



*Center, first-place winner Alex Phan. Photos by Erik Jepsen/UC San Diego Publications*

## **Grad SLAM Challenges Students to Put Complex Research into Plain English**

**First place winner to participate in UC system-wide competition May 4**

How do you explain—in just three minutes and to someone outside of your field—why you are researching the brain’s unconscious processing, or what you hope to learn from studying the diet of whales? That’s the challenge that UC San Diego graduate students took up at the second annual Grad SLAM competition, which concluded April 15. In addition to a prize of \$2,500, the top winner will compete in the first-ever UC system-wide Grad SLAM in Oakland May 4.

The competitive speaking event is an opportunity for students to practice communicating their work, while showcasing the diversity, quality and impact of graduate research at UC San Diego. More than 80 students entered the challenge, which began with a series of 11 preliminary rounds held April 1-3. Eleven students advanced to last week's final round.



“I want everyone here to imagine that you are going blind,” said first-place winner Alex Phan, setting the stage for his talk about a novel sensor to monitor intraocular pressure in glaucoma patients. Glaucoma, he explained, is an incurable disease that affects 60 million people worldwide, and even with treatment, can lead to irreversible blindness. Phan laid out the problem: although the exact cause is unknown, high eye pressure associated with the disease leads to deterioration of vision. For glaucoma

patients, careful monitoring and lowering of eye pressure are essential to mitigate further vision loss. Currently, a patient's eye pressure is only measured during office visits, a few times a year.

### **Perfecting Their Pitches at One Button Studio**

To help students prepare for the Grad SLAM competition, the Center for Student Involvement offered one-on-one coaching to help students translate their technical work into a message that would resonate with the hearts and minds of a general audience. Students received help shaping an overall framework for the talk, suggestions for keeping to the three-minute time limit and personalized feedback.

The coaching sessions took place at the new [One Button Studio](#), located on the first floor of Price Center East. The space allows students to video record their presentations and then view it at their home or office.

“It's tough for the students to watch the video of themselves initially, but it is one of the best learning strategies for improving presentations skills,” said Lisa Gates, program coordinator in the Communication and Leadership program at the Center for Student Involvement.

The One Button Studio is open to undergraduate and graduate students who can use the space independently, or through one of the public speaking seminars offered through the Communication and Leadership program. The program also offers individual coaching for conferences, poster sessions, elevator pitches and lectures.

The mechanical engineer, who is in his second year of graduate study, then shared his work developing an implantable sensor to monitor eye pressure. Once the sensor is in place, pressure is measured simply by taking a photo of the eye with a smartphone. “A selfie, if you will,” he quipped. Alternatively, pressure could be monitored continuously with a device like Google Glass—and all from the convenience of a patient's home. “This would allow physicians to optimize and personalize treatment, and ultimately, the information gathered from our sensor could lead to a better understanding of what causes glaucoma, and how to avoid it.”

For Phan, the Grad SLAM was the latest of several opportunities to practice sharing his work. He participated in the UC San Diego Entrepreneur Challenge's Elevator Pitch Competition in February and the Jacobs School of Engineering Research Expo on April 16. Sharing his work repeatedly has helped him to become more comfortable speaking in front of a crowd, he noted.

The competition is also part of a broader effort to help UC San Diego students with their professional development, including teaching students to communicate clearly and concisely.

"Being able to explain what you do and why is so important in this current age, where funding for academic research is under threat," said Kim E. Barrett, dean of the Graduate Division. "Students need to be able to communicate the value of their work to non-academics."

Other UC San Diego Grad SLAM winners included Sophia Georghiou, who took second place, and Jennie Kuckertz, who took third. The two students study public health and clinical psychology, respectively. For more information about the Grad SLAM and other resources available through the Graduate Division, visit [grad.ucsd.edu](http://grad.ucsd.edu).

The UC Grad SLAM will take place May 4 from 11 a.m.-1:30 p.m. To watch the live-stream, go to: [grad-slam](#).

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