

Evaluation of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program

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This report details the administrative process and outcomes for the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) program and recipients at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, funded by the Estate of William F. Vilas. The report is presented to the Vilas Trustees and the Office of the Provost in three sections¹:

- Section I:** Administrative details of the program.
- Section II:** Experiences and outcomes of VLCP recipients.
- Section III:** Progress and highlights of recipient's scholarship and productivity.

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 \$300,000 for the program in 2013/14, an increase of \$75,000 from the previous year. 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.

Review Panel

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

- **Jennifer Sheridan.** An associate 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 in 2002, as well as serving on the VLCP panel since the Vilas Trust began funding the awards in 2005.
- **Amy Wendt.** A professor in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Dr. Wendt represents the Physical Sciences Division. Dr. Wendt has served on the review panel of the former LCRG program since its inception.
- **Jim Escalante.** Dr. Escalante is a professor of Art, and represents the Arts & Humanities Division.
- **Nancy Mathews.** Dr. Mathews is a Professor in the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, and represents the Biological Sciences Division. She became Director of the Morgridge Center for Public Service in 2010. Dr. Mathews is a former recipient of the original LCRG program.

¹ To maintain anonymity of the recipients, the public will have access to Sections I and II only.

Applicants and Awards

We typically establish three deadlines for VLCP applications throughout the year, in order to increase the flexibility of the program for faculty in crisis. In 2013/14, due to the increased budget, we resumed the practice of holding three application rounds (it was decreased to 2 rounds last year).

- **Round 1.** Deadline May 31, 2013. Applications received: 13. Total amount requested: \$363,718. Applications funded: 5. Total amount awarded: \$125,795 (\$4,771 of this sum will be spent in the 2014/15 academic year.)
- **Round 2.** Deadline September 27, 2013. Applications received: 3. Total amount requested: \$56,848. Applications funded: 3. Total amount awarded: \$54,881 (\$13,447 of this sum will be spent in the 2014/15 academic year.)
- **Round 3.** Deadline December 27, 2013. Applications received: 7. Total amount requested: \$192,098. Applications funded: 6. Total amount awarded: \$163,381 (\$129,051 of this sum will be spent in the 2014/15 academic year.)

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| • SUMMARY, 2013/14: Applications received: 23 (all new/no reapplications). Total amount requested: \$612,664. Applications funded: 14. Total amount awarded: \$344,057 (\$147,269 of this sum will be spent in the 2014/15 academic year.) |
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Recipient Demographics

Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants are very diverse:

	Applicants	Recipients
Gender		
Female	13	9
Male	10	5
Race/Ethnicity²		
Faculty of Color	4	2
Majority Faculty	19	12
Title		
Assistant Professor	8	3
Associate Professor	6	5
Professor	9	6
Permanent PI/Academic Staff	0	0
Division		
Biological Sciences	11	6
Physical Sciences	2	2

² Faculty of Color are those whose “ethnic group code” is listed as Black, Asian, American Indian, Hispanic, or “2 or more races” in University records. Majority Faculty are listed as “White” or have missing data on the race indicator.

Social Studies	4	2
Arts & Humanities	6	4

Issues Arising in 2013/14

Jane Zuengler, Professor of English, retired this past year and we therefore needed to replace her. We wanted to choose a professor in the Arts & Humanities, but outside the English department (since English has been represented on the evaluation committee from the beginning.) We also wanted to diversify our review committee both with regards to gender and race/ethnicity. We invited Jim Escalante, professor of Art, to participate and he accepted. Jim has held several campus leadership positions (and he is currently an Associate Dean in the School of Education), and has been a particularly strong leader in diversity issues on campus.

National Interest

National interest in this program increased this year. The University of Virginia has been inquiring about this program and has asked for details on the structure of the grants, the criteria we use to evaluate them, the funding levels, and the outcomes; they are thinking of implementing something similar. Questions about the outcomes are particularly timely, as we have prepared a manuscript that details the program and the positive outcomes we are seeing. This paper has been accepted in the edited volume *Family Friendly Policies and Practices in Academe*, edited by Catherine Solomon and Erin Anderson. The paper is currently in revision, and should be published in 2015. We will send a copy to the Vilas Trustees as soon as it is published.

Section II: Experiences and Outcomes

Similar to the evaluation results in previous years, the most recent Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) program recipients are overwhelmingly grateful for their ability to move forward with, and to complete a number of their research and scholarly projects due to the funds provided by this program. In general, the recipients faced multiple issues with their own health and personal wellbeing, as well as their spouses, parents, and/or children. Some had their own debilitating illness or were going through a divorce, while others were primary caregivers for their parents who lived out of state or internationally. In the words of one faculty member, they faced “the perfect storm” of life events at the same time. For all of the recipients, critical professional junctures and personal difficulties proved to be the perfect mix for them to question staying at UW-Madison and to be productive teachers and researchers. In the end however, positive outcomes emerged.

The grant application and administration process continues to be implemented very well, according to the awardees. More importantly however, the overarching goals of the grant continue to be realized. In particular, positive outcomes directly attributable to the VLCP program include:

- The retention of all of the faculty recipients, many of whom were at risk for leaving the UW-Madison;
- The hiring and retention of an additional 15 technical/research staff, graduate students, post docs, and undergraduate student researchers;
- Approximately \$4,234,000 additional grant funds applied for and received;
- Approximately 20 manuscripts and books prepared—17 published, many pending;

- Over 40 local, national and international presentations and performances;
- National recognition for scholarship in music and performing arts.

Unfortunately, one faculty member passed away from cancer at the age of 40 during the year in which he received the grant. His obituary and scholarly accomplishments are included in Section III.

Maintained Productivity

The primary goal of the VLCP is to allow a faculty member to continue to be productive in their scholarship when facing a tremendous personal issue. Ultimately, in the words of one recipient, “it saved [his] career.” Others described how the funds were used to maintain their levels of productivity, and also their students’:

The Vilas award helped me support one of my most productive students, and the research we conducted during that time ultimately resulted in a publication. I was also able to use the results of this work to secure a new award for a follow-on project from the World Bank.

Had I not received these funds, I would have lost one of my star graduate students. She played a key role in helping me get my work back on track by not only pushing forward the research, but also helping to manage students and additional projects in my lab. And, the work we completed ultimately played a critical role in securing the next project.

Approximately 15 technical and research staff, graduate students, post docs, and undergraduate researchers were hired and/or retained due to the funds. The following two recipients described their experiences:

Cancer treatment was both time-consuming and exhausting, and I am still feeling the side effects even 1.5 years after the end of treatment. Having the Vilas Professorship allowed me to delegate a certain amount of labor-intensive work to a PA. I am still going through the items my PA collected for me. The Vilas program allowed my research on this project not to grind to a halt, as it may have done without this PA.

The Vilas funds allowed me to keep a long time researcher in my lab who has been instrumental in the success of our research program. She has managed to continue working very productively while I was not (including helping two graduate students to graduate). And we have published two primary research papers in the last year, in large part to the support from the Vilas funds.

Other types of scholarship, including those in the performing, visual and musical arts, proved to be equally affected and effective for other faculty members:

As readers of this report are probably aware, models for funding in the arts are very different from those in the sciences, and, in general, external funding for the arts continues to diminish, more and more rapidly. That said, the most obvious

complementation of external support was provided by the VLCP funds used to support the expenses of travel that enabled me to accept a fellowship. But in every one of the professional opportunities received, the organizations involved provided support, ordinarily in amounts of four and five figures that made possible the events, of which my performances and presentations were part. Thus the VLCP funds complemented "in-kind" support of, I'd estimate, 5-6 times the level of initial VLCP funding. The seclusion for composition enabled by travel was made possible in each case by VLCP funds. And further, an essential part of each event was my participation, which in each case was supported by VLCP funds, and without which, the events, if they took place at all, would have been quite unlikely to have been as successful as they were.

He continued:

Apart from the encouragement and assistance described above that was so important to me, I can't say, except to observe that in the arts, continued visibility is critical to cultivating future activity and opportunities, and the visibility afforded by the events described above has in my estimation undoubtedly led, both directly and indirectly, to further such opportunities for me and my work.

The funds also allowed some faculty members to transition to different research interests, with the hope of maintaining these fields during their recovery:

It's no exaggeration: the Vilas funding saved my career at UW-Madison. Not only did it allow me to get my research program back on track and reaffirm my commitment to teaching, I was able to transition to new research interests.

The funds were certainly helpful in as much as they allowed me to undertake research trips that would otherwise have been difficult or impossible to fund, and they allowed me to employ TAs to help with a number of research projects and develop two new research projects. I think the most important benefit was psychological – the knowledge and confidence that it was now possible for me to attend conferences, make research trips, buy some books and research materials, and so on.

Remained at UW

A number of faculty member recipients seriously thought about leaving the UW-Madison, including those who had been recently hired (assistant professors), as well as those we had been on campus for over 20 years. In all cases, the investment in these individuals by UW-Madison would have been lost without the VLCP program. One faculty member noted that he thought about leaving until he received the award:

I had lost faith in the University, if not academia itself. I felt as though I was treated only as an employee, not as a person.

Another thought about leaving academia altogether:

During this period, it seemed an impossible task to keep research on track and moving forward. With a lack of funding and only me to complete research tasks, I would likely have re-evaluated the situation and opted for a private sector job with far lower expectations.

Another faculty member, who was pre-tenure at the time, noted:

The life event was so protracted and disruptive that it could have ruined my chances for making the progress I needed to meet tenure criteria in my division. Without the funds from the Vilas program, I would have had to lay off my lab manager, and would have thus fallen even further behind because I would then have had to assume his duties and thereby take time away from writing papers and grants. Being able to retain him has allowed me to make significant progress on these fronts, and I am on track for tenure, in part thanks to the funds from the Vilas program.

Others looked at various options:

Leaving UW-Madison was one option I considered. In many ways, it seemed the easiest solution (that is, the one requiring the least effort). I also considered taking a medical leave of absence, which would have set my research program back a year. With the Vilas funding I was able to stay engaged in teaching and advising while recovering my research program. This would have been less likely, if not impossible, without the Vilas award.

I did consider leaving Madison and returning to my hometown to take a lesser paying job. So the Vilas funds have been very useful.

I was considering several options at the time I applied for Vilas funding, including taking a medical leave of absence, looking for a teaching-only faculty position elsewhere, or muddling through as best as I was able. The other options were grim, to say the least, but the prospect of Vilas support provided a more hopeful (and ultimately helpful) road to normalcy.

In all cases, the faculty members were retained.

The Humanity of the UW

When referring to this program, the recipients noted the “humanity” of the UW-Madison and how they felt they were treated as valued people to the university. In the words of one recipient, the program is “priceless.” Another faculty member noted:

A commitment to supporting all employees experiencing major disruptions due to life events is one attribute of a humane workplace. It is the right thing to do. Providing support for research and teaching through multiple avenues is key. This support should include reducing teaching and/or committee workloads, pausing the tenure clock, or support research effort through funding.

Another described the VLCP to others:

I have told others that it is a lifesaver, that it has made it possible for me to continue my analysis and writing. Everyone with whom I've spoken thinks it is a necessary and valuable contribution to the university.

This program, along with other campus supports—such as receiving a tenure clock extension—were noted as being extremely valuable. One faculty member noted, “it made me appreciate all the more how supportive a research environment UW offers.” Another indicated:

I think the value of this program is very high. For me personally, it has been about equal in value to the tenure-clock extension, and both have been critical to helping me successfully navigate the complications that my illness has brought to my research. Both bring support and recognition to the reality that sometimes we as faculty are faced with events in our lives that can severely interfere with our job success. It is hard in many ways to compare it to other faculty programs because of the very different nature of the support provided. For me personally given my situation, Vilas ranks among the most valued program on campus.

Continued Stigma

Despite its high value to the awardees, there continues to a stigma felt by the recipients. This was described by many of the respondents:

I have mentioned to very few people that I received this grant, because by nature it implies that you have lived through a difficult situation. I prefer to keep my personal life separated from my professional life, except when it is not possible, as was the case when I applied for the Vilas Life Cycle Grant. In my department, we do not share personal information, so I have not discussed the nature of the award with my colleagues.

I haven't come across a colleague who had experienced or was experiencing a life event to recommend this grant. My departmental colleagues were aware of my life event, so I did not need to explain much to them. I found it difficult to explain it to colleagues outside my department that I received a grant for my illness. I think that it would be difficult for me to explain regardless of my particular illness, because after all, I believe that most, if not all, life events we experience prompting us to look into this grant are events that we'd rather not talk about or be known to others who are not very close to us.

I have not told very many people about it (although it is on my CV), but when I do, I explain that it is to provide support for faculty members experiencing difficult life situations. Most of the people whom I mentioned it to, I think, already knew about the difficulties I was experiencing. I seem to recall that the chairs of my departments announced that I had received a professorship at the faculty meetings after I received notification of the award. This suggests that they view receiving the grant as a positive

accomplishment, to be touted and praised, similar to other professorships that are available. This felt awkward to me, since, while the professorship does represent an appreciation for my work, it also represents an acknowledgement that I was unable to meet my faculty responsibilities without additional assistance not usually available to my peers. It feels like it has a mixture of merit and charity components, whereas the other professorships are purely merit.

As seen in these comments, the recipients are not embarrassed to receive the award per se, but that they had major life events that significantly impacted their ability to maintain productivity. The culture of “making it on your own” appears to remain.

I have not gone out of my way to tell others about it, although I think that most of my departmental colleagues know I received some type of grant connected with certain personal difficulties. I suppose I felt a bit embarrassed admitting to the fact that I was being helped in this way. But when I have talked about it, I’ve described it in very positive terms and said how grateful I was for this support. I’m not sure how it is perceived – I would hope positively.

Section III: Recipient’s Scholarship and Productivity

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