

**Vietnam Education Foundation**

**Minutes of the  
Meeting of the Board of Directors**

**April 6, 2012**

**2111 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 700  
Arlington, VA 22201**

**List of Attendees:**

- **VEF Board members:**
  - **Mr. Chris Fussner (VEF Board Chair) (via teleconference), Ms. Sandy Dang, Mr. David Duong (via teleconference), Ms. Marjorie Margolies (via teleconference), Dr. Stephen Maxner, Dr. Isaac Silvera**
  - **Mr. Steven Pappas (Education), Mr. Tim Marshall (State)**
- **VEF U.S. Staff:**
  - **Dr. Lynne McNamara, Executive Director**
  - **Ms. Christie Dam, Finance and Administration Assistant**
  - **Ms. Sandarshi Gunawardena, Senior Program Officer**
  - **Ms. Tina Lapel, Program Associate**
  - **Dr. Peggy Petrochenkov, Program Officer**
  - **Ms. Lana Walbert, Director of Finance, Accounting, and Administration**
- **VEF Hanoi Staff:**
  - **Dr. Phuong Nguyen, Country Director (via teleconference)**
  - **Mr. Tu Ngo, IT and Data Manager**
- **VEF Guests:**
  - **Ms. Lesly Wilson (GSA Legal Counsel)**
  - **Mr. Bryant Jones, Office of Management and Budget**

**Call to Order and Approval of Minutes – Chris Fussner**

Mr. Fussner called the meeting to order and, after introductions, called for approval of the minutes of the November 18, 2011, and January 3, 2012, meetings. On separate motions duly made and seconded, both meeting minutes were unanimously approved. Mr. Marshall affirmed that the Department of State had reviewed the minutes and both were approved for posting on the VEF Web site.

**Executive Director Top Line Report – Lynne McNamara**

Dr. McNamara announced a new format of the meeting whereby most of the routine reports normally given at past meetings would be summarized in writing in the

*Announcements* presented to the Board at each Board meeting, but questions about those reports were welcome and could be discussed. She announced the addition of Tina Lapel as Program Associate in the Arlington headquarters, which now is fully manned with six federal employees. The Hanoi office is also fully staffed, with nine employees under a contract with a Vietnamese human resources company.

Dr. McNamara announced with pleasure, a number of “firsts.” VEF has received over 20 letters of commendations; the U.S. staff manual requested by GAO during their audit is finished; a Selection Review Committee was established to monitor and review the selection process; Peggy Petrochenkov has written the first summary of the entire selection process; for all three VEF programs the selection process itself is, for the first time, completely an in-house operation; the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., has requested that VEF assist in organizing a roundtable in June on science and technology to be held in Washington; VEF will be switching to Google Apps for Government for e-mail (to be in compliance with federal requirements); and a publication, entitled *Excellence in Educational Exchange*, is being prepared, which will contain success stories of VEF Fellows and Scholars.

Dr. McNamara commented that, at today’s meeting, the Board would review and approve the list of cohort 2012 Fellows, Visiting Scholars, and U.S. Faculty Scholars, and would consider two innovative proposals: the establishment of a Facebook page for VEF and the recruitment of VEF science advisors to provide advice and counsel on matters pertaining to STEMM<sup>1</sup> related issues.

### **The VEF Selection Committee – Steven Pappas**

Mr. Pappas described the newly established Selection and Review Committee (SRC), which met for the first time on the day before the Board meeting. In about four hours, the Committee reviewed the lower quartile of the finalists in the Fellows program, the Visiting Scholars program, and the U.S. Faculty Scholars program. They also reviewed the reports of the academic reviewers and the comments by the staff who also interviewed the candidates. He commended the staff for the intense effort required to manage the review and put together the final recommendations for the 2012 cohorts that the Board would review. He also recognized the 154-page report that Dr. Petrochenkov authored to document the entire application and selection process; this report will serve as a guide to this process that has now been brought in-house for the first time.

Mr. Pappas stated that the Committee agreed that the selection of the reviewers was carefully considered, and their reports were thorough. The staff was also thorough in the interviews that included an assessment of English language skills. He did express concern, however, about the number of applicants and the ability of the applicants to

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<sup>11</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine

meet the high standards set by the VEF programs. He commented that it is clear that the number of qualified candidates must significantly increase if the program is to select the best candidates with the most potential to succeed.

Dr. Petrochenkov explained the selection process that began by contacting all of the previous reviewers, as well as Deans of the VEF Alliance schools and other institutions in the United States. A volunteer form was sent to appropriate reviewer candidates, and a calendar was constructed to ensure that reviewers would be available during the key selection process events. Mr. Tu Ngo and the Hanoi IT staff designed an online application that reviewers would use and that others, such as the Deans, would use to nominate reviewers. Each application was reviewed by three reviewers. Dr. Petrochenkov mentioned that, after the reviewers were selected, there was a significant amount of follow-up to encourage them to keep on track. Except for a couple of reviewers, most responded well and submitted their comments in a timely way.

The approach to evaluating Fellowship and Visiting Scholar candidates involves two separate qualification stages. After eligibility screening, there is a technical review done online by experts in the applicant's field that is based on academic merit. There are three scoring categories— very good, good, and adequate (those falling in the adequate category, which is the lowest evaluation, are not considered for the program). Reviewers are provided with a rating sheet that contains more detail about their academic qualifications, leadership skills, and activities in Vietnam. The same scale is used for English language proficiency. The U.S. Faculty Scholars are evaluated on the basis of their preparation to teach in Vietnam, but not on their ESL capability, although there are some U.S. professors who do not speak English as a first language and could potentially have trouble communicating with Vietnamese students, which is one factor to consider.

There was a brief discussion about balancing an individual's academic qualifications with his or her English skills, and an observation was made that the choice may be challenging when a truly outstanding student scores relatively low on the ESL portion of the interview. Although no consensus was reached, Dr. McNamara pointed out that one consideration is whether or not the student would be able to improve language skills if selected. Ms. Gunawardena noted also that sometimes students find they are disqualified after they enroll at an institution if they cannot meet the academic requirements. Some Fellows have dropped out because of their inability to fulfill the English language requirements before graduation. VEF staff intends to investigate the language issues further.

## **Items for Board Approval**

### ***2012 Cohort Program Participants***

Ms. Gunawardena described the proposed 2012 Fellows cohort that began as 110 applicants: 90 in Process A and 20 Process B. After a preliminary eligibility screening and a technical review, 93 applicants were interviewed (76 Process A candidates were interviewed face-to-face and 17 Process B candidates were interviewed by phone). Although 45 Process A candidates were selected, four withdrew for various reasons and one candidate was disqualified, leaving the final total from Process A at 40 while 15 Process B candidates were recommended for final approval (out of the 17 originally interviewed). Therefore, a total of 55 candidates were recommended for Board approval. There were seven pending: four with ESL requirements to be clarified, and three who had not obtained any university admission at this time. Ms. Gunawardena added that ESL courses cannot be included in the graduate curriculum, and these pending cases with ESL requirements pose some immigration concerns that need to be overcome. Although the Selection Review Committee granted extensions to the candidates who had not received an admission notification, the Board approved the 55 recommended candidates: 40 from Process A and 15 from Process B.

Asked about the possibility of further dropouts, Ms. Gunawardena conceded that in the past, one or two Fellows have withdrawn from the Fellowship program prior to the start of their academic program. However, there are also cases of admission slots opening up late in the process (after the generally acknowledged university deadline of April 15 for all admission acceptances), which could bode well for those who have not yet been admitted to any university.

Concerning the four alternates with ESL problems, there was a brief discussion of alternatives and options, including providing additional funds to the University for ESL training. Considering the deadline of April 15<sup>th</sup> for commitment by a candidate to U.S. graduate schools, the possibilities of meeting the ESL requirements later does not meet this deadline. Dr. Maxner wondered whether a student could take a full semester of English language study in the fall and start the VEF Fellowship program in the spring, even though this procedure might involve two separate visas. He also noted that the TOEFL score is provided early in the application process (about 1.5 years in advance of enrollment), and it might be helpful to require a second, more timely TOEFL score. Ms. Gunawardena commented that raising the TOEFL minimum of 500 might be worth considering. Dr. McNamara noted that some Fellows receive conditional or limited admission notifications. Dr. Petrochenkov added that some universities have a minimum language score that the Fellow may pass, but they might fail the oral exam that prevents these students from being appointed as a teaching assistant or research assistant (which requires a minimum test score).

Mr. Fussner called the discussion to a close and invited a motion. The motion was duly made and seconded; the Board unanimously approved the 2012 cohort of 55 Fellows that were recommended by the Selection Review Committee.

Moving to Visiting Scholars, Ms. Gunawardena stated that there were 12 initial applicants, 10 of whom were referred for technical review and subsequently also interviewed, and 6 of whom were finally recommended for the program. She added that the Board had approved 15 slots for 2012. On a motion duly made and seconded, the Board unanimously approved the 6 Visiting Scholars proposed by the Selection Review Committee.

Turning finally to the U.S. Faculty Scholars, Ms. Gunawardena commented that of 16 initial applicants, 14 were interviewed, and finally 10 were selected by the Committee. Five of the ten had received U.S. Faculty Scholar grants in the past. Dr. McNamara noted that there are no restrictions on the number of times an individual can apply and be awarded a grant, but that might be an issue that should be discussed, perhaps at a future meeting. Ms. Gunawardena added that a similar trend is also evident in the Fellowship Process B program, where students already enrolled in graduate programs in the United States are applying for VEF funding.

Dr. McNamara discussed some of the obstacles that affect the U.S. Faculty Scholar program, including the difficulty that professors have going to Vietnam, unless they are emeritus or on sabbatical. In addition, videoconferencing must be done in real time, which may present scheduling problems, including the time zone differences. Dr. Petrochenkov noted another impediment: the previous short-time window between application and selection and then deployment. There is a proposal upcoming to widen the time window. Mr. Marshall noted that, in terms of incentive, unless the professors are Southeast Asian specialists or are preparing a book or paper on the subject, they may have problems getting the same credit for participating in the VEF program that they would for a similar stint in the United States.

Dr. Maxner commented that sustainability should be a consideration in the U.S. Faculty Scholar program, and that participants should develop continuing programs and relationships, especially if they serve more than one term. He also expressed concern that the mission of the program is to expand relationships with institutions, and that involves bringing many individuals in contact with many institutions.

There was a brief discussion about marketing the program, and Dr. McNamara expressed appreciation for several good ideas offered by Board members. Mr. Fussner called for a motion and, on motion duly made and seconded, the Board unanimously approved the slate of 10 U.S. Faculty Scholars recommended by the Selection Review Committee.

During discussion, Dr. Maxner observed that the Selection Review Committee had noticed that there was sometimes a disconnect between the narrative comments of a reviewer and the reviewer's numerical scores. He suggested that consideration of both should be a priority when making final selections for any program. Asked about the evaluation process for U.S. Faculty Scholars who receive grants, Dr. McNamara stated that VEF relies mainly on self-reporting by the professor, although a student survey is required as part of that process. Ms. Gunawardena added that the Visiting Scholars also provide a self-evaluation of their program. She added that it might be appropriate to formalize the evaluation process for both the U.S. Faculty Scholar program and the Visiting Scholar program to assess the impact of both of these programs.

### ***Professional Development Grant (PDG)***

Dr. McNamara proposed that the PDG be made available to all Fellows sponsored by VEF and enrolled in an academic program. Currently the PDG is available for two years to master's degree students, and up to five years for doctoral candidates. She further proposed that the PDG be paid retroactively for those currently enrolled as of the fall of 2012, who may have passed the two- or five-year limit. The PDG would also be available to master's degree students who continued under VEF sponsorship to pursue a Ph.D. It would also apply to students who may have returned to Vietnam, as long as they were working on their degree, have not terminated the J visa, and are still under the sponsorship of VEF. It would not apply to anyone engaged in Academic Training (AT).

Ms. Gunawardena commented that at times the rationale for a Fellow extending their degree program to a seventh or eighth year may be weak and students may simply be prolonging their programs. Dr. McNamara noted that one control over that situation is the fact that there are specific requirements for spending the PDG funds so that the use of the money must be related to Fellows' studies and must be limited to a certain range of choices. Asked about the first year cost, Dr. McNamara estimated that it might be as high as \$57,000 because of the retroactive feature of the proposal, but would be significantly lower in subsequent years.

On motion duly made and seconded, the Board approved the proposal to extend the benefits of the PDG.

### ***Consideration of Outside Scientific Advisors***

Dr. Petrochenkov proposed establishing a group of volunteer scientific advisors selected from experts in the STEMM fields, including alumni of the U.S. Faculty Scholar program. She suggested that seven should be selected and that they would not be paid

a stipend but would be recognized on the VEF website. An example of the support they could provide would be supplemental review of a program candidate if required.

Ms. Wilson, VEF Legal Advisor, commented that the structure of the group would have to be very carefully considered to avoid becoming subject to the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), which would put significant restrictions on how the group could function. That is, the group could not be an advisory board or committee and they could not be presented as an organized group on the VEF website. Dr. Maxner suggested that they could be considered subject matter experts who interact with VEF in an independent way, that is, individuals who are willing to provide advice to individual requests from VEF staff or the Board. Dr. McNamara agreed to develop a proposal for future consideration by the Board, and Ms. Wilson agreed to review it in light of the restrictions that the FACA imposes.

### ***VEF on Facebook***

Dr. McNamara proposed establishing a Facebook presence for VEF, specifically to expand the marketing effort to that widely used social medium. Although Facebook may be limited in some ways in Vietnam, Dr. Phuong agreed that VEF on Facebook, which is very popular in Vietnam, would be beneficial in expanding the visibility of VEF in Vietnam. She suggested that the content be monitored, that inquiries from visitors be received only through an already established VEF e-mail address and would not be posted, and that everything posted on the site be approved by the appropriate Washington VEF staff.

During discussion, it was agreed that such controls should be in place to prevent unsolicited comments from being posted on the site. Mr. Marshall observed that the purpose of Facebook is to allow connections among the individuals who visit the site, and to restrict posting on the Facebook wall basically subverts the purpose of Facebook. In that case, he contended, even having 10,000 friends might not produce any interaction of those friends with the site.

Ms. Wilson noted that GSA had negotiated agreements with Facebook and suggested that, if VEF decides to establish a Facebook page, that the GSA agreement be a part of the process. Dr. Phuong observed that providing information about the program on a Facebook page might reach a large proportion of Vietnamese young people. Finally, Dr. McNamara commented that it would be an opportunity to expand marketing and, if no posting is permitted, there would be no significant monitoring costs involved.

After consideration, and on motion duly made and seconded, the Board unanimously approved the proposal that VEF establish a Facebook page.

## **Election of the Chairman of the Board of Directors**

Mr. Fussner suggested that the Board elect a new Chairperson in anticipation of his replacement on the VEF Board. Dr. McNamara explained that the Chairperson, who must be a presidential appointee, is elected by all voting members of the Board to serve for the duration of the elected Chairperson's term. She noted that the voting members of the Board consisted of both the presidential appointments and those from the Executive Branch agencies.

Mr. Fussner invited nominations and, on motions duly made and seconded, Ms. Dang and Dr. Silvera were both nominated. Both expressed a willingness to serve. The issue of a confidential vote came up and the Board agreed to recess and consider in Executive Session, the procedure by which the vote could take place. Ms. Dang and Dr. Silvera recused themselves from the Executive Session.

[An executive session was convened to consider the matter.]

On reconvening the Board in the open Board session, Dr. Maxner announced that Mr. Fussner had to leave the meeting and that he would assume the duties as the Acting Chairperson. He stated that, since there had never been more than one Board member nominated for the position of Chairperson of the Board, there was no procedure in place to conduct an election when there were two or more nominees. Therefore, the Board, during the Executive Session, agreed on a procedure that would henceforth apply.

He explained that a series of questions would be created to which each nominee would provide responses, which would then be distributed to the full Board, after which an e-mail vote would take place. That procedure would take place within the next week. There was no further discussion of the issue.

## **VEF Legislative Amendment**

Dr. Maxner introduced the subject of the possible amendment of the VEF legislation that could revise the structure of VEF in ways that might affect the program itself and/or the funding of the program. The provisions are similar to those provisions that were proposed in earlier versions of the legislation. Conceding that VEF is not permitted to lobby for the legislation in any way, there are, nonetheless, requests from various interested parties, including members of Congress, for information about the legislation. That information can come from VEF. In fact, Dr. Maxner expressed the opinion that VEF had already provided such information based on the earlier version of the legislation, but that there should be a response to this latest version.

Dr. Silvera indicated that he could contact Senator Kerry as a constituent of the Senator's home state. During Dr. Silvera's discussion, Ms. Wilson stated that if his position as a member of the Board was revealed in any communication, he could present information about the VEF program without constraint. She added that VEF could also send informational letters to any interested party explaining the language of the legislation, describing the current VEF program, and pointing out the effect it would have on the program. Mr. Jones commented that if the letter contained a VEF position on the legislation, it should be sent to OMB for review. He added that, considering the potential impact of the legislation, the White House may also be interested in seeing any communications about the program originating within VEF. He felt the latter was true since the legislation might affect the STEMM focus that currently resides in the VEF programs, which is now an important part of Executive Branch education policy.

Dr. Maxner recommended that Dr. McNamara draft a response similar to earlier responses to the proposed legislation, send it to the Board members for comment, if necessary send it to OMB for review, and when final, distribute it as appropriate, to interested parties. Dr. McNamara agreed, adding that she would also send it to Ms. Wilson for review, if appropriate.

#### **Finance Committee Report – Dr. Silvera**

Dr. Silvera commented that, as previously discussed, the selection of participants in all programs fell short of expectations. The Board had approved 60 Fellows, 15 Visiting Scholars and 15 U.S. Faculty Scholars – and the final numbers awarded were 55, 6 and 10 respectively. After discussion, the Committee agreed to recommend that the 2012 budget be revised to reflect the expenditures required to support those selected, and that the Board consider increasing in the FY 2013 budget the number of Fellows, Visiting Scholars, and U.S. Faculty Scholars that had been supported under the FY 2012 budget to use some of the funds not used in the 2012 budget. Ms. Walbert agreed to develop several suggested budgetary scenarios for Board members consideration at the next Board meeting.

Dr. Silvera went on to discuss the proposal to increase the annual stipend to the U.S. universities to support the Fellows. Dr. Maxner commented that the Vietnamese government scholarship organization, VIED, had increased its stipend to students in response to increased costs of living, and he felt that VEF should also consider a similar position. He expressed particular concern that some VEF Fellows might be receiving sub-par monthly stipends.

Concerning the Board review of the 2013 proposed budget, Dr. Maxner suggested that it be deferred until the July meeting.

Ms. Dang briefly described the proposal by the Fundraising Committee, presented at the Finance Committee meeting, to develop a proposal for a planning grant to develop an approach to fundraising in the final years of the VEF.

Finally, Dr. McNamara stated that the staff would be developing a proposal to fund several VEF 10-Year anniversary projects, including a documentary on the history of the VEF program.

### **Programs – Lynne McNamara**

Dr. Petrochenkov briefly discussed the revision of the window of opportunity for applying for VEF Visiting Scholars and U.S. Faculty Scholars, which would require an earlier application deadline and a final decision date, to give the participants additional time to prepare for their tenures in those positions. In addition, in the next selection process, the Visiting Scholars will be interviewed face-to-face during the August timeframe of interviews of the finalists for Process A Fellowships.

Dr. McNamara explained a proposal to amend the definition of “alumni” to only include those VEF Fellows who have completed their academic programs and are no longer sponsored by VEF. It would eliminate those Fellows participating in Academic Training, who are now considered alumni. The purpose of the amendment to the definition is to improve the percentage of individuals who have completed the program and returned to Vietnam. Currently those on Academic Training (AT) in the United States appear to be alumni who have not returned to Vietnam, which is at variance with the program’s mission. Dr. Maxner agreed that the proposal was reasonable and, noting that it did not require a vote of the Board, recommended its implementation.

Dr. McNamara raised the issue of the position of the VEF Fellows and Scholars Association (VEFFA). All of the VEF Annual Conference information is on the VEFFA Website (and not just a link to the VEF website), and the VEFFA logo appears on all annual conference documents, even though VEFFA does not contribute funding for the Annual Conference. VEF’s position is that VEFFA is a separate organization that does not include all of the Fellows and Scholars of VEF, partly because there is a membership fee to belong to VEFFA. Dr. McNamara proposed sending a letter to VEFFA pointing out that position. Dr. Maxner offered a caution that VEFFA is a valuable partner and that any action should be tempered in that light.

Finally, Dr. McNamara commented on a suggestion by Deputy Assistant Secretary Joseph Yun in the Department of State, to establish an Institute of Technology in Vietnam, similar to those in Korea, India, and Taiwan. It is his personal proposal and not an official State Department proposal. He felt it would be a viable alternative to the proposals in the pending VEF legislation. Dr. Maxner recommended putting the issue on a future agenda, adding that he agreed it might be an alternative to the Kerry proposal.

Mr. Pappas observed that establishing such an institute would be a significant financial challenge. There was agreement that current VEF funding could not support such an effort.

### **Upcoming Events and Board Participation**

Dr. Maxner commented that Board members might be interested in attending upcoming VEF events, including the June Pre-Departure Orientation, the August Interview Mission, or the September Working Groups for the Education Conference. He added that such trips must be approved by the Board and that, for those interested in participating, an e-mail vote could be taken before the next meeting. He suggested contacting Dr. McNamara, who could prepare a list for the e-mail vote.

### **Future Meetings**

Dr. Maxner announced that the Board would meet on the following dates: July 13 and November 16 in 2012 and April 5 and July 11 in 2013.

(Whereupon, the Board reached a consensus to adjourn the meeting.)