

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

Section II: Experiences and Outcomes of VLCP Recipients

Section III: Scholarship Progress and Highlights

Section I: Administrative Details

The 2016/17 academic year marks the 12th 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 awarded \$465,896 for the program in 2016/17. While this award is very large relative to a “normal” year, in fact it amounted to \$138,721 in new funding, because a large proportion of the allocation was used to complete the funding for 19 awards from 2015/16 that carried over to the 2016/17 fiscal year. Therefore, we made only 5 awards for the 2016/17 fiscal year, and we canceled the fall and winter rounds because the funds were all allocated after the May 2016 round of applications.

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 used for the recipient’s salary and individual awards are not to exceed \$40,000. 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 Sciences 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.

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

- **Jim Escalante.** Prof. 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.

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 2016/17, we were only able to have one round of funding.

- **Round 1.** Deadline May 27, 2016. Applications received: 12. Total amount requested: \$719,607. Applications funded: 5. Total amount awarded: \$156,721 (\$18,000 of this sum will be spent in the 2017/18 academic year.)

- **SUMMARY, 2016/17:** Applications received: 12. Total amount requested: \$719,607. Applications funded: 5. Total amount awarded: \$156,721 (\$18,000 of this sum will be spent in the 2017/18 academic year.)

Recipient Demographics

Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants are very diverse:

	Applicants	Recipients
Gender		
Female	8	3
Male	4	2
Race/Ethnicity²		
Faculty of Color	3	2
Majority Faculty	9	3
Title		
Assistant Professor	3	2
Associate Professor	3	1
Professor	6	2
Permanent PI/Academic Staff*	0	0
Division		
Biological Sciences	2	1
Physical Sciences	0	0
Social Sciences	6	2
Arts & Humanities	4	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.

* Approximately 40 academic staff members have Permanent PI status.

Issues Arising in 2016/17

Because of the extremely large allocation from 2015/16 (\$850,000), a large number of awards carried over to 2016/17, and therefore the actual amount of new funding was quite low. Demand far exceed supply, and we were only able to fund 5 awards before we used up the allocation. We therefore canceled the fall and winter rounds of review.

One other new issue for the upcoming year is that Katrina Forest has stepped off the review committee. We will replace her with another faculty member in the Biological Sciences division.

Faculty continue to request salary funding from the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program, and therefore we continue to ask the Provost to consider asking the Trustees for this capability for the VLCP program. This request was reviewed by the Provost's Office and forwarded to the Vilas Trustees for consideration.

Section II: Experiences and Outcomes of VLCP Recipients

Twenty-three (85%) of the recipients agreed to participate in a study of the 2014-16 awardees. Each received an invitation to participate and responded to twelve open-ended questions, some of which included:

- To what extent did the funds enable you to progress professionally? For example, how has the grant affected the continuation of your research project(s) or helped to re-align you with your career path?
- Did the life event put you at risk for leaving UW-Madison? To what extent did the funds help you to stay at UW-Madison?
- Were there other positive or negative outcomes that occurred as a result of the funds received? If so, what were they?

This year, we also asked the participants to respond to a question about the change in the criteria for applying for the VLCP awards:

- In the year that you applied to the VLCP Program, the criteria for awards was expanded to consider events that happen AT WORK that interfere with research productivity, not just events in faculty members' personal lives. Do you see benefits to keeping the criteria open beyond personal life events? Why or why not?

All of the participants signed an informed consent that ensured their names and other identifying information would be removed when the findings were reported. The following themes emerged from the participants' responses to the survey and were aggregated to provide a summary of participant outcomes from the VLCP, as well as the value of this program to them and UW-Madison.

Personal and Professional Life Events

This year, grantees were able to apply for the VLCP grant due to crises within their professional lives, as well as personal events at critical junctures in their careers. Of the participants in the study, the majority described personal events, while a few identified a primarily professional event. Even though the criteria were broadened, these few recipients described significantly debilitating experiences that made the award extremely valuable to them. Of the recipients who described personal events, approximately 70% had multiple crises that occurred back to back or simultaneously. These included the illness or death of a parent, partner or child, their own health or illnesses, as well the short and long-term consequences of the situation itself. Regardless of the events, their professional lives were significantly impacted.

Effects on Retention and Promotion

Over 50% of the awardees said they were at risk for leaving the university due to the life events that predicated their applications. Because of the VLCP, they have chosen to stay as active, engaged faculty and staff members. An assistant professor noted:

Actually, yes...I did consider leaving my position at UW-Madison, as my husband had a [position] and his employer offered to look into setting up a position for me as well. After much consideration, we felt that UW-Madison was a better fit for our research interests, skills, and long-term career development, and I negotiated for us both to return to UW-Madison. The Vilas funds, along with previous funding through the Graduate School Fall Competition, and the potential for future research support, were a big part of our decision to stay to UW-Madison.

This faculty member also acknowledged the effects on her prospects for tenure. She noted that without the VLCP, her progress would have been significantly delayed and she may not have received it. Another faculty member, who is now an associate professor, noted:

Based on the research during the VLCP, and in many cases connected with presentations, I was able to publish numerous articles, most of which have had some resonance in my field, and I was able to prepare the groundwork for several other research projects, including those of about five more articles now published, all single-authored. Along with everything mentioned above, the tenure process went extremely smoothly, and my candidacy received unanimous votes both from the Executive Committee of my own department and from the Divisional Committee, with some mention of high merit. My promotion to Associate Professor thus went into effect in the summer of 2016. And I have published plenty since then.

This was described by other assistant professors, as well. For faculty who were tenured, the VLCP helped them to progress to their next career stage (associate or full professor).

Effects on Others and Research

The majority of faculty use the VLCP funds to retain or support lab managers and other staff, postdoctoral researchers, graduate students, and/or “hourly” undergraduate student employees. Due to the VLCP awarded to the recipients, an additional 26 individuals at UW-Madison benefitted from the funds. In some cases, lab managers or other staff kept their jobs. In other

cases, graduate students or post docs had an opportunity to continue or extend their research, leading to grants and graduation. Finally, a number of undergraduate student employees learned valuable skills and knowledge about doing research alongside the recipients. An associate professor noted:

My advisees who collaborated with me by doing student hourly work also benefited enormously and became more aware of what is involved in doing professional research. Among other things, they generated bibliographies, examined data bases of research resources, created pdf's of texts as well as images, transcribed passages, etc. The VLCP provided a very generous number of student hours, and this in turn allowed my own work to progress greatly.

In all cases, these individuals provided intellectual, as well as physical contributions to the continuation of the recipients' research efforts. And, in the end, all were helped:

If I didn't have these funds I would have had to ask my most productive staff member [Postdoctoral Fellow] to leave the lab because I couldn't afford to pay her salary. This would have prevented me from establishing an innovative and productive independent research program that is experiencing a significant upsurge in outcomes relevant to the field of [discipline]. Because she was able to stay in the lab and complete her projects, she has been able to secure two grants. Without funding, she would have had to look for a new lab and new project, delaying her career by several years!

An associate professor noted:

Had I not received this grant, my first NSF project would not have succeeded, which would have likely compromised my ability to procure additional NSF grants. I also would not have been able to maintain employment for my laboratory manager who has been key for supervising laboratory components of several graduate student research projects. Maintaining this momentum on existing projects, as well as generating pilot data for additional proposals, allowed me to procure an additional 2 million dollars in extramural funds.

A number of the recipients indicated that the funds helped them to realign their research or move into a more fruitful research direction. These mid-point switches allowed for the re-establishment of their labs and a boost in funding. In reviewing Section III, millions of dollars were applied for and/or received due to the VLCP. A number of recipients also noted awards or fellowships they received due to the VLCP funds.

This fellowship has already changed my entire relationship to the university and the profession, and frankly would not have been possible without the help of graduate student hourly work funded by the VLCP, as well as the funding provided by the VLCP [to do my research].

As seen the descriptions and quotes above and below, the investment in the recipient, their research staff, and their careers paid off in both quantitative and qualitative ways.

Value of the VLCP

Many of the faculty provided evidence and descriptions about the value the VLCP has had on them. This comment is from a full professor who was debilitated by an unexpected health issue:

This VLCP was a real lifeline, and was the only kind of support available within these critical circumstances. A department like mine has no resources to dedicate to major events like these, because other basic issues such as funding for graduate students would be prioritized. As for the university, I believe that the VLCP program carries out an important function for the university by providing these professorships. It is absolutely unique, and valuable for those who, foreseeably or (like me) unforeseeably, find themselves significantly hampered by life circumstances beyond their control. Other entities within the university attend to more usual circumstances, e.g., funds for attending conferences, or summer salary for research, but as far as I know there is nothing other than the VLCP that fulfills this (literally) vital need.

Another faculty member, who was facing both professional and personal crises simultaneously, identified the courage it took to apply:

While I would like to believe that my entrepreneurial spirit would have led me to seek out additional resources and found a way to continue on, my gut tells me that I would have begun looking for other professional opportunities. Between the climate in my previous department, stress at home, and the typical pressures associated with pursuing tenure at an R1 university, there was very little joy in my work. In many ways, the Vilas was probably a white flag for me. I typically have a difficult time asking for help—and did not want to let colleagues know how much I was struggling. It took much courage for me to apply for the Vilas—and I would not have done so if not in such dire straits. That I was selected and received support was a turning point in my attitude about the university and my sense of optimism about my work.

An associate professor reflects on the value of the funds and how they improve faculty worklife and the balance between work and home:

A little bit can go a long way to provide stability, but it needs to be easy to access and given freely (like Vilas Life Cycle funds). This general stability helps faculty weather major life events – no matter what they are. Life events happen to everyone, and providing a baseline functional workspace normalizes those events so that faculty don't have to scramble to save their careers when life happens (or choose between family and career – thus ending their careers). If used wisely, university research dollars could go a long way toward improving life for faculty researchers on campus, leading to better retention, a more diverse workforce, and a higher quality research and education environment. Perhaps it is time to invest some in the “infrastructure” of faculty life, rather than only “new projects” that garner a lot of attention but don't necessarily contribute to the fabric of the university.

Finally, other recipients noted:

This program is unique and extremely important for those who experience “major life events.” I am personally much indebted to it, as it enabled me to move ahead when my situation was indeed bleak regarding my own health as well as related life circumstances.

Because this is concrete, and because it was so pivotal for me, I value this much more highly than the various brown bags & panels (as nice as those are). Talk is cheap, ultimately, and especially if you need money to help research, you can’t talk about it with colleagues.

The VLCP Program is one of the best programs available to faculty on this campus and fits a real niche that addresses unforeseen problems encountered by hard-working employees.

Personal vs. Professional Life Event

In this past round of awards, the criteria were broadened to allow for faculty and staff to apply for funds due to professional crises. All participants were asked to react to this change. A few thought that issues in peoples’ personal lives should be prioritized, while others thought that “all life events are important” and are “equally detrimental to one’s career.” There was no clear answer, as each person’s opinion was different. Examples of some of their thoughts include this comment from a full professor:

Part of what I find so special about the Vilas is its focus on supporting faculty in navigating personal challenges in the context of their work. There are many resources available to support work—but far fewer resources for supporting people in navigating life challenges (and their impact on work). Regardless of how broad the selection criteria become, I do hope the program will retain its focus on supporting individuals in navigating the intersection of personal and work-related challenges. I fear that it will become a very different program if it is viewed solely as a stop-gap or intermediary funding for research.

An assistant professor commented:

In academia it is frequently difficult to separate personal from professional; with this in mind, I see a benefit to the broader interpretation of life events. On the other hand, funds are limited, and VLCP is the only program that considers personal hardship as a criterion for funding. My ideal scenario would be to keep the broader criteria and procure more funds to keep up with the increased needs.

Similarly, other recipients remarked, “the more people that can be helped, the better.”

There is no reason to limit the kinds of qualifying events that make a faculty members’ life even more difficult than it already is (simply by definition). Doing the most with the Vilas funds available is an outstanding goal for this program. The only down-side, one could argue, is that there will be more applications for the same pot of money, reducing the chances of individual funding success. However, it is the job of the committee to decide what situations they think are reasonable to fund. All work-related situations may not be.

Another concurred:

I have had good friends at other universities have major experiments blow up on them (in some cases, literally) and get setback for six months or more. As hard as it is to get published these days, that definitely counts as a crisis. In my case, moreover, dealing with the work-event (for me—it was a personal crisis for my colleague) had a huge personal upside. You really can’t separate these things, and I don’t think we should act like we can. Meeting people where they are makes a difference.

It is the job of the university to address professional situation, as noted by an associate professor:

Work-site interferences has something the university has direct or indirect responsibility for. Especially in the environment where a “winner takes all” culture dominates, I believe, the university needs to “counter” to ensure fairness in the system and to maintain faculty welfare.

Finally, a couple of recipients noted that the broadened criteria might be most useful for faculty who are untenured. An assistant professor explained this:

I think all events could cause issues although I might prioritize personal events over work events. However, I do see a number of situations for untenured faculty which impact their work in which they are really powerless. I would support this particularly for those faculty who are untenured.

Grant Process

Similar to previous years’ findings, the faculty and staff had many positive things to say about the VLCP application and administration processes:

Everything about the grant application, notification, and administration process was seamless for me. I was impressed from the day that I met Jennifer Sheridan to the day I was awarded this grant. Thank you everyone in the VLCP Program administrative office for your genuine concern for the well-being of the employees here at the University of Wisconsin.

Usually the situations supported by this program are not ones that most people can plan for, so that the application process was not terribly onerous when time was already limited, it was not necessary to “compete” for the funds like most programs on campus, the funds provided were substantial enough to be meaningful, and that there was flexibility in the kinds of things that the funds could be used for (research as well as personnel) puts this program at the top.

Unlike almost any other process on our campus, this process was shockingly painless. The application was not long and tedious (when the applicant is already not feeling well), lots of extraneous information was not required, no outside letters were required (also speeding up the process), and the funds could be spent flexibly on both research and personnel. The notification was quick, and the administrators were kind, helpful and efficient. It's too bad that more campus processes can't be made more quick and painless like this.

Summary

In sum, faculty and staff recipients are grateful for the VLCP funds because of the professional and personal outcomes that are directly attributable to receiving this grant. When asked if there were any negative outcomes, none of the participants indicated “yes” or provided examples. Similar to previous years’ findings, the VLCP viewed as positive and crucial to maintaining their positions and furthering their careers at UW-Madison. Without it, half would have left and others would have been negatively affected due to a loss of their positions. It is not an exaggeration to say that the investment in faculty and staff due to this program is multiplied through their publications, presentations, books, displays and other forms of scholarship, as well as due to the additional funds brought in by their research and scholarly endeavors (see Section III). To close, one faculty noted, “I’d just like to say THANK YOU to the University and Vilas Trustees for funding this program.” The other recipients concur.