

Inaugural Grad SLAM Competition Showcases Impact of Graduate Student Work



Imagine being asked to condense years of focused study and research into a three-minute talk. Now make sure those three minutes are understandable, relatable to the general public and, ideally, inspiring. That's exactly what UC San Diego graduate students were challenged to accomplish for the inaugural Grad SLAM competition, which concluded April 9.

Hosted by the Office of Graduate Studies in collaboration with the Center for Student Involvement – Communication and Leadership, Grad SLAM was created to highlight the impact of graduate student research at UC San Diego as well as to provide a platform for students to gain experience communicating their work to a general audience. The competition was open to all UC San Diego

graduate students and began with a series of preliminary rounds, held March 31 through April 4. Representing a variety of academic fields, 59 students participated in the preliminaries. The top speaker from each round—10 total—advanced to the final competition held April 9 on campus, which offered a \$2,500 prize for first place and \$1,000 each for second and third place.

“To be able to communicate your work to a broad audience is an important skill,” said Suresh Subramani, executive vice chancellor for Academic Affairs, as he welcomed the audience to the April 9 competition.

“We are very excited to start this new tradition at UC San Diego,” added Dean of Graduate Studies Kim Barrett. “This is a unique opportunity to underscore how exceptional our graduate students are, and to share the impact of their work beyond the place where they do their research.”

From the role of Twitter in the Arab Spring to improving aviation safety and finding a path to preventing Alzheimer’s disease, the competitors spoke of their research and how it relates to current challenges and problems that society faces.

Keng-Lou James Hung, a graduate student in biological sciences, opened the competition by talking about global food production. “One out of three bites that humans take are made possible by insects,” said Hung before describing his research of wild pollinators in San Diego. Like all of the competitors, Hung was being scored by a panel of judges that would evaluate not just the content of his talk, but also how it was presented; the judges watched to see how each speaker used eye contact, gestures, facial expressions and voice to engage the audience, as well as how the talk was organized.

With just three minutes to convey their research and its impact, all of the speakers sought to leave the audience with a memorable takeaway. “If you want to do something good for your brain, probably the best thing you can do is to take a walk,” concluded Catherine Dufour, a graduate student in the School of Medicine, after presenting studies of the impact of exercise on cognitive abilities in patients with HIV.

After ten “rapid fire” talks and a short break to tally the scores, the winners of the inaugural Grad SLAM were announced:

1st Place: Patrick Metz, Biomedical Sciences

Titled “Remembering an Infection: How to Make a Lasting Immune Response,” Metz’s talk described his research of T lymphocytes, the white blood cells that patrol the front lines of the body’s defense against infection. When a T cell encounters an invader, Metz explained, it divides into two cells, one of which becomes a short-term cell responsible for immediate defense and another that becomes a long-term “memory” cell that provides future protection from similar infections. Exactly how and when the cells divide and differentiate has not been well understood—until now. Metz and his colleagues

have discovered that the decision by a T cell to produce short-term and long-term cells is made almost at the moment of infection, a novel insight that could help lead to more-effective, longer-lasting vaccines.

“I really enjoy sharing my research,” said Metz. Though he has experience talking about his work with his lab group and others in his field, the Grad SLAM was the largest and most academically diverse audience he has addressed. “It was really challenging to condense my talk into three minutes, and keep it relatable,” he said. “It’s helped me learn how to relate my research to people outside of my field.”

2nd Place: Sarah Jurick, Clinical Psychology

Every 68 seconds, an American develops Alzheimer’s disease, stated Jurick at the beginning of her talk. Jurick’s research involves looking for risk factors that would make a person susceptible to Alzheimer’s disease, with the goal that, one day, prevention will be possible. Jurick compared this challenge to the problem of heart disease, explaining how identifying risk factors for heart disease led to routine screenings and preventative treatments that are now commonly used. Jurick presented one study in which a memory test was given to both adults with minor cognitive impairment and normal older adults. Jurick recorded the brain activation in each group to compare how their brains worked on the task. This kind of research, Jurick explained, provides a “window to what the brain looks like before Alzheimer’s.”

3rd Place: Benjamin Rubin, Biological Sciences

In his talk titled “The Green Machine,” Rubin shared his research to better understand cyanobacteria and how they can be harnessed for biofuel production. In three minutes, Rubin told the story of how these organisms helped to form life on Earth as we know it, injecting oxygen into the atmosphere and evolving into all forms of plant life. Rubin’s research investigates how cyanobacteria function at night, a topic that has been studied little but that Rubin believes will lead to new insight about these organisms and, ultimately, will help scientists effectively utilize cyanobacteria for biofuels.

The 10 finalists of the Grad SLAM competition were: Catherine Dufour, School of Medicine; Sophia Georghiou, global health; Colin Haynes, structural engineering; Keng-Lou James Hung, biological sciences; Sarah Jurick, clinical psychology; Eric Keen, Scripps Institution of Oceanography; Paola Marcovecchio, biomedical sciences; Patrick Metz, Biomedical Sciences; Benjamin Rubin, biological sciences and Zachary Steinert-Threlkeld, political science.

The Office of Graduate Studies plans to offer the Grad SLAM competition again in the 2014-2015 academic year. For more information about this year’s competition, visit the [Grad SLAM web page](#).

Located in the Student Services Center, the Office of Graduate Studies provides a wide range of services to prospective and current UC San Diego graduate students, as well as campus departments, on all matters related to graduate education. This includes diversity outreach and recruitment, graduate admissions, enhancing the quality of graduate student life and student financial support, among many other elements of the graduate student experience at UC San Diego.

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