

Evaluation of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program

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April 15, 2015

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 2014/15 academic year marks the 10th year of Vilas Life Cycle Professorships at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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 \$372,000 for the program in 2014/15, an increase of \$72,000 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.
- **Katrina Forest.** Dr. Forest is a Professor of Bacteriology, and represents the Biological Sciences Division. Dr. Forest was on sabbatical for the December 2014 round of applications.

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

- **Molly Carnes.** Dr. Carnes is a Professor of Medicine and is co-Director of WISELI. She replaced Dr. Forest on the review panel for the December 2014 round.

Applicants and Awards

We typically establish multiple deadlines for VLCP applications throughout the year, in order to increase the flexibility of the program for faculty in crisis. In 2014/15, we held three rounds of application review.

- **Round 1.** Deadline May 30, 2014. Applications received: 10. Total amount requested: \$267,107. Applications funded: 6. Total amount awarded: \$137,292 (\$4,000 of this sum will be spent in the 2015/16 academic year.)
- **Round 2.** Deadline September 26, 2014. Applications received: 5. Total amount requested: \$149,586. Applications funded: 3. Total amount awarded: \$87,178 (\$36,809 of this sum will be spent in the 2015/16 academic year.)
- **Round 3.** Deadline December 26, 2014. Applications received: 10 (one was a reapplication from Round 2). Total amount requested: \$266,900. Applications funded: 6. Total amount awarded: \$127,689 (\$94,810 of this sum will be spent in the 2015/16 academic year.)

- **SUMMARY, 2014/15:** Applications received: 24 (one person applied twice). Total amount requested: \$653,593. Applications funded: 15. Total amount awarded: \$352,159 (\$135,619 of this sum will be spent in the 2015/16 academic year.)

Recipient Demographics

Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants are very diverse:

	Applicants	Recipients
Gender		
Female	17	10
Male	7	5
Race/Ethnicity²		
Faculty of Color	8	3
Majority Faculty	16	12
Title		
Assistant Professor	9	6
Associate Professor	9	5
Professor	6	4
Permanent PI/Academic Staff	0	0

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.

Division		
Biological Sciences	7	4
Physical Sciences	4	1
Social Studies	5	4
Arts & Humanities	8	6

Issues Arising in 2014/15

Nancy Mathews, who has served on the review committee for many years, took a dean position at the University of Vermont in 2014. We replace Dr. Mathews with another faculty member in the Biological Sciences—Dr. Katrina Forest. Dr. Forest is on sabbatical for spring semester 2015, and while she is away Dr. Molly Carnes (WISELI co-Director and a Professor of Medicine) will fill in. Dr. Forest intends to serve on the review committee indefinitely once she returns.

Faculty continue to request salary funding from the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program, and therefore we asked the Provost to consider asking the Trustees for this capability for the VLCP program. In addition, costs of funding a graduate student assistant have increased since the original creation of the VLCP program, and we are also requesting an increase on award caps. These requests will be reviewed by the Provost’s Office and if deemed appropriate, will be forwarded to the Vilas Trustees for consideration.

Visibility and Dissemination

The manuscript detailing the creation, administration, and outcomes of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program is in press. Entitled “Life Happens: The Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison” will be published in the edited volume *Family Friendly Policies and Practices in Academe*, edited by Catherine Solomon and Erin Anderson in 2015. We will send a copy to the Vilas Trustees as soon as it is published.

The Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) highlighted the VLCP program in a news release about its new evaluation center: LEAD (Learning through Evaluation, Adaptation, and Dissemination) Center. The VLCP annual evaluation report is conducted by LEAD Center Director Dr. Christine Pribbenow. The piece highlights both the VLCP program, and the importance of continual evaluation to ensure that the VLCP program continues to meet its goals. This story is available online and a copy of the story is attached at the end of this report.

http://wcer.wisc.edu/news/coverStories/2015/The_LEAD_Center_Helps_Faculty_Improve_Productivity.php

Section II: Experiences and Outcomes

The 2013/14 Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) awardees were faced with numerous and simultaneous crises that significantly affected their professional lives. As opposed to previous years, the majority of the recipients were faced with major issues related to their spouse/partner, child/children, or aging parents. A few described concurrent crises with themselves, as well as others. Two lost their spouses to death during the year of the grant. Despite these challenges, this year's grantees indicated numerous positive outcomes directly attributable to receiving the grant.

Because of the VLCP grant, the recipients were able to apply for ten additional grants, with three of them awarded to date. They have conducted over twenty presentations locally, nationally and internationally. They have also written and edited books, and contributed to over thirty journal publications or other scholarly works. Indeed, the VLCP improved the recipient's productivity immensely.

Of the eight recipients in the 2013/14 funding cycle, six (75%) were at risk for leaving the University due to the crisis. All of these recipients indicated they stayed at UW-Madison due to the support of the grant. One of the recipients survived her hardship, but did not feel that it impacted her choice to stay either way. One recipient took another position at a different university due to her spouse's death and needed to find a new environment in which to work.

All of the recipients felt that the grant was instrumental to the continuation of their research and career at UW-Madison. In addition, they were able to continue supporting graduate students and other university staff, who would have lost their positions if not for the grant. These personnel continued to provide the work and momentum to keep the recipients' research studies progressing. When asked what the recipients would have done without the grant, they replied:

The funds were essential to my ability to continue with my research program, particularly during a time when my primary collaborator was unavailable to devote significant time to our project. With the funding, I hired a graduate student PA who assisted with data collection, data analysis, project management and report writing. Absent the student assistance, progress on the research project would not have progressed according to our timeline and we would have had difficulty maintaining access to our field sites.

I would have been forced to lay off essential personnel, and would have been unable to complete key experiments for papers and grants. This devastating outcome would have destroyed my chances for tenure. I may have left the University or sought a different, less research-intensive job.

The funds enabled me to hire research assistants who provided the much needed help in my research projects, including data collection, cleaning and programming support. More importantly, the fund assisted me in establishing the research collaboration with PhD students and faculty in the [NAME] department. It laid the foundation for the interdisciplinary research group and extended my research.

The funds were extremely helpful. They allowed me to hire a PA to continue my central research project. The funds allowed me to progress on my project and a paper related to it. It is currently under review at a journal.

The Vilas Life Cycle Award was absolutely indispensable in helping me recover some of the considerable time I had lost taking care of my parents, and for helping me regain my career momentum.

The funds saved me time and energy to collect the evaluation data, and to hire some students to transcribe data and do analysis. It provided me sufficient funds to present some of the results from this project at some conferences. In 2014, I presented at three conferences, and got to know some scholars in the field. Meanwhile, I have additional time to focus on my book writing, while graduates who were supported by the funds help me transcribe data and do analysis. Therefore, I finished my first book, and presented some results from this project in major conferences, and prepared manuscripts for publication. One of the papers has been published in an edited book. Meanwhile, I applied for and received other funds.

None of the recipients noted any negative effects from receiving the grants. Most told others about it, but a few did not because of their need for privacy. When asked about the value of the VLCP, a few noted:

In my personal experience, this program has tremendous value. Not only because of the funding support, but also because emotionally I feel that the university cares about me and it is there to help me during the difficult times.

Often we do not want to share extreme difficulties with our colleagues because there is so much competition. Unfortunately, colleagues think the “major life event” is something a person can control, when control is not possible. In the years since I've been on campus, there has been a growing understanding of these situations and I feel this grant has done a lot to make people more understanding and tolerant.

I have told others, particularly junior assistant professors, who have faced adverse life consequences and would benefit from the VLCP. I describe it as one of the best examples of the unique pro-faculty policies of UW-Madison. I have colleagues at a variety of other institutions, ranging from top-tier state universities to private Ivy-league institutions, and all are highly impressed by the progressiveness of UW-Madison's faculty policies (they are all jealous of how well UW treats its faculty!!). Not sure what my department thinks--I believe that they generally respect the award and feel that it serves a vital function.

I would rate the VLPC program near or at the top. Programs like this are really the only mechanisms for junior faculty to offset the adverse impact of major life events that are beyond the faculty members' control. Programs like this allow UW-Madison to show

that it puts its “money where its mouth is” in terms of supporting junior faculty. Note that, although my comments focus on junior, pre-tenure faculty (because I believe them to be the most vulnerable), I also believe that there is value in protecting more senior faculty; for example, Associate Professors going to Full.

The VLCP has tremendous value and appears to be a unique program in that it responds to major life events, which everyone encounters at some point in their life. The other programs on campus that support the faculty’s work seem to be primarily focused on either rewarding faculty for their scholarly productivity or on retaining/recruiting faculty. While those programs are necessary to the success of the university, they don’t respond to the needs of faculty who (because of life events) have experienced a disruption or slow down to their work productivity. The university could do more to invest in faculty at such critical moments in their career.

Help from the university or department is very important. During major life events, psychological stress is also very large. People need a happy working environment. The VLCP has a clear scope. It can release the stress of the faculty who experiences major life events and it seems fair that from the funding support, the faculty could have similar time or energy as other faculty who do not experience the difficulties.

All of the recipients described the administration of the grant in positive terms. A few provided these comments:

The application, notification and administration process were not difficult and the help I received from Jennifer Sheridan was exceptionally supportive. She worked with me in the process of establishing a budget that fit the terms of the grant. It is a good process.

I found the application process very straightforward. Jennifer Sheridan’s help was particularly invaluable. I can’t thank her enough.

The application, notification and administrative process operated very well. I had questions early on and received a prompt and responsive answer. Generally, the process was straightforward and uneventful. I can’t think of any areas that need improvement or reconsideration.

Finally, the recipients had a number of suggestions for ensuring that the VLCP continues to be funded. They also had a number of suggestions about how the funds could be used:

The University should continue to ensure that initiatives like the VLCP remain well-funded. Departments should recognize the serious nature of major life events with regard to adverse effects on career trajectory—particularly for pre-tenure faculty. Departments should grant tenure clock stoppages so that VLCP funds have an opportunity to be used to maximum effectiveness.

This grant is discussed frequently among my colleagues. It is seen as helpful, but not as helpful as it could be. It seems designed primarily to assist those in the natural sciences who need to keep a lab running. It excludes many possible uses of funds that would be more helpful to those in the social sciences, such as support for travel and for equipment purchases.

It would be helpful if the university or department had a broad range of tools at its disposal to help faculty during major life events. In addition to funding to hire student PAs, other potential tools include (1) reductions in the faculty member's teaching load, (2) protection from heavy service obligations, and (3) discretionary research funds to make available on an as needed basis.

Section III: Research, Scholarship and Productivity

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



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The LEAD Center Helps Faculty Improve Productivity

March 9, 2015

University administrators specialize in administration; scientists specialize in research; teaching staff specialize in teaching. Few have training in how to evaluate the success of their work objectively, although there's always room for improving work practices.



Christine Pribbenow

That's where professional evaluators come in. Their expertise helps administrators, scientists and teaching staff measure their success, find room for improvement and implement change. And, in an age of accountability in higher education, federal grants often require their services.

A recent addition to WCER's project portfolio is [The LEAD Center](#), a higher education evaluation team directed by Christine Pribbenow. She brings years of experience helping people improve their performance in fields as diverse as biomedical research, genomics education for undergraduates, biology instruction, and gender and racial awareness. Her team serves projects across the UW-Madison campus, the state of Wisconsin and nationally.

Since 2005 Pribbenow has evaluated an innovative program that assists faculty and staff who meet personal or professional crises of a magnitude that threatens their continued research work at UW-Madison. Such events can be particularly devastating if they come at a critical career juncture, such as tenure review. The Office of the Provost sends an announcement to faculty approximately one month prior to application due dates, two or three times per year.

The "Vilas Life Cycle Professorship" (VLCP) is funded by the Vilas Trust, established over 100 years ago by William F. Vilas, a professor of law and university regent. Funds from the Vilas Trust are earmarked to support research.

The VLCP annually awards about \$280,000 to 12 faculty members, based on 2007-2012 averaged award amounts. Individual awards are capped at \$30,000 and they last one year.

The Vilas Trust stipulates that funds cannot be used for faculty salaries—only for direct research costs, including student assistants, lab

equipment and research travel.

Although the program is open to all faculty and permanent principal investigators, women faculty apply for and receive the grants in greater proportion than their presence in the faculty. This likely reflects the fact that, despite substantial changes in family and work over the past 50 years, the responsibility for managing these responsibilities still rests most heavily on women.

“I felt an enormously beneficial personal sense that I have the backing and support of this university during an ongoing period of crisis, rather than being a faculty member who has been written off as an unproductive loser.”
– a 2012 VLCP recipient

Pribbenow says faculty from racial and ethnic minority groups also apply for and receive grants in slightly greater proportion to their presence on the faculty. Assistant professors are much more likely than faculty at higher ranks to apply for and receive funding.

The types of “life events” that disrupt a faculty member’s research typically include a crisis in personal health, a child’s health, a spouse or partner’s health and complications from childbirth. Or, even more challenging, they experience multiple crises that occur simultaneously.

The most common kind of “critical career juncture” listed in applications is the tenure process. Faculty in their third-to-fifth year on the tenure clock are especially vulnerable when a research setback occurs. These cases receive priority for funding. Early in the tenure process, faculty may have time to get back on track following a life crisis, especially if they have startup funds available, or take a tenure clock extension.

Associate and full professors often cite a “loss of momentum” or a missed grant deadline that will lead to a layoff or loss of valuable staff, further reducing the chances that future grant applications will be successful. They foresee a negative spiral of events that could occur if not interrupted immediately.

For tenured professors, the critical career junctures most often cited are a need to revive stalled research momentum, complete a project, re-establish funding or change research focus. When life events occur at these times, they could be damage the research trajectories of associate and full professors.

The grants often support the faculty’s research teams, including academic staff, graduate and undergraduate students, and postdoctoral researchers. In the biological sciences, lab managers and research specialists are the most commonly requested resource, while other disciplines more often ask for graduate student support.

Faculty retention and productivity

One goal of any program designed to improve work/life management in the university is increased faculty retention. The loss of a faculty member is expensive for institutions, both financially and for other costs such as the loss of students or mentors. Losing one’s position is certainly disruptive to the career of a faculty member who leaves under circumstances related to a lack of productivity. Recipients of VLCP grants report that the receipt of the grant was a determining factor in their decision to stay at UW-Madison.

Many faculty use their VLCP award to position themselves for future grant funding. Recipients write about how even a small amount of VLCP funding can leverage much higher amounts in grants from outside sources. As one applicant wrote, "If I get my grant, it's going to pay off for the university several fold over."

Another recipient wrote, "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 quality and quantity. I go up for tenure soon. I feel much better about my prospects." This recipient did receive tenure.

Pribbenow points out that helping faculty reinvigorate their research programs is a boon to the university not only because of the increased funding, but also because it increases the overall productivity of the faculty. One applicant said, "Investment in our careers at, or after, a point of crisis is both humane and efficient in terms of generating research progress and publications, attracting outside funds, and stabilizing and accelerating professional development. It is more efficient than losing faculty members who leave, or who become non-productive in research terms, then trying to refill tenure lines."

Words of thanks

Recipients have voiced consistent themes over the years. They use words like "lifesaver" "one of a kind" "totally unique" "lifeline" "humane" "immensely valuable" "fantastic" and "absolutely essential". Program applicants often express gratefulness that the program exists, whether they receive funding or not.

"I wish the UW talked about this program more," said another. "It's a selling point for our culture and an indication of the way that a progressive workplace can treat women if it wants to! Not that anybody, male or female, wants to be in a situation where they need the help this program gives – but lightning can and does strike us all."

Pribbenow's decade-long evaluation of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program shows the importance of evaluative work to the continued success of a program. Before the Vilas Trust invested in this program, a pilot program was implemented, using funds from the National Science Foundation. Pribbenow's evaluation of the pilot program showed that the funds did improve faculty research productivity. That, in turn, encouraged the Vilas Trust to fund the program.

This evaluation work uses multiple research methods and, as rigorous research, is published in peer-reviewed journals and books. This is what clients of the new LEAD Center can expect.

The VLCP will be described more fully in "Life Happens: The Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison." *In Family Friendly Policies and Practices in Academe* (Catherine R. Solomon and Erin K. Anderson, Eds.) Washington DC: Lexington Books.

For more information about the VLCP, see:

wiseli.engr.wisc.edu/vilas.php

For more information about The LEAD Center see lead.wceruw.org



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