

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 sections:

- 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.¹

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 \$225,000 for the program in 2012/13, a decrease of \$147,000 (40%) 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.
- **Jane Zuengler.** Dr. Zuengler is a professor of English and Associate Chair of the department, 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. However, due to the limited 2012/13 budget, we reduced this to two rounds.

- **Round 1.** Deadline June 1, 2012. Applications received: 18 (2 were reapplications). Total amount requested: \$505,606. Applications funded: 6. Total amount awarded: \$103,495. This is the largest set of applications ever received in one round for this program.
- **Round 2.** Deadline November 2, 2012. Applications received: 5 (2 were reapplications). Total amount requested: \$125,458. Applications funded: 3. Total amount awarded: \$81,694 (\$62,816 of this sum will be spent in the 2013/14 academic year.)

• **SUMMARY, 2012/13:** Applications received: 23 (including 4 reapplications). Total amount requested: \$631,064. Applications funded: 9. Total amount awarded: \$185,189 (\$62,816 of this sum will be spent in the 2013/14 academic year.)

Recipient Demographics

Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants are very diverse:

	Applicants	Recipients²
Gender		
Female	16	7
Male	6	2
Race/Ethnicity³		
Faculty of Color	7	4
Majority Faculty	15	5
Title		
Assistant Professor	10	5
Associate Professor	5	2
Professor	6	2
Permanent PI/Academic Staff	1	0
Division		
Biological Sciences	5	2
Physical Sciences	1	0
Social Studies	8	4
Arts & Humanities	8	3

² One recipient applied twice in 2012/13, and is only included once in this table. Other reapplications were from previous years, and those faculty are counted in this table.

³ 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.

Issues Arising in 2012/13

In 2012/13, the reduced funding level meant that we declined to fund several worthy proposals. We will be inviting those unfunded faculty who we felt had meritorious proposals to reapply in May 2013, assuming funding for 2013/14.

Section II: Experiences and Outcomes

The 2011-2012 Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) awardees were faced with numerous personal crises that significantly affected their ability to navigate their professional lives successfully. Approximately one-half of the recipients were faced with a medical or other personal issue. The other recipients were dealing with issues related to their spouse/partner, child/children, or aging parents. A few described concurrent crises with both themselves, as well as others. Despite these challenges, this year's grantees indicated numerous positive outcomes directly attributable to receiving the grant, many of which are similar to outcomes noted in previous reports.

Impact on Productivity and Scholarship

The primary purpose of this grant is to help faculty maintain their research productivity. Clearly, evaluations completed by the recipients attest to this positive outcome. Often, the funds were used to "bridge" a gap in funding, or to help the faculty member collect and analyze data in order to apply for other long-term funds. An Assistant Professor described this:

The funds provided us a mechanism to retain a critical staff scientist through a no-cost extension period for our NIH award. This in turn allowed us to complete the project, and publish the results, leaving us in an excellent position to compete for funds to continue this work. We currently have an NSF pre-proposal pending that builds on this work.

Funding agencies often look for preliminary data before awarding a grant to ensure that the idea is viable. This is explained by an Assistant Professor:

The majority of Vilas Life Cycle funds were used to support my graduate student's research...The remaining portion of the funds supported my travel to important research conferences and to conduct preliminary research projects initiated in my program. Currently, my student is finishing two manuscripts and we have three additional ones planned stemming from her research. This will help in re-establishing a steady publication stream, which should aid in boosting the competitiveness of future grant proposals.

An Assistant Professor describes how the VLCP helped her remain competitive:

We were in danger of failing to complete the objectives of our NIH award. Funds remaining for the no-cost extension covered the costs of the experiments, but not the human resources to do the work. Importantly, this project marked a transition of my research from strictly [scientific method] to an integrated experimental and [scientific method] approach. Had we failed, it would have proven especially challenging to persuade any funding agency that we are competent experimentalists.

An Assistant Professor explains how the VLCP provided “momentum” to continue research she had started previously:

The funds provided me with essential time and momentum. Time, in the sense of offering grant support for my research at a moment in my career when there was enormous stress on my work-life “balance” and I needed to attend to the life/home side. Momentum, in permitting me to hire an excellent doctoral student who completed qualitative data coding and analyses for me on two projects I had brought with me from [a different university]. Rather than being shelved for an extended period, I was able to keep going on both of those studies.

Finally, a recipient describes a number of consequences to her research and lab had she not received the grant:

The grant provided essential bridge funding. My NIH K-award and institutional start-up funds were depleted. The Vilas award allowed me to continue paying my lab manager and finish K-award related projects. I have since received an NIH R01 and a NARSAD Independent Investigator Grant! My lab manager continues to work with me on these projects...The Vilas funds were essential. If it were not for the VLCP, I may have lost my lab, because I needed the extra support in order to apply for an R01.

Provided Support and Invested in Others

The majority of grantees were able to hire personnel to help them move forward with their research programs, despite any setbacks and issues they were facing. According to the evaluations received by current recipients, the VLCP grants supported talented undergraduate researchers, student assistants, data analysts, graduate students, and staff scientists during the year in which they were funded. In total, approximately fifteen members of the university community were directly affected by this program, attesting to its positive impact on both the recipient, and others. An Assistant Professor notes:

If it were not for the Vilas award I would have lost my lab manager. Because of my [health concern], I was unable to apply for the R01 in time to prevent a gap in funding. The Vilas award has greatly benefited my research program by filling the gap in funding and allowing me to continue paying my lab manager, who is an incredibly talented person.

Two recipients explain how the hiring of graduate students was invaluable:

The funds essentially saved my career but perhaps in a roundabout way. I could not have predicted that I would subsequently become sufficiently ill that without having had these funds I would have lost an important graduate student.

The most significant accomplishment, however, was that I was able to continue working with a colleague and my doctoral students to implement a large-scale experimental intervention representing the culmination of over five years of research, program design, and pilot testing. With the implementation of this intervention, I have been able to submit

to the NIH for an ROI to cover the evaluation of this intervention—although not yet funded we were scored reasonably high on the first round and plan to resubmit this July.

The funds for a PA were absolutely crucial both for finishing my book (needed for tenure) and for advancing the work of the Initiative that I was hired to help spearhead. The travel and research funds enabled me to obtain needed materials and permissions for my book and also for my second book project. I am now in excellent shape for tenure review this fall.

A Professor explains how he has enabled undergraduate students to work with him in his lab and to conduct their own independent research projects:

I began to repopulate my lab by bringing in three undergraduates to work on various projects, especially ones relating to other species. Two of the undergraduates are still with me (one departed), and another has joined us this spring. Thus, I feel that my research is now on track to compete for funds that can support my research and teaching missions.

Remained and Progressed at UW

When asked if they were at risk for leaving the UW, approximately half of the respondents indicated “yes.” For these recipients, the funds came at a critical point that enabled them to remain in their positions. For example, an Assistant Professor notes:

To say I would have left academia would be an overstatement, but I suspect I would not be at UW now had I not received it.

Not only did the VLCP help them remain at UW, they also attribute the grant to progressing professionally. An Assistant Professor explains:

I was at risk for having to leave the university to go on long-term disability, and I believe having this funding helped me to continue making research progress so that I could qualify for tenure at UW-Madison.

In fact, two of the recipients were awarded tenure almost concurrently with the ending of the grant.

Other recipients indicated that they were not at risk for leaving immediately however, the funds engendered a feeling of community and reflected on the UW positively:

I believe this program is one of the most important on campus. Without question, it has helped the university keep and cultivate world-class scholars, as well as a more compassionate campus/departmental climate.

I had been recruited and almost accepted a job elsewhere just prior to my application to the VLC program, so had been on the verge of leaving beforehand. However, the fact

that this resource was made available to me in a time of crisis definitely engendered in me a stronger loyalty toward UW-Madison.

I don't think I was ever at risk of leaving UW-Madison. However, the funds did restore my sense of belonging to, and being a valued member of the UW academic community.

Grant is Highly Valued

The awardees were extremely grateful for the support that this grant afforded them, especially at a time when they were in dire need of help. The recipients described this in terms of providing “emotional” and “psychological” support that positively reflected on the University. They understand that the VLCP is a unique award—one unlike any other offered in academia. When asked where the VLCP falls relative to other programs on campus, all of the recipients indicated it was “the best,” “critical,” and “of highest importance.” One Associate Professor notes:

In my opinion, the Vilas program is one of the most valuable offerings for faculty at UW. Academia is stressful and highly competitive. To have an organization offer support for those in acute need is invaluable.

An Assistant Professor, who is close to achieving tenure, provides her perspective:

I don't think I can emphasize enough that the value of this program is not only in the financial resources it provides. In addition, the positive feedback I received regarding my research and my value to the UW campus was incredibly important during that time in my tenure process. This sense of positive acknowledgment—and what it signaled to others—fueled my drive to succeed. ...Also, just knowing that there were other faculty members who had benefitted from such support was important. Often, difficult situations that pose barriers to progression toward tenure are not discussed, due to a fear of raising red flags along a career path. Openness about the ways that life events might alter a path to tenure was invaluable.

Finally, a full Professor, reflects on her experience:

Without the VLCP, my research program would have been irreparably damaged. This program is immensely valuable. It is hard to think of any kind of program that could be more valuable to faculty and, thus, to the university. I very much hope that the program continues so faculty with major life events can be helped in the future.

Grant Administration

When asked about the administration of the grant, all of the recipients provided positive, grateful comments about how their applications were handled. As examples:

All of these aspects of the life-cycle grant process were outstanding. The application was very straightforward and did not involve unnecessary work or “red tape.” It was not onerous in any way. [WISELI grant administrator] was immensely helpful in answering all of my questions as I prepared the application as well as after I received the award. She is truly outstanding. She was always available for questions and responded very

promptly. She also is extremely knowledgeable about all aspects of the life-cycle grant process. It was wonderful to work with her! The grant notification and administration were equally excellent. I had extremely positive experiences with all aspects of the life-cycle grant process.

The entire granting process was transparent and straightforward. There was much less “red tape” than usually accompanies other kinds of awards. I was grateful for these features.

My interactions during the application process were uniformly kind, helpful, and very empathic. I was grateful that no stigma was attached.

All of it has been very positive – the application was completely reasonable and straightforward, and I was communicated with about my award and its administration clearly and efficiently.

Simple, straightforward, fair, confidential, and clear. I have no complaints about any of these items.

Summary

Similar to previous years, the VLCP awardees were unable to identify any negative outcomes due to receiving this grant. Most of the recipients have told others that they received the grant they often encourage their colleagues to apply for it. A few choose to keep the grant confidential as a means to keep their private life, private. This year however, was the first year in which two VLCP recipients left the UW in the subsequent year. One continues to conduct research in a laboratory and the other took a faculty position in another university. The thirteen other grantees continued with their scholarship and applied for and received numerous grants due to the VLCP funding (see Section III).

Section III: Productivity and Scholarship

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