

Evaluation of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program

Christine M. Pribbenow and Jennifer Sheridan

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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 2019/20 academic year marks the 15th 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 \$440,000 for the program in 2019/20. \$169,156 was carried over from 2018/19, leaving \$270,844 in new funding for this year.

All faculty and permanent principal investigators, regardless of divisional affiliation, are eligible for these funds. Per the stipulations of the Estate, 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.
- **Thomas DuBois.** Dr. DuBois is professor and chair of the German, Nordic, and Slavic department, 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 2019/20, we offered three rounds of funding.

- **Round 1.** Deadline May 31, 2019. Applications received: 16. Total amount requested: \$577,710. Applications funded: 10. Total amount awarded: \$241,463.
- **Round 2.** Deadline September 27, 2019. Applications received: 3. Total amount requested: \$94,623. Applications funded: 1. Total amount awarded: \$14,408 (\$9,963 of this sum will be spent in the 2020/21 academic year.)
- **Round 3.** Deadline December 27, 2019. Applications received: 10 (1 is a reapplication from the first round.) Total amount requested: \$381,951. Applications funded: 5. Total amount awarded: \$176,740 (\$152,449 of this sum will be spent in the 2020/21 academic year.)

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| • SUMMARY, 2019/20: Applications received: 29. Total amount requested: \$1,054,284. Applications funded: 16. Total amount awarded: \$432,611 (\$162,412 of this sum will be spent in the 2020/21 academic year.) |
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Recipient Demographics

Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants are very diverse (only 28 applicants are tracked because one was a reapplication):

| | Applicants | Recipients |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 17 | 12 |
| Male | 11 | 4 |
| Race/Ethnicity² | | |
| Faculty of Color | 5 | 2 |
| Majority Faculty | 23 | 14 |
| Title | | |
| Assistant Professor | 8 | 8 |
| Associate Professor | 9 | 5 |
| Professor | 9 | 2 |
| Permanent PI/Academic Staff* | 2 | 1 |
| Division | | |
| Biological Sciences | 10 | 5 |
| Physical Sciences | 1 | 1 |
| Social Sciences | 10 | 6 |
| Arts & Humanities | 7 | 4 |

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 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 2019/20

We had many more applications in 2019/20 than in the past two years, and most of the applications were fundable. We made some difficult choices, and have asked for an increase in funding for 2020/21, as we hope several applicants can apply again in the next fiscal year.

In 2019/20, we had yet another instance where the committee made an award recommendation but the Provost’s Office declined to fund the individual. We will work with the Provost’s Office prior to the 2020/21 program to ensure that all language in the call for proposals and the application makes applicants aware that the Provost’s Office has final approval of all funding decisions.

Section II: Experiences and Outcomes of VLCP Recipients

Similar to previous years’ recipients, faculty and staff who received the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) award provided a number of positive outcomes, scholarship success, and perspectives about the impact and value of the program. None of the recipients indicated any negative outcomes from applying for and receiving the grant. Rather, they provided extensive examples and evidence about how necessary this program is to maintaining their status and continuing their professional success at UW-Madison.

Need for the Program

Approximately half of the recipients applied for the grant to mitigate the effects of caretaking responsibilities for their children, spouses, and/or parents who were ill or dying. The other half of the participants were taking care of others while they themselves were sick. A few of the recipients were battling their own illnesses during a critical career juncture that threatened their professional growth.

When asked if they were at risk for leaving the UW due to their circumstances, approximately 1/3 indicated “yes.” A few explained their thoughts about this:

The life event not only led to me almost leaving UW–Madison, but leaving academia entirely given the impact that the life event had on my quality of life and on my professional productivity. It’s challenging to specifically quantify how the award helped me to stay at UW–Madison, but it certainly played a role in making me feel supported by the University during a challenging time in my life, which went a long way in keeping me excited and motivated about the work that I and my colleagues have undertaken.

I previously had a faculty position at [NAME] university where dual career negotiations failed. They reached out to me to see whether I wanted to come back to [other university]. The support from this program was a significant factor in deciding to stay. It demonstrated (along with some departmental actions) that the university really supported me.

The other 2/3 had considered leaving, but due to the length of time at the UW and/or their commitment to their colleagues and students, this was not a strong possibility. This finding, which is different from previous years, could be due to the higher number of awardees who are Associate Professors and Professors and therefore, post-tenure. The following comments provide insight into their thinking:

The VLCP grant made it easy for me to assuage any concerns of my lab members that I might consider leaving. It was something I could point to as the source of my certainty in the university's support. My colleagues definitely have a more positive impression of UW-Madison based on our conversations about the grant.

I am not sure that I ever considered leaving Madison, because I love my job here and I love teaching, but I certainly considered the possibility that I might need to take a leave of absence, which I did not want to do. I have a small program in the [NAME] department and I am always aware that it needs me. In the end, I was able to use some of my accumulated leave to have a reduced teaching load and the funds from VLCP allowed me to complete my work.

I think the life-event put me at some risk of leaving UW-Madison, just because of the incredible stress I was under, although I suspect my sense of duty to the university and my students and colleagues would always have overridden that. But the funds certainly helped me feel more valued and made my life here better and, as a result, helped my research and other activities too.

I was not thinking of leaving UW-Madison in 2018 or 2019 although the support made me more fully recognize what a supportive and broad-minded university I work for. Vilas support, blended with departmental support, also made me far less willing to entertain overtures to consider positions at other universities (and I've been asked to apply for 2-4 positions every year since Vilas support came through).

I can't say the funds were the factor that kept me from leaving, because if I hadn't started to improve, no amount of money would have enabled me to continue long term. However, the funds did give me optimism that I could get through this rough spot and resume my career if/when my health recovered. It was a big psychological lift to have the VLCP support.

Professional Accomplishments and other Effects

All of the VLCP recipients' scholarly accomplishments, such as publications, grants and exhibitions, that they attribute to the grant funds are found in Section III. Other accomplishments, both tangible and intangible, were also described:

The awarded funds allowed me to accelerate various projects and interests that I had prior to the injury that I sustained. Many of the activities that were supported by this award led to data that served as the foundation for a proposed – and eventually funded – center. Finally, the information and data collected as part of this award were included in multiple proposals submitted to external funding agencies.

From my perspective, the funds played a critically important role in enabling me to progress professionally. Despite the 'spillover' of life event impacts into all of 2018 and 2019, I was able to make research progress, and lay a foundation for some key writing projects. The funding enabled me to keep up with a burgeoning literature, and to keep connected to relevant research networks. I should also add that the funds enable me to make progress not just while dealing with the lifecycle spillover effects, but also some major administrative duties I had to take on in 2018, 2019, and early 2020.

Besides these professional accomplishments, some of the recipients provided examples of how this award helped them emotionally and psychologically:

For me, the VLC Program was a godsend. I was drowning in lack of self-confidence, feeling devalued, and unappreciated. I knew what I needed to do but I couldn't find the time, self-motivation, and strength to step up and move forward. I was doing SO much at the university that was not valued by my department and the VLC Program was a gentle support that lifted me up in order to reboot myself.

Many of the programs at UW are awards program that reward excellence and productivity. Success builds on success. I needed help getting research active again and this program did that.

When faculty are rated on number of publications, grants, and presentations, it can feel like a personal failing to have a downward turn with respect to these numbers. This grant recognizes that there are life circumstances beyond our control that have a major impact on careers.

Receiving the VLCP funds was an emotionally supportive act. Initially, the funds were an affirmation that inspired me to keep trying. I knew I could not do it alone (I had already tried for years), so the funds gave me support and encouragement; it was a tremendous boost to just knowing that UW valued me enough to invest in me.

I was feeling very bad about myself as a professional scholar, even though I was teaching and doing a lot of service and data collection. I did not have any products as evidence of this activity. The VLCP improved my mental health, sense of self-worth, and energized me.

The truth is, I considered cancelling my project because of the life events that I was going through. I wasn't sure I could do it. But, somehow, the funds from the VLCP program gave me a renewed hope and energy that it was possible that I could do it. The financial support also gave me a psychological lift at a moment when I was completely overwhelmed. I used the funds very carefully so that I could make the most progress on my project.

Perception of the VLCP

Since the beginning of the program, more people are aware of it and its value. A number of the recipients described the perceptions that both they, and their colleagues at UW, have about the program. Many have gone out of their way to communicate about it to others, as described below:

I have told others. It is perceived as one of the things that makes UW great. Without programs such as this that provide crucial support during times of need, many people would lose research programs.

I always encourage people to consider the Vilas Life Cycle program whenever the call for proposals comes out, as well as when I interact with colleagues who are experiencing or have recently experienced a major life event. I describe this opportunity as one way that the University supports faculty undergoing various challenges. All feedback that I have received from others regarding this program has been extremely positive, whether coming from someone with a

significant life event, or from colleagues who have not experienced such an event but still recognize how these events can impact colleagues professionally.

I have told others about the grant. I have referred a few colleagues who may qualify. I typically explain that it provides research support for faculty who have experienced life events that impact research (most of my colleagues are aware of my personal situation). I have really only received supportive and positive comments, including, "I'm so glad UW offers something like that." Others can see the award listed on my CV or acknowledged in presentations and are probably not aware of what the award is.

I have told colleagues about this award. I describe it as a supportive leg that metaphorically speaking kept my desk upright. I have no clear understanding of how the award is perceived, but I know my colleagues encourage each other to take advantage of leave of absence and other opportunities to continue their career without jeopardizing their prospects.

Besides the positive perception that the grant has on UW-Madison's campus, the recipients often describe the program to faculty at other universities who are impressed with the program:

I told colleagues who are in other universities about the Vilas Life Cycle award, when I described how I was able to keep the morale of my laboratory personnel and trainees strong, and have sufficient funds to be able to do all we had hope to do with regard to the research plan.

Colleagues at other universities are astonished this grant exists, and view UW-Madison in a more favorable light. Many colleagues here never really understood how it really worked, and so I was able to provide them with practical details and information about the broad rationale for it. They are also consistently impressed with the fact we even have such a scheme here to support faculty under strain.

I also want to say that I have shared my experience with the VLCP with colleagues at other universities, and they all think that UW-Madison is so forward-thinking in having such an important program.

Several colleagues told me how impressed they were that UW-Madison had such a program that specifically assisted faculty who found themselves in unexpected situations that could have substantial negative impact on their research and trainee mentoring programs.

Value of the Program

The recipients were asked to rank the value of this program as compared to others that are available to faculty at UW-Madison. All of the recipients pointed at the VLCP as one of the most critical programs for people who need support at critical points in their careers.

Certainly, the availability of financial and instrumental support is crucial. In addition, explicit validation of faculty member's value is essential. This is often missing. The validation and support provided by VLCP was extraordinarily valuable both from financial and emotional standpoints.

It is extraordinarily valuable in that it serves a different need and is complementary. It is tremendously valuable that we have a program that addresses needs due to life circumstances outside the control of the faculty member.

I think it is genuinely one of the best programs, if not the best, as life events can take some time to build up, and some time to resolve or work through. Given this, this is a major bridge program with multi-year positive impacts on multiple levels. I am absolutely thrilled that it exists, and encourage its maintenance if not expansion on campus. I am deeply grateful for the support.

It is an excellent resource and a great idea since it provides, strategic support to maintain research momentum to faculty at key moments in their lives. This increases the faculty's sense of loyalty to UW and provides an important bridge to maintain research programs

Many of the programs at UW are awards program that reward excellence and productivity. Success builds on success. I needed help getting research active again and this program did that.

UW-Madison has some unique, high value programs that aren't very obvious to outsiders. The annual fall competition through the VCRGE office is one that I always mention when recruiting faculty. The VLCP program by design is less visible, but is very high value. People are our greatest resource. Replacing a faculty member is an extremely expensive proposition. Retaining faculty facing life challenges is of very high value. Furthermore, on a human level this sort of support is important – it definitely contributes to a positive climate.

Unintended, Positive Impacts

Similar to previous years, the recipients identified a number of unintended and positive consequences due directly to the VLCP. This included the hiring and retaining of talented staff, postdoctoral researchers, and graduate students. They also described positive effects on the climate and morale in their labs and departments.

Receiving the Vilas funds contributed, indirectly, to keeping the morale of my laboratory personnel and trainees strong during a period when I could not be with them for 5-6 months because of my illness. My Research Specialist/Lab Manager provides the “memory” of my lab that is transmitted to new trainees that join our group; he excels at training new, typically young, people in the techniques used in my lab, and in addition he is a wonderful human being – everyone and especially trainees who has worked with him formed strong, positive bonds with him. Not having to worry about whether I would be able to keep him employed in my lab group as our newly funded project was just getting underway, but without my presence on a daily basis, added a huge amount of stability and good spirits to the lab group in what otherwise could have been a stressful and sad situation.

The funds really did save the day for me. I was able to have a studio graduate assistant (Project Assistant), who was nothing short of amazing, and this made it possible to get the pieces finished for the project. I also had flexible funds for materials which was so important because I had drained my resources doing so much traveling to care for my mother. I was able to have certain parts of the works, that I would normally make myself, made by others or hired some others to help me. I really had a whole team of student helping me and it seems like a group effort to get the project completed. It is no exaggeration to say that the entire project could not have happened without the funds from the Vilas Life Cycle Grant. I will forever be grateful.

I think that the VLCP program is just a small wonderful piece to keep us sane. So, yes, attention to work related events and how they impact an individual worker is much needed and appreciated.

My postdoctoral fellow joined the lab while I was in the midst of chemotherapy, and because of the difficulty of the protocol I was on, I stayed home for much of the 5-6 month treatment period. So, he and I were not able to start getting to know each other well, and have a normal beginning to a mentoring relationship, until a few months after he arrived in Madison. Yet, because of the stability in the lab and the strong morale, it appeared that he had little trouble fitting into the lab and beginning work on the research laid out in our experimental design. Again, our lab manager "took him under his wing" with regard to all aspects of our lab's functions, and they quickly developed a strong and mutually respectful relationship. That realization on days I could visit the lab for a short time and observe them working together meant the world to me.

Other Needed Supports

The recipients were asked to provide examples of ways that the university could do a better job to support faculty and staff when in personal crisis situations that affect their productivity. The following were provided by a few of the VLCP program grantees:

First, it is important to provide paid leave for faculty. Once the faculty member is able to return to work, it is important not to penalize him/her for time away and time that it takes to get back on track. This may include clock extensions but also accounting for impact of a life event when evaluating productivity for awards, grants, and leadership positions. Finally, it is important to provide support to allow faculty members to return to their work. This includes bridge research funding but also supporting effort / time for career development.

The department could be at the front of acknowledging this new context and supporting faculty to keep focused on work-family balance and constructive steps towards productivity instead of just annual and post-tenure assessments which are now more critical than encouraging.

While medical leave, disability, and other formal measures exist for serious major life events, the university and departments could do more for negotiated adjustments in workloads to acknowledge stresses, challenges, and work-family balance.

Administration of the VLCP Program

Finally, similar to previous years' results, the recipients had positive comments about the administration of this program:

I found the process to be straightforward and not too burdensome. Staff was a pleasure to work with. My only suggestion is to consider CHS track faculty members in the medical school for this award. I wasn't initially able to apply, even though I have been heavily involved in research, because of my CHS track position. I was able to apply after getting permanent PI status, but the process of receiving permanent PI status takes many months and delayed my award.

I also want to say that Jennifer Sheridan was wonderful to work with. I was working with her on applying for the VLCP program during a moment in my life when I was literally falling apart, and she was so helpful, responsive, and supportive. I can't thank her enough. She made the process painless, she responded to emails immediately, and she always made me feel like the university was on my side. It was a good feeling to have during trying times.

I think this is one of the most valuable programs on campus. The process for applying for the program is relatively short and simple, which was very valuable during a period when I had limited time to devote to proposal writing (and other activities). Also, turnaround time between application and award is relatively short, which was extremely helpful.

Everything was very straightforward, with clear instructions, excellent communication lines and notifications, and efficient administration.

Everything was actually logical and straight forward. I have applied and received grants from several different entities over the years and this was the one source that seemed to apply common sense to these elements.

The entire process has been managed very professionally, and in a manner that conveys, to me, genuine sensitivity about the fact applicants and awardees have been going through major life events. In short, I have nothing but praise to communicate regarding this issue.

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.