors include Dr. Carrie Towbes and Dr. John Lewis, and the Lopker Family Foundation. The event’s medalist sponsors are the Sten Family Foundation, the Santa Barbara Independent, Boone Graphics and the UCSB Graduate Student Association. In addition to the $5,000 grand prize for the winner, $2000 will go to the runner-up. The winner of the People's Choice prize – determined by audience members voting online in-person and remotely – will be awarded $1,000.

UCSB’s champion will be invited to compete against other campus champions at the UC Grad Slam, being held April 22 at the UC Student and Policy Center in Sacramento, with opening remarks by California Senate President pro Tempore Monique Limón.

The April 9 event judging panel includes Elizabeth Belding, professor of computer science; Arnie Brier, chief operating and legal officer at Yardi Systems; Buster Buchanan, a health equity advocate at UCSB Health & Wellness; Yuting Ma, the 2025 Grad Slam all-UC representative and doctoral candidate in statistics; Karen Myers, professor of communications; Ashley Rifkin, international programs specialist at OISS and Kathleen Zhang from the Office of Undergraduate Research and the Creatives Activities (URCA) Slam Winner.

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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.