

# Evaluation of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorships Program

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This report details the process and outcomes for the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, funded by the Estate of William F. Vilas. The report is presented in three sections to the Vilas Trustees and the Office of the Provost:

**Section I:** Administrative details of the program.

**Section II:** The experiences of the recipients of Vilas Life Cycle Professorships.

**Section III:** Research progress of the recipients (2005/06 and 2006/07 cohorts).

The public will have access to only Sections I and II.

## Section I: Administrative Details

The Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) program is administered by the Women in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute (WISELI), as authorized by the Office of the Provost. The Vilas Trustees generously awarded \$310,000 for the program in 2006, as they did in 2005. All faculty and permanent principal investigators, regardless of divisional affiliation, are eligible for these funds. Per the stipulations of the Estate, no Vilas funds are to be used for the recipient's salary and individual awards are not to exceed \$30,000. In addition, all awardees are vetted with the Office of the Provost prior to establishing an award in order to ensure that each recipient is in good standing with the University.

WISELI has enlisted the following faculty/staff to read applications and make funding decisions:

- **Jennifer Sheridan.** An assistant scientist and a sociologist by training, Dr. Sheridan represents the social studies division. Dr. Sheridan has administered the original Life Cycle Research Grant (LCRG) program since its inception, as well as serving on the review panel from the beginning.
- **Amy Wendt.** A professor in the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department, Dr. Wendt represents the physical sciences division. Dr. Wendt has served on the review panel of the former LCRG program since its inception.
- **Cecilia Ford.** Dr. Ford is a professor of English, and represents the arts & humanities division. Dr. Ford has also served on the review panel for the original LCRG program since the beginning.
- **Nancy Mathews.** Dr. Mathews is an Associate Professor in the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, and represents the biological sciences division. Dr. Mathews is herself a former recipient of the original LCRG program.

Because flexibility is of utmost importance to faculty who are experiencing life crises, we established three deadlines for applications for the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program for 2006/07:

- **Round 1.** Deadline May 26, 2006. Applications received: 6. Total amount requested: \$179,284. Applications funded: 4 (with one deferred to Round 2). Total amount awarded: \$106,459 (\$17,290 of this sum will be spent in the 2007/08 academic year should the Estate fund another year of awards).

- **Round 2.** Deadline September 29, 2006. Applications received: 6. Total amount requested: \$142,819. Applications funded: 6 (including one from Round 1; one application was deferred to Round 3). Total amount awarded: \$125,799 (\$58,779 of this sum will be spent in the 2007/08 academic year should the Estate fund another year of awards).
- **Round 3.** Deadline December 29, 2006. Applications received: 9. Total amount requested: \$256,936. Applications funded: 8 (including one from Round 2.) Total amount awarded: \$138,653 (\$96,717 of this sum will be spent in the 2007/08 academic year should the Estate fund another year of awards).

• **SUMMARY, 2006/07:** Applications received: 21. Total amount requested: \$579,039. Applications funded: 18. Total amount awarded: \$370,911 (\$172,786 of this sum will be spent in the 2007/08 academic year should the Estate fund another year of awards).

Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants and recipients are very diverse:

	<b>Applicants</b>	<b>Recipients</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	15	14
Male	6	4
<b>Race/Ethnicity*</b>		
Faculty of Color	4	3
Majority Faculty	17	15
<b>Title</b>		
Assistant Professor	12	12
Associate Professor	3	1
Professor	4	4
Permanent PI/Academic Staff	2	1
<b>Division</b>		
Biological Sciences	8	6
Physical Sciences	1	1
Social Studies	8	7
Arts & Humanities	4	4

\* Faculty of Color are those whose "heritage code" is listed as Black, Asian, Native American, or Hispanic in University records. Majority Faculty are listed as "Other".

*New Issues Arising in 2006.* As this program became more widely known, and as we gained experience with new constituencies across campus, several new issues arose in 2006.

- Faculty who need this program also need the flexibility to use their VLCP award across the fiscal year boundary; these awards help the most when the faculty member can decide which 12 months they would like to spend their award. We worked with Research and Sponsored Programs (RSP) so that we can allow VLCP recipients to have an award that spans a fiscal year boundary. The Provost has agreed that in the event the

Vilas Trustees do not fund a year of VLCP, his/her office would cover any remaining commitments that spanned a fiscal year boundary.

- For the first time, we had two applicants who are permanent PIs (one was partially funded), and had two other inquiries from academic staff who are PIs and are interested in applying, but are unable to because they have not achieved permanent PI status. A consultation with the Provost's and Chancellor's offices confirmed that the criteria for inclusion in the VLCP program for academic staff at UW-Madison would continue to be "permanent PI status."
- One committee member would like to resign; she has been on the VLCP evaluation committee since the inception of the pilot LCRG program. We will be looking for a new faculty representative for the arts & humanities division for 2007.
- More assistant professors applied in 2006 than in 2005. In 2005, five of 27 applicants were junior faculty (18.5%), and in 2006, twelve of 21 applicants were assistant professors (57.1%). The committee gives assistant professors priority when making these awards; thus, in 2006 we made awards to over 85% of our applicants, compared to 67% of our applicants in 2005. Because we wanted to make more awards than we had funds, we made many partial awards in 2006. For our 2007 budget we requested an increase of approximately 10%, as we expect that assistant professors will continue to apply in larger proportion than other ranks (based on the experience of our pilot program; the first year of the VLCP program appears to be an anomaly with a high number of full professors applying).

*Special Recognition of Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program.* In May 2006, Chancellor John Wiley was notified that the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program was selected as a recipient of the Alfred P. Sloan Award for Faculty Career Flexibility, funded by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Sloan Foundation. The VLCP program was recognized for its "innovation in career flexibility for tenured and tenure-track faculty." As the award letter states:

"The Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program exemplifies a true model of innovation in career flexibility for tenured and tenure-track faculty. This outstanding program provides financial support and personal attention to faculty who encounter critical junctures in their careers that affect both their research and personal lives. It demonstrates your university's commitment to changing the structure of the traditional academic career path in ways that both improve the lives of the faculty and contribute to the retention of valued faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison."

The \$25,000 award was used in support of WISELI's administration of the program. The ACE/Sloan organizations also presented the UW-Madison with a beautiful crystal bowl to commemorate the award.

## **Section II: Experiences of Vilas Life Cycle Professors**

Awardees were asked to complete a questionnaire about their experiences and the outcomes due to the VLCP program, and to also report their research progress. Experiences of the recipients

awarded in both 2005/06 and 2006/07 are summarized in this section (five from Round 1; seven from Round 2). Research summaries are found in Section III.<sup>1</sup>

The life events that led to the recipients' applications reflect many of the challenges experienced in our complex and ever-changing world—their own life-threatening illnesses and recuperation, diagnoses and disabilities of family members, the struggles of raising children with special needs, and taking care of elderly parents, often from afar. Faced with these challenges, the recipients were at a critical juncture and wondered if they would actually “make it” in their careers and at the University. The evaluation of this program identified many positive effects on the lives and careers of the recipients, other students and staff, and on the University, itself.

### **The VLCP Enables Continued Success**

Professional success was by far, the most important outcome for the recipients of this grant. Many recognized that their careers were at a standstill, or actually regressing, due to the life events they faced. Some described how their research and labs were about to be discontinued before the VLCP was awarded. Susan explains:

*I was considering closing down my lab...The grant made all the difference, both financially and psychologically. I was able to keep my laboratory going and maintain a colony of animals that would have been extremely difficult to replace... and now I have a 3 year NSF grant.*

Lily had a similar experience:

*My two NIH grants were up for renewal and I had few resources to support the salary of my research specialists, who had been working with me for many years. Thus, it was greatly helpful to receive the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship, to continue my research...The fund was so critical that I cannot imagine the situation without this fund. I would have probably lost one research specialist and might have started thinking about closing my lab.*

Mary's career progression was at risk when she received the VLCP:

*I think my tenure application was at risk because the pace of my scholarship had slowed down. The combination of this grant and an extension of my tenure clock has made a tremendous difference in my scholarship quantity and quality. I go up for tenure soon. I won't really know how much of a difference they've made until I get tenure (or not). However, I am feeling much better about my prospects.<sup>2</sup>*

Janet, who faced a life-threatening illness and recuperation, notes:

*The VLCP allowed me to be released from teaching during the fall 2006 semester so that I could pursue my research. It also gave me time to begin writing parts of my new*

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<sup>1</sup> Participants' names are withheld in Section II to protect their privacy. Participants' names are provided in Section III to acknowledge the outcomes that they directly attribute to the award.

<sup>2</sup> She did indeed achieve tenure and was promoted to an Associate Professor.

*research, some of which has been published in a leading journal in the field. In addition, with the publication of my book and journal articles, I have been invited to give numerous lectures in the United States and abroad... This is not to say that I would not have completed the book and started the research, but it would have taken me much, much longer. The grant was that extra help up that made the last two years so productive.*

For these four recipients, as well as the others, the award came at a crucial point in their career and provided a “bridge” between funds or during a critical point in their scholarship. Without it, their research and professional lives would have been significantly and negatively impacted.

### **It Decreases Attrition in the Faculty**

Because of the crises in their lives, a majority of the faculty members considered a career change or early retirement. A few were concerned that they would not achieve tenure and thought about leaving the institution altogether. Others recognized the toll on themselves psychologically and emotionally. For each of the recipients, the awards came at a critical decision-making point in their lives. David explains:

*I was contemplating retiring early. I no longer plan to take that route. I believe that the Vilas grant helped me make this decision.*

Elizabeth faced a similar life-altering decision:

*The life event that I experienced put me at risk of leaving my tenure track position. The stress induced by many responsibilities and the legalities associated with the event caused lingering health issues. As it is, I was granted an extension on my tenure clock to help overcome some of these problems. The funds provided by the VLCP were a minimal contribution to the targeted project - a small morale booster - and a substantial amount of funding from other sources was utilized to complete the second stage of the project.*

Susan notes:

*There are times when it seems very difficult to balance family and research and to try to excel at both. In academics it can be very difficult to catch up once you have slipped behind. The long term stress of this can become debilitating and I was getting close to that point. The grant made a big difference in this direction and was greatly appreciated.*

Providing a boost in morale was experienced by others, as well. Janet explains:

*The grant gave me the space to continue my work and it also gave me the confidence to get back to my writing after my recuperation. Thus it was important to me both financially (funding research, etc.) and emotionally.*

Without the award, many of these faculty would have fallen into a “downward spiral” described in previous evaluation reports and perhaps, become one of the numbers of faculty who leave the institution in any given year.

### **Its Effects Extend Beyond the Recipients**

Faculty members are dependent on the support and expertise of staff and students who work with them on a daily basis. The careers of research staff are also at risk when a faculty member faces an illness or a life-changing event that requires attention. Recognizing this, the recipients were extremely grateful for the award, as it enabled technicians, postdoctoral researchers and graduate students to remain with the faculty and extend their research. According to Lily and Kim, respectively:

*The grant supported one of my graduate students. This enabled me to focus on grant applications and manuscripts without worrying about the funding of the student. I was able to complete and publish two major research papers. Accomplishing this would have been much more difficult without the help of the Vilas award.*

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*The technician who was paid on the life-cycle award started a project that was not part of the grant. This project is not yet complete but I am hoping it will serve as the beginning of a new facet of our research.*

The grant also helped further the professional careers of the staff or students, themselves. David provides an example of this:

*If I had not received the Vilas grant, one of my students, who is an especially gifted student, would have gone with out funding, and might have been forced to leave graduate school. As it is now, I have enough funding to support her until August 2007 at which time she plans to graduate with her Ph.D. This is a very happy ending.*

Carole, Connie, and Julia also acknowledged the positive effects of the award on others:

*This award enabled me to keep a research specialist and postdoc, who would have been let go otherwise. The postdoctoral researcher also obtained independent funding for herself in 2007. Hence, two women in science directly benefited from the VLCP.*

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*A terrific outcome was that it resulted in funding a graduate student who otherwise would have been a TA. This gave him wonderful research experience that he will use in his research and it also gave me access to some technical skills (website design) that I would not have had otherwise.*

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*Moreover, [the award] was very helpful to the graduate student who worked as my PA, as it supported him during a crucial year in his doctoral work.*

### **It is an Example of the University, at Its Best**

The recipients were unable to identify any negative outcomes associated with receiving these grants. In fact, they have encouraged many of their colleagues, both men and women, to apply for them. Their recommendations and the following comments suggest the highest respect for the University, due to the generosity of the Vilas Estate.

*I consider the program an example of the University of Wisconsin at its most humane best, where the university provides resources to faculty going through a difficult period, to enable them to maintain the kind of research productivity that strengthens their careers, and strengthens the university as a whole.*

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*I think the Vilas grants can be a lifesaver for those who receive them. A short investment like this can get someone through a difficulty period where they then go on to years of productive work. This is a fantastic program.*

The recipients described the VLCP as an investment program in an individual and their career. In Kim's words:

*Your efforts are a valuable investment for our university. Relatively small amounts of money can make huge differences at critical times. Funding in the biological sciences is so very competitive at present (~10% of grants are funded at NIH) that many research programs are ending. After funding has ended for a significant period and productivity drops, it is very difficult to regain NIH funding. Funding that allows labs to remain active over such periods makes it possible to regain funding.*

Mary identifies particular faculty who would particularly benefit:

*I think [the VLCP] is extremely valuable. I also think it is important in the retention of women, faculty of color and faculty who come from low income backgrounds who may be more likely to have family responsibilities and distractions that keep them from tenure.*

Other recipients comment on the value of the VLCP:

- *I think the Vilas program is one of a kind and totally unique. It's at the very top of my list because of the huge long term impact it can have over the entire career of a faculty member.*
- *It fills a niche not filled by any other funding mechanism.*
- *The University should expand this program.*
- *It is as important as any other programs for faculty on campus.*
- *[The VLCP] is of the highest priority.*
- *The funds did re-confirm my confidence in the University's commitment to scholars and to scholarship.*

### **Section III: Research Progress of Vilas Life Cycle Professors**

*Section III has been removed to protect the confidentiality of the VLCP recipients.*