Vilas Life Cycle Professorships: Frequently Asked Questions

Q: I'm a/an (assistant professor/associate professor/full professor). Can I apply?
A: All ranks of faculty (assistant, associate, full) may apply, and all ranks have been funded in the past. Academic staff with permanent PI status (see https://kb.wisc.edu/gsadminkb/page.php?id=35683 for a list of individuals) are also eligible. Because one main criterion for making an award is that the faculty member is at a “critical career juncture”, assistant professors often receive priority in funding compared to tenured professors. However, any rank of faculty member can be at a “critical career juncture”, so all ranks are eligible for the award. For associate and full professors, clearly articulate WHY you are at a critical career juncture in your statement of need when you answer the question “Why is this a critical juncture in your career?”

Q: Where in this application do I talk about my science/research?
A: The goal of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program is to further the career of a UW-Madison faculty member through funding of his/her research. The program is successful if faculty members get their careers back on track (e.g., they receive tenure, their next grant proposal is approved, their next novel is published, they stay at UW-Madison.) We make the basic assumption that ALL UW-Madison faculty are doing wonderful research, and that is why they are here and why we want to retain them. Thus, the application is not, except in rare occasions, evaluated on the basis of the scholarship of the applicant. That said, the funds are to be used ONLY for research expenses, so in your description of the use of the funds, some description of your research program is necessary. Most applicants write about their research in relation to their proposed spending—this usually appears in response to the question “How will the requested funds help you through the crisis and enhance your research program?”

Q: What should the title be?
A: The title can be anything. Most people use the title of their research project. We do not publish the titles of any applications or awards, to maintain the confidentiality of the recipients as much as we can.

Q: What is the “other funding” column for—do I fill in ALL of my project funding?
A: If you are proposing to use Vilas Life Cycle Professorship funding for an item that cannot be 100% funded by the Vilas funds, then the committee needs to know where the additional funding is coming from. For example, if you are proposing to use the $40,000 Vilas funding towards the salary of a lab manager, but the lab manager costs more than $40,000 to employ, then we need to know where the other sources of funding for that lab manager will come from. This is especially important when the applicant is proposing to partially fund a PA or RA; we need to know who we are splitting the tuition remission with for planning purposes.
Q: Can I switch my spending later?
A: Changes in budget allocation may be considered in exceptional circumstances.

Q: Can I have more than one year to spend the funds?
A: Funding is for a period of one year, and is subject to constraints imposed by the fiscal cycle which ends on June 30 each year. Be warned! For any award that straddles two fiscal years, we will request a revised budget splitting the funds between the two. Any funds requested for your first (partial) year not spent by June 30 will be lost. Consult with your department financial administrator(s) to be sure you meet all of the University spending regulations.

Q: May I use the funds for salary?
A: The Vilas Trust will allow a limited amount of the award to be used for the salary of the PI. PI salary is limited to the equivalent of 2/9ths of the lowest paid Vilas Research Professors salary, and is payable only in July and August of the award year. The appropriate fringe rates will be charged for all personnel on the award. Per the terms of the Vilas Trust, this award may not be used to supplement base salary or provide a temporary base adjustment. See RSP’s website for the current summer salary rates and additional information. (https://www.rsp.wisc.edu/Vilas/vlifecycle.cfm).

Q: Does the application need to be single-spaced? What should the margins be?
A: We specify a 3-page limit for the “statement of need” because most faculty can share their issues and describe their request in that amount of space. We do not intend this application process to be a burden. We have no requirements about the formatting—it can be double- or single-spaced, it can have wide or narrow margins—we are not picky.

Q: If I email the application, how do I send in my signature on the front page?
A: If you cannot append an electronic signature (e.g., a jpg of your signature), then please sign a physical copy of the front page and campus mail it to WISELI (3065 Mechanical Engineering Building). As long as the rest of the application is emailed by the deadline date, it doesn’t matter if the signature page arrives a few days late.

Q: What time is the application due on the deadline day?
A: If you are emailing the application, the deadline is 11:59pm of the due date (just so the date sent is the same as the deadline day.) If you are dropping off a hard copy, there is usually somebody in the WISELI office (3065 ME Building) until 4pm on workdays. To be fair to all applicants, please try to submit your application on or before the deadline day.

Q: My life/work event isn’t THAT bad—should I even apply?
A: If you feel that your research productivity has been impacted by a life/work event, and that your career is in serious jeopardy, then you should apply even if in the scheme of things, your event might not seem big. Do keep in mind, however, that in
general we imagine that faculty will only be able to access these funds once. Be sure 
that this is the most advantageous time to apply. We are not saying that we will never 
fund people more than once, especially if the events are completely separate 
occaurrences (see below); however, we will certainly give priority to faculty who have 
ever applied before.

Q: What if my department chair can’t send a letter by the deadline?
A: If your chair can’t get a letter produced by the deadline, it is adequate to let us know 
that one is coming, and to have it sent later after the deadline. Please do let us know 
to expect a letter, however.

Q: What if I don’t want my department chair to know what’s going on?
A: Some faculty want their chairs to know what is happening in their lives, and other 
faculty do not want their chairs to know. For this reason, letters from chairs are not 
required, and applications that do not include letters from chairs are never 
disadvantaged because of it. All Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants should 
understand, however, that if they are awarded a grant then once the funding is set up in 
the department, the chair will know about the award because of the normal 
reporting procedures when a new 133 account is set up. Although the chair (and 
other individuals, such as the Provost and the Vilas Trustees) will know that you 
received a Vilas Life Cycle Professorship, only the four committee members who 
review the applications will know the reasons for the award, and they will keep the 
information confidential to the extent allowed by law.

Q: Why do you want to know about my other grant funding?
A: The committee must compare the level of need of each applicant, and part of the 
committee’s determination of “need” includes whether the applicant has other 
resources upon which to draw. This is not to say that having other grants will 
necessarily disadvantage you; it is just one way that we have to compare applicants. 
Often, the committee has seen merit in the application, but because the current grant 
funding was adequate, the committee has recommended postponing an award, or 
asking the applicant to reapply if a pending grant is not awarded. We need to help as 
many faculty as possible with these funds, and spreading them out over time is one 
way we can achieve that goal.

Q: How do I report my startup funds?
A: If you have any startup funds remaining, please report this in your Current and 
Pending Support list. If you are an assistant professor and have depleted your startup 
funds, please note this somewhere in your application so that the review committee 
does not think that the startup was simply left off the list.

Q: I’ve already received a Vilas Life Cycle Professorship—can I apply again?
A: Yes, of course you can apply. However, we will not be able to fund an application 
for continued funding for the same “life event.” Also, when comparing your (second) 
application to others in the applicant pool, we will likely give yours a lower priority.
We receive about twice as many applications as we have funds to cover, so we try to make sure that many different faculty have access to these funds.

Q: Are there any types of research expenses you do not fund?
A: There are two main types of requests that we typically do not fund because there are other sources for those kinds of expenses on campus (e.g., Graduate School travel funds, school/college capital exercises). We typically do not fund any conference travel, and we very often will cut requests for new computers/laptops and general supplies such as paper, ink cartridges, etc. unless an extremely compelling case can be made why the new computer/general supplies are directly related to the research project at hand.