



UC San Diego graduate student Alex Phan. Photo by Erik Jepsen/UC San Diego Publications

UC San Diego Student Takes Third Place at UC Grad Slam

In a three-minute TED-style talk, UC San Diego graduate student Alex Phan explained to University of California President Janet Napolitano and a panel of judges how his work developing a novel intraocular pressure sensor holds the potential to transform care for glaucoma patients and lead to better understanding of the disease. Phan was one of 10 graduate students to compete in the first UC-wide Grad Slam tournament, which took place May 4 in Oakland. Phan took third place and received a \$1,000 prize for his presentation.

The Grad Slam challenges students to take years of academic work and present it to a general audience in just three minutes, without using any jargon or technical lingo. The result is a fun and engaging glimpse at the variety and impact of graduate student work across the University of

California. It's also an opportunity for students to practice communicating their research, a skill of growing necessity as public funding for research and higher education becomes more competitive.

"Making the mysteries of basic research understandable and exciting to the world at large is one of our top priorities," said Napolitano, who emceed the event. "After all, how good is basic research if you can't explain it to anybody? In that spirit, the Grad Slam plays a key role in highlighting the broad societal significance of the research done at the University of California."

Leading up to the May 4 tournament, each UC campus held its own Grad Slam competition, with the winner of each advancing to the final event in Oakland. While this was the first year for a UC-wide Grad Slam, it was the second year for UC San Diego's campus competition.

"I was extremely proud to represent UC San Diego in Oakland," said Phan, a second year mechanical engineering graduate student. "It was as exhilarating to be sharing our work on stage as it was exciting to listen to all the presentations from other students. I was amazed by the diversity and the impact of UC research on the community."

In his talk titled "Intraocular Pressure Sensor: Fight for Sight," Phan described a novel sensor to monitor intraocular pressure in glaucoma patients. High eye pressure associated with the disease—which affects 60 million people worldwide—leads to deterioration of vision, he explained. However, glaucoma patients only have their eye pressure checked a few times a year.

Phan explained his lab's work with Dr. Robert N. Weinreb, director of the Shiley Eye Institute, to develop an implantable sensor to monitor eye pressure. Once in place, the patient can simply take a photo of the eye with a smartphone and get a measurement of the pressure. Or, with a device such as Google Glass, eye pressure can be continuously monitored.

Among the audience members was Frank Talke, professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering and Phan's advisor.

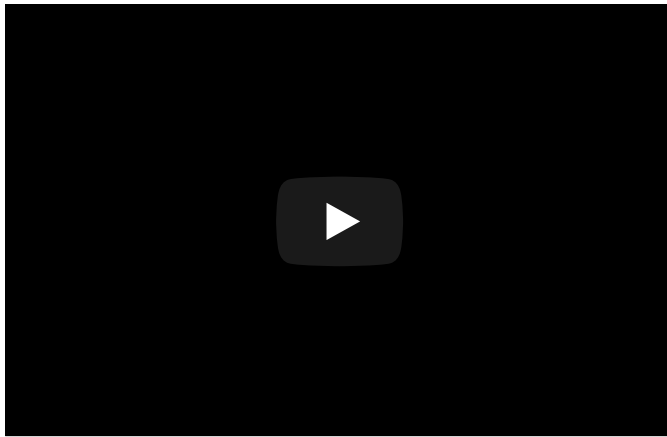
"All students did an outstanding job in presenting their research, and I would not have wanted to be a judge to pick the winners," said Talke. "I was delighted, however, when Alex's name was called, and am proud of him and all other students in our lab. Seeing a graduate student doing well is a wonderful and rewarding feeling."

In addition to Phan, the UC Grad Slam winners were Ashley Fong of UC Irvine who took first place and Daniel Hieber of UC Santa Barbara who placed second.

Non-academics, including NBC Bay Area News anchor Jessica Aguirre, Silicon Valley venture capitalist Josh Green and Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf, joined UC Regent Eddie Island and UC Provost Aimée Dorr as the contest judges. They evaluated contestants based on their ability to clearly and concisely explain their research and its impact.

To prepare for the competition, Phan and the contestants of UC San Diego's Grad Slam took advantage of coaching sessions and workshops offered through the Communication and Leadership program, including the new One Button Studio located in Price Center East. Students received guidance for shaping the framework of their talks and crafting a presentation that would connect to a general audience. Many practiced in the studio, which allowed them to video record their presentation and view it later at their home or office.

"I'm very grateful for all the support from my family, friends, faculty and staff members," said Phan. "The experience and accomplishment was definitely fulfilling for all of us."



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