

Evaluation of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program

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April 19, 2018

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 2017/18 academic year marks the 13th 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 \$526,668 for the program in 2017/18. This award is very large relative to a “normal” year, and very little was carried over from 2016/17.

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.** A Senior Scientist, Permanent PI, 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.
- **Jim Escalante.** Prof. Escalante is a professor of Art, and represents the Arts & Humanities Division.
- **Nicole Perna.** Dr. Perna is a Professor of Genetics, and represents the Biological Sciences Division.

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

Applicants and Awards

We have established multiple deadlines for VLCP applications throughout the year, in order to increase the flexibility of the program for faculty in crisis. In 2017/18, we offered three rounds of funding.

- **Round 1.** Deadline May 26, 2017. Applications received: 20. Total amount requested: \$722,121. Applications funded: 11. Total amount awarded: \$315,714 (\$27,168 of this sum will be spent in the 2018/19 academic year.)
- **Round 2.** Deadline October 9, 2017. Applications received: 5 (one was a reapplication from Round 1.) Total amount requested: \$168,632. Applications funded: 5. Total amount awarded: \$171,613 (\$71,321 of this sum will be spent in the 2018/19 academic year.)
- **Round 3.** Deadline December 29, 2017. Applications received: 11 (one was a reapplication from Round 1.) Total amount requested: \$386,209. Applications funded: 5. Total amount awarded: \$185,095 (\$112,779 of this sum will be spent in the 2018/19 academic year.)

- **SUMMARY, 2017/18:** Applications received: 34. Total amount requested: \$1,198,962. Applications funded: 21. Total amount awarded: \$672,422 (\$211,268 of this sum will be spent in the 2018/19 academic year.)

Recipient Demographics

Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants are very diverse:

	Applicants	Recipients
Gender		
Female	21	12
Male	13	9
Race/Ethnicity²		
Faculty of Color	9	6
Majority Faculty	25	15
Title		
Assistant Professor	7	3
Associate Professor	12	6
Professor	11	10
Permanent PI/Academic Staff*	4	2
Division		
Biological Sciences	12	5
Physical Sciences	5	3

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 Sciences	11	9
Arts & Humanities	6	4

* Approximately 50 academic staff members have Permanent PI status. A divisional affiliation was assigned to them based on their research and administrative home (e.g., a Permanent PI in the SMPH is assigned the “Biological Sciences” division.)

Issues Arising in 2017/18

In contrast to the previous year, we have very few awards that carried over to this fiscal year, so we had almost the entire \$526,668 to award to new recipients. This is a very large award and we did not spend it all. Many awards given this year will run into the next fiscal year, however, and so we anticipate a more “normal” year next year, if we receive the same amount.

In 2017/18, we added Prof. Nicole Perna (Genetics) to our review committee, and she has been a wonderful addition.

For the upcoming 2018/19 award year, we will be working with RSP and the Provost’s Office to incorporate limited summer salary for VLCP award recipients, per the stipulations of the Vilas Trust. We think faculty will be very happy with this addition to the program.

Section II: Experiences and Outcomes of VLCP Recipients

Evaluation methods for the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) program were similar to those used in previous years. Each of the recipients was invited to answer a series of questions about their experience with the grant, the use and value of it, as well as any outcomes from receiving it, either positive or negative. This year, we also included a question about the expanded criteria for the awards. The respondents were asked to comment on the review criteria that included work events that interfere with research productivity. As in previous years, the recipients completed this survey under the condition of anonymity and their responses are provided in aggregate Section II. Quotes are de-identified and are provided to reflect overarching themes or a specific idea by an individual.

Consequential Events

The recipients of the VLCP were, and continue to be, dealing with significant issues and challenges in their personal and professional lives. Some are responsible for dealing with their loved ones’ illnesses or deaths, as well as the aftermath of these situations. For others, it is their own illness and mortality that has affected their careers. Others have had to address significant work-related disruptions. Many are doing this with little support and consequently, are juggling research, teaching, travel and multiple meetings and appointments. In all of the cases, the events that led to their application for this award were significant and career-altering.

Of the recipients, 60% ($n=12$) said they were definitely at risk for leaving the university due to the event(s) that affected their professional lives. This was especially the case with many of the pre-tenure faculty who received the grant. They, as compared to tenured faculty, were early

enough in their careers to know that any disruption to their productivity could have dire consequences on their careers. The recipients provided many examples of this:

I did consider applying for positions at other institutions, in order to secure additional startup funds, but was reluctant to do so at an early stage in my career. The Vilas Life Cycle Professorship reduced stress and allowed me to resume my path towards my career goals at UW-Madison.

The Vilas professorship funds allowed me to continue making steady progress toward tenure at a time that I thought I'd have to put everything on hold. I am certain that had I not received those funds, I would have at least one fewer article in my tenure file. I am just now working toward a final manuscript from the project, less than a year away from my tenure vote—and the manuscript is still months away from submission. I cannot imagine how I would have ever completed it before tenure without the Vilas funding.

The VLCP funding helped me push off proposal writing during this difficult time so that I could focus my efforts on publishing and making research progress as soon as I got used to the “new normal” in my routine. Without the VLCP funding, I would have had to write more grant proposals instead of publishing, and that would have negatively affected my research progress and career trajectory. The VLCP helped to minimize the disruption to my research program and allowed me to “bounce back” to re-align with my career path.

I cannot emphasize how essential it was for me to receive the funding from the Vilas professorship at the time I did. There were numerous signs that my scholarship had been suffering due to the turmoil in my professional life, but perhaps the most frustrating was the fact that I'd been repeatedly turned down on grant applications I'd submitted that year. I felt that getting “unstuck” at that point was going to be impossible. Thanks to the Vilas funds, I was able to spend the next year conducting the time-intensive qualitative research project I had planned as my major post-dissertation work as a pre-tenure faculty member.

Another noted that a highly personal event, which the faculty member wants to keep in confidence, was creating challenges in their progression:

[The event] and the circumstances surrounding it definitely put me at risk for leaving UW. Not only was I slipping behind in my work, I was also suffering with a sense of isolation and hopelessness that made me seriously consider quitting everything or at the very least taking a leave of absence. Taking leave would have been an unprecedented move for someone pre-tenure in my department who wasn't suffering any obvious physical condition. While I think the world of my colleagues, I'm unsure how this would have been received at the tenure vote even if I were able to come back in a single semester. So in addition to having a much thinner tenure file than I do now with the project I've described under my belt, I'd also likely be facing the uphill struggle of convincing my colleagues that my delayed progress pre-tenure was a fluke.

Of the remaining 40%, some noted that although they were not at risk for leaving UW, they could lose their research program and consequently, their ability to remain at UW-Madison in their faculty positions. A few noted how they had seriously considered this idea, but chose to stay:

After careful consideration, I made the decision to stay at UW-Madison and reinvigorate my research program. The Vilas Life Cycle grant certainly contributed to my ability to pursue this path.

The life event put me at risk of quitting research, which means leaving UW-Madison. To me, the fund provides hope, showing the UW community cares about my research and my career.

A few considered looking for positions at other universities and attributes the grant as the primary reason they chose to stay:

If I had not received the grant at the time, I would have likely returned to the job market. In fact, I had an invitation to consider a position at another institution. I do not think I would have felt such a strong investment in remaining at UW-Madison, if I had not received the grant and was not in the midst of develop this research.

Although contacted regularly to apply to positions at other institutions, I preferred to remain at UW-Madison. In order to do so, I needed to reinvigorate my research program.

Had I not received the VLCP, I would have felt unsupported by campus and would have seriously considered requests to apply for positions at other universities.

Finally, some considered leaving academia altogether:

Yes. I seriously considered leaving my position to care for my son full time. I actually made the decision to apply for the funds right after contemplating leaving my position. I was feeling so torn between caring for his health and pursuing my career (and feeling like I wasn't doing a job of either). However the funds helped me start a project I felt very passionate about, and also helped me fund one of my students, which was also a huge stress relief.

Professional Outcomes

Similar to previous years, recipients primarily used the funds to retain or hire graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, scientists or other staff members. These hires enabled the researcher to continue their productivity through their scholarship and grants.

The grant enabled me to recruit a top-notch PhD student from a graduate course that I was teaching. Working with that student allowed to further my research during the very

difficult period while moving into a new research area. It also allowed me to better focus on my other PhD student, and ultimately win a \$400K NSF grant.

The projects with which the RA helped me yielded 2 publications, and also freed up my time to begin new collaborations. I was able to build on some of this work to secure additional grants from local sources and to conduct preliminary work in support of three grant proposals to the NIH.

Without these funds I would have been vulnerable to losing all research expertise for my lab, expertise that I have worked to cultivate via my NIH R01 funds for over a decade now. This expertise is critical to maintaining R01 funding for my lab, but it also helps my colleagues at UW Madison because I am a strong grant writer and editor for their grants. The expert scientist that I have trained and that works in my lab frees me up to help my colleagues with their grants in addition to generating the data necessary to maintain my own grant competitiveness. As a biomedical research scientist covering a large fraction of my salary in the medical school, GRANTS ARE EVERYTHING. We cannot survive without them, and we put our own as well as our UW friends and colleagues research programs at risk when we lose them.

The fund allows me to support a third year medical student for a full year research fellowship. This particularly student is exceptionally skilled in microsurgery as well as in organization. She produced data critical to the renewal of my NIH grant. Her energetic personality inspired others in the lab myself included. ...The fund assisted me to produce several high impact publications and successfully renew a federal grant.

During the leave of absence I was able to recruit a postdoctoral trainee. Her productivity was reflected by a peer-review publication within the first year. We are currently wrapping up the project and preparing the next set of publications. The research data that we obtained will allow us to expand to a new direction.

Besides helping the faculty in need, the people who were hired with the grant funds were productive in their own right and led to their further success:

The grant did have a positive effect on the career of my lab technician who I hired with this grant. It gave her the opportunity to demonstrate her skills in research, which put her in an excellent position to apply successfully to graduate school.

The grant provided support to a medical student who took a year off from medical education to pursue research. Therefore, the grant has a very positive impact on her career development. In fact, she called me last Friday to share her good news: she is matched to a top surgical resident program. It is a very competitive program. I like to believe that her research experience and publications with me helped.

Some of the funds were spent to pay a graduate student to work on some of my data. The student was in the last year of his thesis and really needed these few months of funding to fill out the year. He is an member of an underserved minority, and I'm particularly glad we were able to help support him. He has since gotten a great postdoc.

This reduced stress on a staff member whose salary was, in part, supported by this award and who now receives multi-year support for her position from extramural sources. Without this, she would have had to find another position in the university.

Value of the Program

The recipients were asked to indicate both positive and negative outcomes from receiving the grant. None of them identified something negative. Rather, they indicated the value of this program and why they viewed it so highly.

This is the most valuable program on-campus in my opinion. Each faculty may be hit by a major life event at some point in her/his career but overall it will be temporary when compared to the many years each faculty will be contributing to the university. Decline in research, particularly, can impact faculty development in junior and mid-career stages which can have future or long-term consequences. Support in a critical life stage should be viewed as a valuable investment by the university to get the faculty back on research track as quickly as possible.

The VLCP was a life-saver! For that year, I finally felt on top of things, and I was writing and researching like I hadn't been before!! It was an amazing year, and it has helped to propel me forward.

My students and colleagues always appreciate it when I am feeling my best. The year that I had the VLCP, I was feeling my best a whole lot because of the extra support I was receiving! I was able to give more than usual with no adverse effects. Now, without extra support, I think that the year with the VLCP has given me perspective of what is possible for me to do.

Frankly, the award was the absolute most helpful thing I can imagine...It has been the most valuable support I've received from the university or my department.

I have informed a few colleagues about it. I usually tell them that it is of inestimable value for someone who is undergoing difficult circumstances and requires additional support and assistance. That, depending on the level of support, it allows one to maintain one's research productivity while dealing with the often-onerous demands that a difficult life event can unexpectedly place on us.

Similar to previous years, the recipients noted that they felt more loyal and felt valued by the UW because of receiving the award.

It is an awesome program! What an amazing way to tell faculty that they are valued, and that the university is supportive of their careers during a time of crisis. I'm not sure of another program quite like it!

I feel more valued at UW because of a program like this. Very difficult time managing the emotions of situation like this. The program was a bright spot in the midst of this gloom.

It was helpful to feel supported by UW-Madison during this disruptive time in my life. I feel loyal to UW-Madison as a direct result of this grant.

*The emphasis on work-life balance, and acknowledging that an individual **should and must** divide their attention in a crisis is unique to UW-Madison. These accommodations also made me feel valued as a scientist, and teacher, and made me want to stay at UW-Madison.*

Other Supports Needed

When asked what else the university could do to support faculty who are in crisis, the recipients had a number of ideas.

Be more understanding that major life events do not necessarily fit in one or two pre-defined buckets. A life event may last a couple of years and there should not be an expectation of shorter period for adaption/healing because individual situations are different. Affected individual may not be in spirit to request help; mentors and department chair can be vital to instead offer help and resources. Department chair can specifically help by checking and inquiring how the faculty is affected, ask for details and continuous updates, and offer help, not just thoughts and prayers. For example, he/she can be understanding by asking for service activities that require less interactions with others. Department chair can also step in and if possible offer resources such as teaching assistants. But more than anything, having the department chair (and senior colleagues in your area) be aware of the situation, check on you, and offer help are the best because feeling isolated at work can negatively impact progress and daily activities.

The VLCP is a good start, but it would be better if there were greater funds for the life scientists facing situations, especially those at midcareer that are still capable of being productive. Grants are competitive and hard to get. It is in UW's best interest to have multiple pathways designed to keep responsible scientists afloat during life challenges that threaten their research programs and viability. Over 30% of the costs of running UW Madison come from the indirect costs that come with federal grants. Support for faculty that have been productive and continue to try to get funding is not only a good thing to do for a variety of reasons, but it makes economic sense.

I think that it is not uncommon for faculty to struggle at some point in their careers due to the toll events in their personal lives can take on their ability to work productively. The faculty member in this situation certainly does not want this to happen and will usually struggle to maintain their productivity. However, emotionally it can become impossible to do because we value our personal lives and those in it. Such situations cause a great deal of stress that can negatively affect the faculty member for quite some time. Departments, schools and the university should recognize this and be supportive to the individual, help them overcome the negative emotional effects that such situations cause.

I think the university and departments should provide funding and course reduction or research leave when someone is recovering from an event that has derailed her/his/their career.

It is crucial for the University and all departments to provide support primordially to alleviate the affected faculty's workload and secondarily to support their ongoing research should they choose to continue researching during the major life event.

Expanded Criteria for Applicants

The recipients were asked about expanding the criteria to include events at work that interfere with research productivity, not just events in faculty members' personal lives. In general, they were supportive and believed that these experiences should be considered.

I don't see any reason to restrict it to "personal" events, if those who are reviewing the applications continue to ensure that the awards go to those who are most affected or disadvantaged. The entire premise of the award is the idea that our personal lives affect our professional lives. It would be strange then to make the award contingent on criteria that assume that these aspects of our lives are completely siloed.

Yes, I support such an expansion of the selection criteria. I know from personal experience that a negative work environment can often have as profound an impact on one's research as major health issues and significant personal challenges.

Yes, there are a number of benefits to keeping the criteria open. Many faculty are expected to become leaders in the field as educators, researchers, or to take on higher administrative academic positions. These responsibilities inevitably block their research flow. These open criteria with the VLCP program provide resources for the affected faculty to reinvigorate their research endeavors and possibly reposition their life choices.

That said, they felt that the application review committee should make these decisions.

I would suggest the criteria be kept and these applications evaluated on a case-by-case basis along with other life events.

I believe it should be left to the discretion of the VLCP committee to decide who is eligible for the award and how the criteria are defined and applied. Individual interviews can be scheduled for better assessment if necessary but I would trust the VLCP committee to make the judgment. Work environment can also hamper productivity and different individuals may be affected differently. It may not be easy to resolve work issues through “standard channels.” Ultimately what matters is for faculty to have a working environment without unnecessary distractions to be able to focus on research, bringing grant money, and publishing their work effectively so they can be of most value to the university’s mission. How an individual is affected by a life event or at the work place is also a function of individual traits and cultural background. I disagree with limiting ‘major’ life events to a few categories, which may become implicitly biased and ignore individual attributes.

One person suggested that people who have personal issues should still have priority consideration for the VLCP:

I can imagine that one could experience events at work that have a negative impact on a faculty member’s research productivity. I think it is important that new criterion did not negatively affect the ability for those who applied based on events in their personal lives to obtain support.

Section III: Research, Scholarship and Productivity

This final section describes the recipients’ research and the scholarship that they directly attribute to the time and funds of their VLCP award. It has been removed for confidentiality reasons.