

Vietnam Education Foundation

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

April 5, 2013

**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. David Duong (via telephone)**
 - **Mr. Basil Kiwan (Treasury)**
 - **Mr. Tim Marshall (State)**
 - **Ms. Anhlan Nguyen**
 - **Ms. Jenna Spinks (Sen. Richard Blumenthal's office) (via telephone)Ms. Quyen Vuong**

- **VEF Staff:**
 - **Dr. Lynne McNamara, Executive Director**
 - **Ms. Donna Brickers, Human Resources and Administration Specialist**
 - **Ms. Sandarshi Gunawardena, Senior Program Officer**
 - **Dr. Phuong Nguyen, Country Director (via telephone)**
 - **Dr. Peggy Petrochenkov, Program Officer**

- **VEF Guests:**
 - **Ms. Lesly Wilson (GSA Legal Counsel)**

Call to Order and Approval of Minutes – Isaac Silvera

Dr. Silvera called the meeting to order and, after introductions, called for approval of the minutes of the November 16, 2012, Board meeting. On motion duly made and seconded, the minutes were unanimously approved.

Discussion of White Paper on Future of VEF

Dr. Silvera invited discussion of the white paper prepared by staff in response to a request by congressional staff during a recent meeting on the Hill, attended by Dr. Silvera, Dr. McNamara and Dr. Petrochenkov. In another meeting at the Department of State, the preparation of the white paper was also suggested by Deputy Assistant Secretary Joseph Yun. Mr. Yun suggested that the white paper should present the present staff's vision of the future of VEF in whatever organizational structure might exist. In a separate meeting, Dr. William Colglazier, DOS Science and Technology Advisor, also encouraged VEF to prepare a discussion on the future of VEF.

During the Board discussion, the following points in the draft white paper were emphasized:

- A more balanced student exchange program that would increase the number of U.S.

students involved.

- Programs that could be supported by the existing VEF infrastructure, experience, and expertise, including consideration of undergraduate exchange programs.
- VEF serving as advisor to the Vietnamese government on STEMM education and on the Vietnamese education system in general, perhaps sending experts from the U.S. to consult on education reform.
- Development of similar parallel organizations and programs in other countries (like Afghanistan and Cambodia), especially if an existing debt by that country would facilitate a funding stream similar to that of the VEF program.
- Consideration of legislative changes that would be required if VEF were to either expand its mission, extend its existence past 2018, or both.

Dr. Silvera expressed appreciation for the contributions and said that staff would incorporate suggestions discussed or submitted by Board members, prepare a revised white paper, and send to Board members for further comment.

Executive Director's Top Line Report – Lynne McNamara

Dr. McNamara commented that the VEF U.S. office had been undermanned since the departure of Lana Walbert, former Director of Finance, Accounting, and Administration, and there are recruitment efforts under way to fill that vacancy as well as the position of Program Associate for Immigration as support for Ms. Gunawardena, whose responsibilities include immigration oversight. Dr. McNamara commended the Deputy Director of Finance, Accounting, and Administration in the Hanoi office for assistance in making sure that bills are paid. She noted that, when the Hanoi office staff attend the Annual Conference in the United States, every effort is made to arrange for those involved in finance to visit the GSA offices in Kansas City, and good working relationships have been developed through that activity.

As at earlier Board meetings, Dr. McNamara listed a few of the “firsts” that have occurred since the last Board meeting. The Tenth Anniversary video is now on the VEF web site and, for the first time, congressional and Department of State staff have requested that VEF prepare a white paper on the future of the VEF, which was completed by staff and delivered for review by the Board. There was a first ever community outreach program held in Houston, which was well attended. VEF’s presence is also on Facebook, which expands the ability of a broader public to access information about VEF programs. The Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., requested VEF’s help in organizing and running its first Education Forum, scheduled for April 26. Finally, for the first time, venues for the Annual Conference have been confirmed for the next four years – University of Missouri at Columbia, University of Iowa, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and University of Wyoming. Although not a first, Dr. McNamara commended Ms. Gunawardena and staff for rapid response to a Department of State request for information about exchange student activity related to environmental sustainability and climate change, and the requested information with regard to VEF programs was provided in only a few days.

Dr. McNamara mentioned that the federal Office of Government Ethics was completing a review of VEF, out of which may come some policy and procedure changes. Since the Board will consider staff salaries and bonuses later in the meeting, she added that the staff has been overloaded recently and that the cooperative response they have shown attests to the importance of employing and retaining high-quality staff.

Items for Board Approval

Approval of 2013 VEF Fellows Cohort

Dr. Silvera announced that new Board member representing the Department of Education, Dr. Sylvia Crowder, had accepted the responsibility of Chair of the Selection Review Committee (SRC). He and Ms. Vuong are the

other two members of the SRC. Dr. Crowder reported that the SRC developed a proposed cohort of Fellows for 2013, consisting of 62 candidates who were selected from 100 applicants, winnowed down to 81 who were interviewed, 77 from Process A and 4 from Process B. It was noted that 12 of the candidates had not yet attained admission to any U.S. university, and since the deadline extension was nearing its end, it would be unlikely that the situation would change. Therefore, it is anticipated that about 48 will enter the 2013 cohort.

Dr. Silvera noted that nine candidates had withdrawn because they were able to obtain full funding from the universities that admitted them. The reason may be that the F1 visa, which is the typical visa for U.S. university students, is more flexible than the J1 visa that Fellows must secure since VEF provides government funding for Fellowships. There was a brief discussion about the impact of this kind of outcome on the mission of VEF, with divergent opinions: (1) the loss of candidates could reflect negatively on VEF and makes it difficult to plan and to fully utilize funding that has been approved by the Board; and (2) conversely, the outcome could be considered positive in that a number of students gained admission to U.S. universities (which is a significant aspect of the VEF mission) using only the small part of the VEF funding related to the selection process, freeing up funding that may be used for other Fellows or for other purposes (such as expanding the Visiting Scholars program).

It was noted that 286 potential Fellowship applicants had signed on to the VEF web site indicating interest, but only 100 had finally submitted an application. There was a brief discussion of the final number of applicants versus initial registrants: one reason for the lower number of final applicants may be due to other opportunities for potential applicants to obtain funding and another reason may be due to the requirement that the GRE has become an integral part of the VEF Fellowship application process, which may preempt applications from individuals who have difficulties in taking the GRE. There was a brief discussion of the demographics of the 2013 Fellowship cohort, and it was noted that females represented 29%, and it was also noted that the number of females submitting applications had declined from previous years. Concerning geographic representation, Dr. McNamara commented that in the past applications from the north exceeded those from the south, but that this year the balance between the north and the central/south part of Vietnam was improved. Ms. Dang recommended consideration of establishing a VEF office in the south, and there was an observation that funding such an enterprise might detract from other programs, but that expanded advertising might be a viable alternative.

The discussion ended; on motion duly made and seconded, the cohort of 62 prospective Fellows was unanimously approved.

Approval of 2013 U.S. Faculty Scholars

Turning to approval of U.S. Faculty Scholars, Dr. Crowder announced the proposed cohort of eleven, nine of whom were approved through the online technical review and after telephone interviews with a panel of six experts, with unanimous agreement. Two additional candidates were approved by the same online technical review process, but the interview panel was not unanimous in its approval. Dr. Crowder added that 203 individuals had indicated interest by registering on the VEF web portal, and 23 had finally completed the application process. Dr. McNamara stated that the criteria for successful selection are posted on the web portal.

Ms. Vuong asked if there was an appeal process available to unsuccessful applicants. Dr. McNamara explained that although there is no formal appeals process, Dr. Petrochenkov provides a full summary of the interview panel's comments to each unsuccessful applicant, who requests such information. It was noted that other programs – i.e., NSF, Ford Foundation fellowships – follow a similar policy, a report of the review process but no option to appeal a negative decision.

With regard to Faculty Scholars who re-apply for successive terms, there was a brief discussion that there had been a number of awards for a second term, and one for a third term. It was observed that some of

the Faculty Scholars are especially effective or bring to the program outstanding projects. However, there was agreement that the policy on an individual receiving more than one U.S. Faculty Scholar grant should be reviewed.

Finally, asked about evaluation of the contributions of the individual Faculty Scholars, Dr. Phuong explained that there is an informal review in Vietnam: VEF staff visit the university when possible and have informal discussions with administrators and students. Dr. McNamara added that part of the U.S. Faculty Scholar grant requirement includes evaluations created by the Faculty Scholar to be completed by students as well as university administrators and faculty teaching, and these evaluations and/or summaries are included in the final reports sent to VEF.

Dr. Silvera called for a motion, and on motion duly made and seconded, the cohort of eleven Faculty Scholars was unanimously approved.

Proposed Changes in Program Eligibility

Dr. Crowder introduced proposed changes to program eligibility:

Fellowships

- Nominees will be selected in rank order on the basis of the applicants' average scores to fill slots available in accordance with the Board's approved budget. The remaining eligible candidates will be designated as Alternates, also in rank order based on their average scores. Nominee slots that become available are filled by an Alternate in rank order after the deadline for submission to VEF of university admissions. If slots still remain, Process B candidates will fill them in rank order.
- Graduate students who are already enrolled and matriculated at U.S. institutions are not eligible to apply for VEF Fellowships.
- Previous VEF Fellowship recipients are not eligible to apply for another VEF Fellowship, although a Fellow being supported under an existing VEF grant, *and pursuing a master's degree, may be granted an extension to continue in a Ph.D. program that is fully funded by the U.S. university.*

Visiting Scholar grants

- Visiting Scholar applicants must be affiliated *full time* with a Vietnamese university so that they may engage in the "train the trainer" activities required by the Visiting Scholar Program.
- U.S. educational institutions may not charge fees for activities that are part of the Visiting Scholar's project or proposal.

U.S. Faculty Scholar Grants

Previous U.S. Faculty Scholar award recipients must demonstrate the importance of past outcomes and sustainability in their applications.

During discussion, two changes, indicated by the italicized phrases above, were made to the original proposal from the SRC. First, the Board agreed that a VEF Fellow enrolled in a program leading to a master's degree should be allowed to extend his or her VEF Fellowship to continue in a program that would lead to a doctoral degree, provided that the U.S. university is fully funding the doctoral program. Second, because an adjunct professor in a Vietnamese university may teach only a single course and not be associated with the university in any other way, the Board agreed that the commitment to the university should be more substantial, that is, a full-time position with the university.

On motions serially made and seconded after discussion of each change, all changes were unanimously approved.

Priority for Selection of VEF Fellows

Dr. Silvera explained that this change was meant to resolve any tie in priority scores that might result from the normal selection process. The Board agreed on the following four criteria to break the tie, but also agreed that the four should be considered in no particular order, but as factors in making the tie-breaking decision:

- Applicant pursuing a degree in an underrepresented priority field as designated by the Board
- An applicant who is female takes priority over an applicant who is male
- An applicant who is a member of a recognized minority group in Vietnam
- An applicant from an underrepresented region in Vietnam

On motion duly made and seconded, the Board unanimously approved the priority selection criteria for VEF Fellows.

Policies on Salaries and Awards/Bonuses

Dr. Silvera recognized the exceptional efforts of staff in the U.S. Headquarters Office and in the Hanoi Field Office to fulfill the mission of VEF and to fill in for the manning shortages that currently exist. He noted that the Board had met informally earlier and decided that the salary freeze in Vietnam should be lifted, with the exception of the Country Director, whose salary was considered sufficient. He mentioned the Board's decision in July 2012 to allow accrual of comp time and monetary reimbursement of comp time if not used within one year of earning the comp time. He announced that the Board had agreed to revise that policy, effective immediately, to disallow monetary reimbursement for comp time for the Hanoi staff. The Hanoi staff would only be able to redeem comp time with scheduled time off. This policy would remain in effect until the July 2013 Board meeting, by which time a study of the situation would be completed and the Board could revisit the issue. He reiterated that the policy would not apply to comp time accumulated by Hanoi staff between July 2012 and April 5, 2013, which could be reimbursed by a monetary payment. All VEF U.S. staff need to be mindful of the accrual of comp time.

There was an extensive discussion about the need to manage approval of comp time, especially during a time that requires commitment to programs such as the Pre-Departure Orientation and the summer Interview Mission, particularly when staff shortages exist, such as those at present, that require additional effort to maintain workflow. Nonetheless, it was agreed that better management of assignment might ameliorate some situations (e.g., when a joint Hanoi-U.S. teleconference meeting is held, all staff need not attend when one or two staff persons would be sufficient).

There was a discussion that the Board authorize a sum of money to be used at the discretion of the Chair to support a study by the Finance Committee of the current situation in Vietnam, including developing data on comp time as well as personnel compensation and benefits, so that a more detailed discussion of the issues could be included in the July 2013 Board meeting agenda. The funds could be used to commission an outside consultant to provide support for the study, and the study would include a review of the Vietnamese laws governing employment and remuneration, payment of bonuses, and so on. The Board members proposed \$10,000 as the limit, but with further consideration, the ceiling was raised to \$25,000, though the final amount up to that ceiling would need to be approved by the Chairman of the Board.

On motion duly made and seconded, that proposal was unanimously approved.

Finance Committee Report

Ms. Dang reported that she and Dr. McNamara had discussed the plans for a draft of the FY 2014 budget and that she would come to Hanoi several days before the Pre-Departure Orientation in order to coordinate with the staff the development of a budget that would have a slightly different format than previous budgets. She suggested a budget format that would specify how the annual authorized funding of \$5 million would be spent and how any surplus funds would be used. Dr. McNamara pointed out that, since staff in the U.S. office and Hanoi were already working on the budget, it is important to clarify the format as soon as possible, especially if it is significantly different from the 2013 budget.

Outreach Committee Report

Ms. Nguyen reported that the Houston outreach meeting held in March was a success, with about 80 in attendance. About 70% of the attendees were from the community, and the remaining was faculty from the university as well as VEF Fellows, who posted and discussed posters of their scientific research and participated in the discussions. It was noted that there were cultural influences that had to be taken into account, such as the interaction of the members of the Vietnamese-American community with the VEF Fellows. Dr. McNamara commented that the community was interested in the event. She added that the radio announcements and discussion programs, organized by Anhlan Nguyen, before the meeting may have been effective in creating a positive image of the VEF program. There was a comment that a similar event might be scheduled for the fall in Northern California, and that it might be appropriate to consider holding a Board meeting in California as well.

Ethics Report

Ms. Brickers announced that presidential appointees on the Board should receive information soon about financial disclosure requirements and mandatory training, which is web-based and is to be completed by May 15, 2013.

VEF Exchange Programs

Ms. Gunawardena talked about the Alumni Conference that has been repositioned on the calendar to be held in June after the Pre-Departure Orientation when relevant U.S. staff will already be in Vietnam. Although it continues to be an opportunity for alumni to network and exchange news and information, this year it will be a spring-board for a few projects that the alumni have identified that would enable them to make a meaningful contribution and would be an integral part of the conference program this year. This includes the development of a VEF Alumni summer teaching project, proposed by a VEF Visiting Scholar from Nha Trang University, in which the VEF alumni can participate. Ms. Gunawardena commented that there are limited funds in the budget for the alumni, specifically through the Alumni Conference, but that working with the alumni does contribute to the advancement of the relationship between Vietnam and the United States, which is part of the VEF mission as set for in the legislation.

Capacity Building

Dr. McNamara announced that the Vietnam Embassy in Washington, D.C., had requested VEF support in organizing and managing an Education Forum at the Ambassador's residence in late April. She also discussed another VEF project, entitled *Follow-up Research on Higher Education in Vietnam*, that will take place July 20-29, and Dr. Silvera, Dr. Petrochenkov, herself, and seven other professors, will participate. Finally, the U.S.-Vietnam Higher Education Consortium, which was discussed at the last Board meeting, is finalized except for the requirement that Vietnam (through MOST) must provide matching funds for the four-year program. Although there has been a positive verbal decision by MOST, there must be a written commitment for the funding by June 1 in order to proceed, at least for this year.

Operations Report/VEF Events

Dr. McNamara briefly mentioned the staff recruitment effort to fill vacancies in Hanoi and in the U.S. office, and noted that staff would try to schedule follow-up meetings on the Hill and at the State Department. She announced that the U.S. Faculty Scholar Orientation would be held on March 13 at the VEF U.S. office, and the Pre-Departure Orientation (June 9-13) and the Alumni Conference (June 14-16) would be in Vietnam.

New Business

Dr. Silvera stated that VEFFA (VEF Fellows and Scholars Association, an independent organization) had sent an e-mail requesting that the Board consider extending academic training from the present 18-month maximum, to 36 months. There was a brief discussion that included the observation that the J1 visa allows an 18-month academic training period with an additional 18-month extension if the individual is pursuing a Ph.D. VEF had originally permitted a 36-month period and changed its policy to 18 months, partly in response to recommendations from entities in Vietnam concerned that the VEF graduates were not returning to Vietnam in a timely way. VEF also brought its academic training policy more in line with other federal programs by reducing the term to 18 months. There was a comment that, once a Fellow gets a Ph.D. and returns to Vietnam, getting a proper position is often frustrated with the result that the individual may accept a job in another country and leave Vietnam. Dr. Silvera ended the discussion, adding that the issue could be put on the agenda of the next Board meeting.

Future Meetings

Dr. Silvera announced that the Board would meet on November 22, 2013, in Arlington, and in 2014, on April 9 and July 18. With the consensus of the Board members, Dr. Silvera adjourned the meeting.

(There being no further business, the meeting of the Board of Directors was adjourned.)