

My VEF Fellowship interview experience

By Ngo To Linh – VEF Fellow Cohort 2011

On the day of interview, I got up at 7am (2 hours before the exam), took a bath, had a nice breakfast, selected a simple dress, wore a little make up, then got to the Sofitel Plaza Hanoi Hotel at 8.15am. The waiting lounge was cozy and relaxing. I felt very good; perhaps the nice dress I wore made me confident.

At 9am, a young lady took me to the interview room. She was the note-taker. We had a small talk and this was helpful to me, it made my mouth “shape” to suit English speaking. The interview room was small and simple with one table, one medium-sized board and one flipchart. All of them were white (I mention this because the color made me feel calm and comfortable). There were two professors, two observers, and one note taker. Then came self introduction, handshake, and the interview began.

The Profs seemed to have a list of questions for me. They asked me about my personal background first. I answered: “My name is Ngo To Linh, please just call me Linh. I was born in Hanoi and grew up here. I’m a senior student in Hanoi University of Agriculture (HUA). My major is crop science. I love nature since I was a child and I was amazed by different types of plants. In fact, the miracle of living things really fascinated me. So I chose biology to follow very early from my high school time up to now, and when I got in to HUA, I took crop science as my major”. (They asked some questions as a small talk, but I do not remember all the details)

Then they asked me to address the most interesting project I had worked on. I answered “Ethnobotanical survey of herbal bath of Red Dao people in Sapa”. I also explained Red Dao people were a minority group in Northern Vietnam.

“Could you tell us what ethnobotany is?”

“It is the study of the relationships between people and plants. I mean, the study about how people use plants, how they exploit them, how they conserve them, how they use them for different purposes like foods, medicines, vegetables, etc.”

“How was your work like?”

I described my work succinctly: the place, time, the method and a few details. They asked me what I would do after completing the task. I said I would make recommendation on conservation and worked with the community for sustainable management. They asked me to show the importance of my project in Vietnam. I indicated the potential of poverty elimination, biodiversity conservation and culture conservation. I used strong words in this answer.

They asked me what I expected to contribute for Vietnam when I come back after my study in the U.S. My answer included education (establish a new curriculum), research (because I love this work), and network building between Vietnamese and the U.S scientists, because there

were some modern equipments we did not have in Vietnam yet and we needed help from “your” country. They asked me to provide example of “modern equipments”. I answered directly: “GIS is the tool that we do not have now”. Then I explained why GIS was necessary for ethnobotanical research.

They also asked me if I felt the courses I had taken helped me in research, I said yes. They asked me if I had taken any course in statistics, I said yes. I did not provide details and reasons because there was no time between these small questions. They asked some questions about my professors, I thought this was to make sure that the work was done by me but not by others. In this answer, I also described how my professor was a model for me in serious scientific research and how I was then becoming a serious scientist like him.

They asked me about the universities I chose, why I chose them and HOW I chose them. I started with UHM. I told them I was working on the literature review of my project; I read many articles and saw the name of Prof X appear again and again. I searched for his work and found it very interesting (example...). I knew he worked in UHM, so I wanted to get into this school to be his student. I also mentioned some trends of research I wanted to do, and they were strange to the Profs interviewing me: “Biocognosy, it is a new word, could you explain it?”

They kept on until they asked me about all of the schools I listed in the application. For each school, I put into my answers some details about me. When I talked about UCD, I mentioned about ecology, why I wanted to study it, how much I knew about it. When I talked about UCR, I mentioned about sustainable agriculture and climate change. When I talked about Columbia, I mentioned about a famous professor, how I was impressed by his lecture broadcasted on Youtube, and I knew he was a student of the father of my field.

Then the list of questions seemed to be over, they turned to ask me about interesting points in my presentation. Most of the questions were about my research. They were quite straight forward. “Do you have to do the survey on indigenous knowledge?”, “Do you find the task demanding?”, “Do you face any difficulties when you’re living there and how you work them out?”... I thought I made them believe in my work and in my love for this field. In the answers, I pointed out how I did this in Vietnam, what the problem in methodology was, what I thought, and how I could work it out if I could pursue higher education in the United States. They asked me if I would get to the U.S, who would continue my work. I said I would finish it before I left, following my plan, but if the project would not be completed before I left, I believed other students would keep on, because back then I was working with some freshmen and led them into the project.

They asked me: “What do you think your research is of ethnobotany or crop science?” I took my opportunity right then: “I see my research as the integration between crop science and

ethnobotany. Crops, by definition, are plants that are grown by people. Ethnobotany is the study about how people use plants. By studying the connections between people and plants, I could understand how a plant becomes a crop, and it is very important in crop science”.

They asked me if I had a chance to experience leadership, I answered yes and gave an example. They asked who the members of my team were, and if I had worked with different teams or only one. I only mentioned about my team in my class. This was the only answer that I did not feel satisfied. I should have answered the question better if I had brought up my extracurricular activities like the festival I organized, the magazine I edited, and the English club I moderated. I also led a group of VEF interviewees and worked on the preparation for this interview. I even could have made my answer better by just saying:”I’m a leader in student organization. If you come to my school and ask about me, I believe everyone could answer you who I am”. They also asked me about publication: “Are you required to publish your final report? Do you want to publish your report?. etc.,” My answer showed that I understood the importance of publication and I was trying to publish my findings.

When we ran out of time, they let me ask them some questions. I asked three questions:

1. “Do you have any recommendation about my choice of schools?”

“It’s ok. You know about the school you chose. They are fine...”

2. “What do you think about the education and research in ethnobotany in the U.S now?”

“It is a small major, but it grabs attention of public. It is a hot topic...”

3. “What do you think about the opportunity of cooperation between VN and US in this field?”

“Yes, in pharmaceutical industry...”

(Their answers were long; I do not remember the whole sentences)

They said they were impressed by the work I had done and appreciated the conversation. The interview finished here. I stood up, made handshake, said thank you, goodbye and went out. I felt I did a good job. The questions were simpler than I had expected. My presentation went very smoothly. Of course it was not as perfect as my preparation, but I knew it was good enough. I was flexible and responded cleverly. I made use of all questions to perform my best.

A small note: My field was a minor and not very commonly known in the U.S. My story may not applicable to other “hot topics” like computer science or nano-material. However, my opinion is that every question is a chance for you to express yourself. If you make use of the chance, you win!