

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

November 2, 2023

Hybrid meeting, in person in Waterman Lounge and by Video Conference on Zoom

MINUTES

Call to Order: President Michael Gurdon called the meeting to order at 3pm. There were 41 members in attendance.

1. President Gurdon introduced Dr. Josh Bongard, the Veinott Professor of Computer Science and director of the Morphology, Evolution & Cognition Laboratory on campus. Dr. Bongard's lab creates AI, robots, and computer designed organisms (so-called "xenobots"). He received a research award from former president Barack Obama at a ceremony at the White House in 2011, appeared in an episode of Morgan Freeman's science program 'Through the Wormhole', was named as one of MIT Technology Review's Top 35 Under 35, and received the Cozzarelli Prize from the National Academy of Sciences. He has appeared on CNN and his work has been covered by The New York Times, The New Yorker, and the BBC. He is also the author of the book "How the Body Shapes the Way We Think". The title of his talk was " Organisms, robots, and AI. Past, present, and possible futures". He began by noting that robots have proven effective at systematizing assembly by mass production in-doors. However, robots are less useful out-doors because they do not adapt well to variable conditions. Currently there is an effort to develop robots for large scale outdoor projects like alternative energy sources which have high operating and maintenance costs with the goal of automating maintenance. This will probably involve using AI to construct an adaptive robot. AI usually approaches a problem like this by trial and error. He next described his laboratory's research on xenobots. These are AI designed new tissues and organisms. In collaboration with scientists at Tufts University, frog skin and heart muscle are combined at the direction of AI to synergize contraction. Videos were shown to illustrate progression of tissue reorganization which ultimately resulted in a construct that moved by muscle contraction. Professor Bongard then took questions from the audience.
2. President Gurdon gave a brief overview of Executive Committee and RFAO organizational activities during the past year.
 - a. The Board met in 10 regular meetings and one special meeting.
 - b. Much of the discussion at Board meetings regarded the change in the health plan and attendant problems. The Board met 5 times with representatives of Human Resources and 4 times with Cigna representatives. At present it appears that there has been an improvement in member experience but that issues remain.
 - c. A related issue of concern to the Board was the prolonged inactivity of the University Benefits Advisory Council. As a result of this inactivity retirees were not informed of nor involved in decisions that led to changes in the health plan. The UBAC has been reconstituted and has two RFAO members. This should provide more retiree input into University benefit decisions.
 - d. The Board had discussions with the new Vice-Provost regarding member access to computer software. There is now in place a satisfactory mechanism to obtain access.
 - e. It has obtained stipends for member scholarship activity, and awards were made to retired faculty from the English, History, and Plant and Soil Science departments.
 - f. There was an election by ballot for the first time, and 117 ballots were recorded.
 - g. Questions followed.
 - i. How should members communicate problems with the health plan? The Board and HR are available to help, and major issues can be brought to the attention of the UBAC.
 - ii. How long is the contract with Cigna? There is a 5 year frame-work. No change in premiums for the first 3 years. The contract can be terminated earlier than 3 years.
 - iii. A member noted that any employment by UVM can result in the loss of retiree parking privileges. (Subsequent to the meeting, this circumstance was verified. The faculty union

contract states, on p. 117, "Should a retiree be reemployed by UVM they will be subject to the same parking rates, policies and procedures as active employees.")

- h. Results of elections of representatives to the RFAO Board for 2 year terms.
 - i. Officers:
 - 1. Michael Gurdon, President
 - 2. Beth Mintz, Vice-President
 - 3. Richard Branda, Secretary-Treasurer
 - ii. At Large Executive Board Members:
 - 1. Ralph Budd, Alan Gotlieb, Rachel Johnson, Alison Pecheneck, Lee Thompson
- 2. The meeting was adjourned at 4:37pm

Respectfully submitted, Richard Branda