



Second-place finisher Jessica Moreton (at left), winner Nicholas Root and third-place finisher Aurora Lagattuta led the competition at last Thursday's Grad SLAM final round. Photos by Erik Jepsen/UC San Diego Publications

Three Times a Charm for Grad SLAM Winner

For Nicholas Root, a fifth-year doctoral student in psychology who had competed in the final round twice before, the third time was truly a charm last week when he won UC San Diego's fifth annual Grad SLAM—a TED-style competition that showcases graduate student research on the campus.

“This was the fourth time I’ve competed and third time I’ve been in the finals,” he confessed with relief soon after being declared the winner. “My talk was on a different subject the first two times I did it and then I switched my research topic to something I and my graduate advisor were more passionate about. I think that made the difference.”

Ten UC San Diego graduate students from a variety of academic disciplines participated in the Grad SLAM final round, which took place in the Student Services Complex Multipurpose Room. Organized by the Graduate Division, Grad SLAM challenged the 44 graduate students who entered the competition this year to break down their research into engaging three-minute talks understandable to a lay audience using only three Power Point slides.

The topics in last Thursday's final round ranged from tissue resident memory cells to motor learning to understanding what makes photosynthetic biofilms stick to surfaces. And the finalists brought not only their best dramatic rendition of their thesis to the competition, but also their advisors, mentors and lab mates, who filled the auditorium with raucous cheers before and after each competitor took the stage.

"Grad SLAM is important because it allows our graduate students to succinctly convey the impact of their research to a broad audience," said Kit Pogliano, dean of the Graduate Division and a professor of molecular biology who also emceed last week's final round. "These graduate students are doing technically difficult and challenging research projects that impact human health and the environment, and yet they're able to explain them in just a few minutes to a general audience."



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"It's really important for us to describe the research that we do on the UC San Diego campus and how it impacts our community and human health globally," she added. "Communication skills are critical because if we're unable to communicate what we do here to a broad audience then the public won't understand what we do and won't support us."

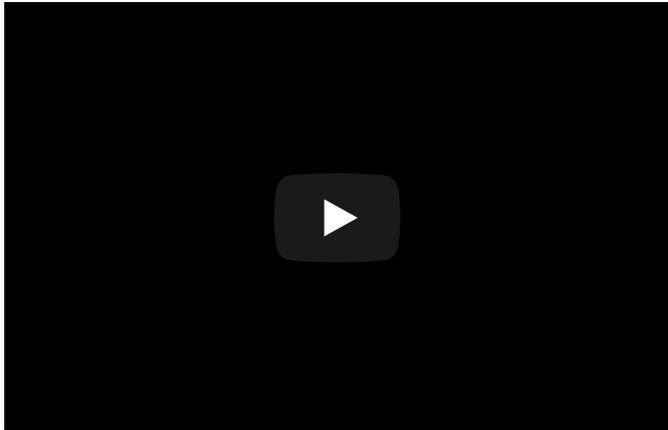
Root's three-minute talk, which earned him \$5,000 and the chance to compete against Grad SLAM winners from other UC campuses at the UC-wide Grad SLAM final in San Francisco May 3, focused on his research in language and synesthesia—a perceptual phenomenon in which the stimulation of one sensory pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second pathway.

Jessica Moreton, a fourth-year doctoral student in chemistry and biochemistry, won second place and \$2,000 for her talk on her research in developing new kinds of chemical protectants against nerve agents. And Aurora Lagattuta, a professional dancer and master's student in theatre and dance, won the \$1,500 third prize for her presentation on how dancing can be used to create a more diverse and inclusive community.

Moreton said before the competition that she decided to enter this year's Grad SLAM because a friend, Geoff Hollet, who won last year's competition, talked her into it.

“He spoke really highly of the experience,” she said. “I have also had a really great experience so far, so it was good advice.”

For Root, winning this year’s competition after four attempts was just the icing on the cake to the opportunity he’s had as a graduate student mentored by famed psychologist V.S. Ramachandran, a distinguished professor of psychology and director of UC San Diego’s [Center for Brain and Cognition](#).



Root said he was inspired to go to graduate school in psychology 10 years ago when he read Ramachandran’s acclaimed book about his pioneering research into phantom limb paralysis *Phantoms in the Brain*.

“And now,” he added, “I’m working as a graduate student under him.”

Root first began studying “unconscious processing” with Ramachandran, the information that comes into our brains and what we subconsciously perceive are different from each other.

“Before I would ask questions like, ‘When you see something that scares you and you’re not aware that you’ve seen it, in what ways does it affect your behavior?’ ” he said about his initial research thesis project. “And now what I’m sort of asking is, ‘When you see something but you perceive something differently and you perceive something extra, what can that tell us?’ ”

And how does Root plan to spend his \$5,000 payday?

“I’m planning on traveling to Europe this summer, partly for my own enjoyment and partly to network for postdoctoral positions after I finish my dissertation,” he said, “and I’ve always had this dream of renting a cabin in the middle of nowhere and finishing my dissertation away from the world.”

UC San Diego faculty, students and staff can root for Root on May 3 and view the livestream [here](#) when he competes in the 10-campus UC-wide Grad SLAM competition, which will be hosted by UC President Janet Napolitano at the LinkedIn headquarters in San Francisco.

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