

**Vietnam Education Foundation**

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

**November 16, 2012**

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

**List of Attendees:**

- **VEF Board members:**
  - **Dr. Isaac Silvera, Chair, Board of Directors**
  - **Ms. Sandy Dang**
  - **Mr. Basil Kiwan (Treasury) (via telephone)**
  - **Mr. Tim Marshall (State)**
  - **Ms. Anhlan Nguyen**
  - **Mr. Steven Pappas (Education)**
  - **Ms. Quyen Vuong**
- **VEF Staff:**
  - **Dr. Lynne McNamara, Executive Director**
  - **Ms. Tina Lapel, Program Associate**
  - **Dr. Phuong Nguyen, VEF Country Director (via telephone)**
  - **Dr. Peggy Petrochenkov, Program Officer**
  - **Ms. Lana Walbert, Director of Finance, Accounting, and Administration**
- **VEF Guests:**
  - **Ms. Lesly Wilson (GSA Legal Counsel)**
  - **Ms. Annie Yea (Office of Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez)**

**Call to Order and Approval of Minutes**

**Dr. Isaac Silvera**

Dr. Silvera called the meeting to order and welcomed those present and on the telephone. Noting that staff had distributed the minutes earlier than at previous meetings, he invited approval of the minutes of the July 13, 2012, meeting, and on motion duly made and seconded, those minutes were unanimously approved.

Dr. Silvera invited Dr. McNamara to present her Top Line Report.

## **Executive Director Top-Line Report**

### **Dr. Lynne McNamara**

Dr. McNamara announced that Christie Dam, Finance and Administration Assistant, had resigned and that a recruitment effort for her position would begin soon. She added that the responsibilities of the position would be reviewed and perhaps revised before the recruitment begins.

Dr. McNamara commented that the Outreach Committee was formally approved by the Board at the last meeting, and a number of efforts had been made since the last meeting to enhance VEF's presence and availability, including establishing a section on the VEF website containing documents and publications in Vietnamese. A link was placed on the home page to help visitors find those documents. There is also a link to allow visitors to join the VEF mailing list. Commenting on multiple first-time activities, Dr. McNamara indicated that VEF is working with GSA to conform to regulatory requirements related to a social media presence, specifically on Facebook, which will be announced when finalized. A "stories project" has begun, to be entitled *Excellence in Educational Exchange*, and the first volume has been completed. Finally, the Announcements for the Board include a substantial selection of public relations efforts, including press releases, a BBC interview, the new VEF poster, and other information provided to the media.

The time window for the selection process for Visiting Scholars was expanded to allow applicants more time to prepare for their visits to the United States, and the first cohort to be approved in November is on the agenda – usually the vote would take place six months later, in April.

One major transition has been accomplished; namely, the August interview process associated with the selection of Fellowship recipients was completed at the end of the summer and it was totally managed within VEF. Another success announced by Dr. McNamara was the Follow-up Research Project by VEF that has secured support from major Vietnamese ministries and agreement by five of six original researchers to participate. Furthermore, the annual audit was completed, which was another perfect audit with no exceptions. A number of projects were researched by the VEF staff for the Board: an analysis of the financial support from U.S. universities to the Fellowship program (over and above the VEF contributions related to the Fellows' grants); a cost analysis of the GRE test fee reimbursements for the past three years, provided by VEF to the Fellows; a summary of the activities of the Visiting Scholars upon return to Vietnam; and a summary of the use of professional development grants (PDG) by Fellows and Visiting Scholars. Fellows receive a PDG of \$1000 per year, which may be accumulated but must be used before they leave the U.S. university. Details of the staff research on these topics are available in the VEF Online Library.

## **Items for Board Approval**

### **Dr. Isaac Silvera**

Mr. Pappas began the discussion and stated that the Selection Review Committee met and agreed on four prospective nominees for Visiting Scholar and requested Board consideration. On motion duly made and seconded, those candidates for Visiting Scholar grants were unanimously approved.

The Ministry of Education and Training has requested that VEF add three new fields of specialization to the Follow-up Research Project – civil engineering, environmental science, and transportation and communication. Dr. Petrochenkov described the request, noting that it would require movement of \$37,000 from one part of the budget to another, but would not require approval of additional funding. On motion duly made and seconded, the Board approved this reallocation of funding to add the three new areas of specialization.

Mr. Pappas briefly discussed the VEF policy to reimburse Fellows with the highest GRE scores for the expense of taking the GRE General Test. The Selection Review Committee considered the issue and recommended that **all** successful Fellows should be reimbursed as an added incentive to completing the application process. Staff reported that the cost would approximately double from the present obligation of \$3,500 to about \$7,000, which Mr. Pappas suggested was a very small amount compared to the benefit. On motion duly made and seconded, the Board unanimously approved increasing that benefit to all Fellows selected for the 2014 cohort and beyond.

## **VEF Amendment**

### **Dr. Isaac Silvera, Dr. Lynne McNamara**

Dr. Silvera stated that the amendment to transfer VEF from its status as an independent agency to come under the aegis of the Department of State continues to be a possible legislative change. Dr. McNamara commented that she had discussed the amendment earlier in the day with Michael Schiffer, of Senator Kerry's staff, who indicated that Senator Kerry supports VEF and does not anticipate any change in VEF's responsibilities and functions should the amendment pass. He recognized that the amendment indicated that public policy would be added to the VEF portfolio of fields of study in the exchange program. Also, it was clear in the language that, should the amendment pass, financial control would shift to the State Department, which could impact VEF programs and staffing as well. Mr. Schiffer also indicated that Senator Kerry was committed to honoring all beneficiaries of the program, including Fellows and Visiting Scholars.

## **Finance Committee (FC) Report**

**Ms. Sandy Dang, Chair**

Ms. Dang noted that in the interest of time, since all of the Board members except Mr. Marshall were present for the Finance Committee meeting, the Finance Committee report would be truncated. Specifically, she mentioned the discussions related to forwarded funds (a term now used instead of “carryover”), the final approval of the FY 2013 budget, a discussion of the projected budget through 2018, and the fact that the FY 2012 audit was completed and there were no exceptions.

## **Selection Review Committee (SRC) Report**

**Mr. Steve Pappas, Chair**

Mr. Pappas reported that the SRC discussed five issues. He invited Dr. Petrochenkov to comment on the fifth, the GRE General Test. She observed that the test consists of three parts – a quantitative score, a verbal score, and a writing test. The reviewers did not seem to rely on the latter, although it was included in their resource information. The SRC agreed that reviewers should be provided with each separate score, and not a combined quantitative-verbal score, and that the minimum requirements should not be addressed since the requirements vary from one graduate school to another. Mr. Pappas added that the best institutions seldom consider GRE scores. Dr. Petrochenkov commented that the TOEFL scores seemed to predict successful performance in the interview process. Both TOEFL and GRE scores will be provided to the reviewers and interviewers for consideration. In some cases, the graduate school minimum requirements may be higher than these scores, and the prospective students would have to meet the institution’s minimum requirements in any case.

Mr. Pappas commented that successful Fellowship candidates are not necessarily aware of their chosen institution’s requirements, especially when they choose the best schools, so that staff is prepared to offer counseling about alternative schools that might better fit their interests and their test results. Dr. McNamara observed that this is the first year that there have been Fellowship interviewees formally called “Alternates,” and that when a Nominee slot opens up for whatever reason an Alternate is immediately moved into the slot. She added that of the 73 successful candidates interviewed, 62 were selected as nominees and 11 were qualified but didn’t make the cut because the Board had authorized VEF to select 60 Fellows. Those 11 were designated as Alternates, partly because the term “alternate” carries with it a stronger suggestion of qualification and potential, and those candidates may be considered more seriously by the U.S. institutions. Process B applicants will only be considered if any Fellowship slots remain after the Alternates fill available slots. Mr. Pappas added that four of the 77 interviewees were not selected, partly based on

language skills, although on average, the language skills were better this year than in the past.

### **Outreach Committee (OC) Report**

#### **Ms. Quyen Vuong, Chair**

Ms. Vuong confirmed that the Outreach Committee had been formed and had met prior to the Board meeting to discuss the Committee's mission, which is basically to strengthen VEF's relationship with outside partners. Although the term "partners" is still under discussion, there are four principal groups that could be considered stakeholders: government entities in the United States and Vietnam; community groups (such as Vietnamese-American organizations, Vietnam Veterans groups, and individual Vietnamese nationals in the United States and in Vietnam); VEF-affiliated individuals (i.e., Fellows, Alumni, past Board members, and VEF staff); and partners such as universities, corporations, and non-profits. Ms. Vuong stated that the list could become very long and that there should be careful consideration in reviewing and prioritizing the list.

During a brief discussion, there was some agreement that the Vietnamese-American community and VEF alumni, both of whom have extensive contacts in Vietnam, should be considered a high priority. There were also suggestions about ways to begin the outreach process, including sponsoring small public sessions at which stakeholders could begin to learn more about VEF. Dr. McNamara observed that the U.S. universities, especially those with VEF Fellows in attendance, could be sponsors for those small public meetings where the VEF message could be disseminated more broadly. Vietnamese Americans in the community could be invited to participate.

Ms. Vuong suggested that since the number of Vietnamese Americans on the Board has increased, those members could be a valuable asset in reaching out to potential candidates for the program in Vietnam. She also suggested that the Tenth Year Anniversary celebration could be helpful in increasing awareness among the members of the Vietnamese-American community in the United States, even though that group has been basically ignored since VEF began. Mr. Pappas agreed, but suggested that the opportunity still exists to recruit them as supporters. He felt the term "celebration" should not necessarily connote a party, but should be a means to emphasize VEF's accomplishments.

At this point in the meeting, Ms. Yea from Congresswoman Sanchez' office joined the meeting and commented that VEF is not well-known in the Orange County community, in particular, and generally in other areas of the country. However, she felt that her office could provide some additional help in increasing support in the Vietnamese-American community. She also suggested that there are celebrations

scheduled, particularly around the Tet holiday, which could include participation by both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese VEF Board members, as well VEF Fellows in the area.

### **Board Retreat - Outcomes and Actions**

#### **Dr. Isaac Silvera**

Dr. Silvera reported on the first Board retreat held the day before the regular Board meeting, commenting that it offered an informal environment to discuss VEF's programs and to get to know each other better. Although he felt there were few hard outcomes, there were beneficial discussions of expanding research on education in Vietnam and extending support to Ph.D. programs in Vietnam to help the universities become more self-sufficient in producing Ph.Ds. It was an opportunity to look at VEF from a broader perspective than the detailed discussions that are often on the Board's agendas. He added that it also laid a foundation for the main Board meeting the following day that made it easier to manage that agenda. Mr. Pappas suggested considering time for the Board to meet also at the January meeting, and Dr. McNamara agreed that she would facilitate scheduling a time for the Board that could fit around the VEF Annual Fellows and Scholars Conference agenda.

### **Programs**

#### **Dr. Lynne McNamara**

Dr. McNamara announced that Sandarshi Gunawardena, who usually leads the discussion on Operations, was involved with a regional NAFSA meeting and could not attend. However, all of the informational materials about programs are on the Online Library (within the VEF Online Management System - OMS) and Board members are invited to refer to the summary documents there. All of the usual reports that are made at Board meetings are included.

### **Selection and Application Process**

#### **Dr. Peggy Petrochenkov**

Commenting on the selection and application process, Dr. Petrochenkov said that 62 nominees and 11 alternates had been named out of 89 applicants who were reviewed. Four were not recommended, and 12 either cancelled beforehand or just didn't show up. This year 29% of the Fellows were female, and the South and Central regions had slightly more nominees than the North. Dr. McNamara added that a lot of effort had been focused on recruiting in the South and Central regions. Dr. Petrochenkov continued, saying that 80% of the nominees had bachelor's degrees or were close to obtaining them; 20% held master's degrees. The fields of study selected continue to be dominated by the engineering sciences. Public health is holding its own, and the biomedical sciences have increased during the past few years.

The Selection Review Committee was asked to consider a policy related to priority consideration in the case of ties, based on gender, geographical origin, or field of study; but overall, the qualifications of the individual applicants are still the most important considerations. This year the qualification level of the applicants was better than usual, resulting in only four of the 77 interviewees who failed to be selected. In looking at scores, the nominees typically had higher TOEFL scores than alternates, but the GRE scores were very similar. Mr. Pappas, who observed a number of interviews, added that when an applicant showed a language deficit, the interviewers would usually move straight to problem solving, which the interviewers seemed to value over language skills. In one case a candidate was having exceptional difficulty understanding the English questions, but when given a particularly difficult math problem the interviewee very quickly solved it.

Dr. Petrochenkov stated that the reviewers took a brief survey about the interview process, and the comments were overwhelmingly positive. The survey results are at the Online Library.

#### **Observations by Board Member Visiting Vietnam**

##### **Mr. Steve Pappas**

Mr. Pappas was the only Board member to attend the VEF Interview Mission in August and he stated that it seemed to be effective. Concerning the fourth VEF Alumni Conference, Mr. Pappas suggested that if a Board member attends there should be a session scheduled at which the Board member could interact with the Alumni to elicit feedback, to which Ms. Sandy Dang agreed. Finally, he commented that one of the most positive events was the participation of senior Vietnamese ministry, who were very open and candid, and provided assurances of jobs to those Fellows who completed their academic programs in the United States. Mr. Pappas also encouraged the meeting planners to schedule some open and informal sessions with a flexible format to encourage free discussion of subjects of interest to the Alumni.

Dr. McNamara briefly outlined the general schedule (agenda) that is developed by the Alumni Conference Planning Committee, which includes VEF Alumni. She said that this year's meeting included an afternoon of team building, and the project that the Alumni took on for that day was building bicycles from parts. Then, the bikes were contributed to a local orphanage. On the last day there was a series of informal discussions about topics chosen by the Alumni, including discussions about green energy, academic research, and financial resources for research.

## **Capacity Building**

**Dr. Lynne McNamara**

As with the informational reports under the agenda item on Programs, documents on capacity-building programs and projects are provided in the Online Library, and Board members are invited to refer to that section of the Online Library for more information.

## **Operations Report**

**Dr. Lynne McNamara**

Commenting on the VEF University Consortium project, a joint venture between VEF and the Vietnamese government, Dr. McNamara stated that the process at the moment is on hold. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has indicated that it could take as much as five months to obtain funding (matching fund with VEF). However, if a strong research component were included, the Ministry of Science and Technology could probably move faster. In effect, she said that the \$100,000 currently set aside by VEF to match Vietnamese funding could be used to fund other programs within VEF if the Vietnamese government does not act by April 2013. Although the funds could be used to support more exchange program participants, the same funds for the Consortium could have much more impact.

There was a brief discussion about the Paper Reduction Act, and Ms. Wilson explained that it was meant to reduce the burden on individuals from the public sector when a federal agency asks for information.

## **VEF Events**

**Dr. Isaac Silvera**

Dr. Silvera invited Board members to volunteer to attend future VEF functions. Dr. Silvera, Ms. Dang, Mr. Pappas (tentatively), and Mr. Marshall indicated an interest in attending the VEF Annual Fellows and Scholars Conference at Florida State University.

Dr. McNamara announced that any Board member could have an Official Federal Government passport if they wished. The advantage is that it lets customs agents know that the traveler is on official U.S. government business. Board members can also obtain a VEF email address, which costs VEF a small monthly fee. The email address format would be [yourname@vef.gov](mailto:yourname@vef.gov).

## **Confirmation of Future Board Meeting Dates**

**Dr. Isaac Silvera**

Dr. Silvera announced that future 2013 Board meetings were scheduled on April 5, July 12, and November 22.

**Adjournment**

Dr. Silvera noted that a closed Executive Session would immediately follow the open session of the Board meeting. By consensus, the Board agreed to adjourn.