Evaluation of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program
Christine M. Pribbenow and Jennifer Sheridan
April 20, 2022

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
- **Section II:** Experiences and Outcomes of VLCP Recipients
- **Section III:** Scholarship Progress and Highlights

**Section I: Administrative Details**
The 2021/22 academic year marks the 17th 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 $531,731 for the program in 2011/22. $91,277 was carried over from 2020/21, leaving $440,454 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 VCLP 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. She currently serves as the Associate Vice Chancellor for Research in the Physical Sciences in the OVCRGE.
- **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.

**Applicants and Awards**

---

1 To maintain anonymity of the recipients, the public will have access to Sections I and II only.
We have established multiple deadlines for Life Cycle applications throughout the year, in order to increase the flexibility of the program for faculty in crisis. In 2020/21, we offered two rounds of funding.

- **Round 3.** Deadline December 31, 2021. Applications received: 10. Total amount requested: $386,036. Applications funded: 7. Total amount awarded: $261,642. ($211,870 of this sum will be spent in the 2022/23 academic year.)

**SUMMARY, 2021/22:** Applications received: 25 (2 were reapplications.) Total amount requested: $914,019. Applications funded: 18. Total amount awarded: $652,842 ($318,498 of this sum will be spent in the 2022/23 academic year.)

Recipient Demographics
Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants are very diverse (only 23 applicants are tracked because two were reapplications):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Applicants</th>
<th>Recipients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Color</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Faculty</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent PI/Academic Staff*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Division</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Sciences</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Sciences</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Humanities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 would be 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 2021/22**

We were surprised to not see as many applications as anticipated in 2021/22; rather, it was an “average” year in terms of request, although many of the applications did mention pandemic-related issues. One trend we have noticed is that many more faculty are writing their awards in such a way that it delays spending farther into the future, such that we have a higher “rollover” amount for awards into the next fiscal year than normal. We will be keeping a close eye on this in 2022/23. It could be this is pandemic-related, with people delaying spending a bit in order to account for uncertainties in hiring and ability to do regular research tasks. If the trend continues, we are considering changing due dates in order to even out the awards better over the fiscal year.

**Section II: Experiences and Outcomes of VLCP Recipients**

The responses and data received from the awardees of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) program mirror the results obtained from previous years’ studies in many ways. What is different however, is that the past two years have included the additional burden of COVID and its ramifications. Although none of the awardees received funds due solely to the pandemic, their personal and professional challenges were exacerbated by its effects.

Similar to previous years’ grantees, the respondents described facing multiple challenging experiences at the same time. The majority of the awardees were responsible for the care of ailing and terminally ill family members, many of whom died. Sadly, two faculty members lost young children under horrible circumstances. Other situations included divorce and the sole caretaking of children with a number of physical and mental health issues. Unlike previous years however, a small minority indicated they had their own physical and mental health issues. Most bore the brunt of caretaking of others, while facing professional challenges.

**Value and Administration of Award**

When asked about the value of this award, all of the respondents indicated that it was one of the most valuable programs on campus as compared to others. Many provided words of thanks and appreciation to the Vilas Trustees and Dr. Jenn Sheridan and WISELI, who administers the program. Some of the comments included:

> At the absolute top of the pyramid – in fact, with COVID, I think it has become even more urgent to increase the funding to support faculty who have experienced major life events that interfere with their research progress.

*****

> I think that the VLCP is perhaps the most valuable program we have for acknowledging and supporting the basic humanity of our faculty, honestly.

*****
This program is very important, and I think this is the least that the university could be doing to support faculty during major life events. I think this is especially important for improving equity, because caregiving responsibilities fall more often on women than on men, because of societal expectations. The VLCP doesn’t completely account for those discrepancies, but it helps somewhat.

*****
I have participated in group discussions and luncheons for new faculty and mid-career faculty. Those are helpful in terms of advice, but this program is much more important to help faculty recover from un-planned and unavoidable set-backs.

*****
I think that the university is very supportive and offers really great opportunities for faculty to be able to go through harsh life events. At all levels, the university is very helpful and understanding of personal issues that for sure might have an impact on faculty’s performance.

*****
It’s an extremely appreciated and significant program, I hope it last forever so other faculty could take advantage of it as I and many did.

*****
My department unfortunately does not care about life events impacting their faculty so it is all the more important that the Vilas Life Cycle program exists – not all of us can get support from our home departments when unforeseeable and uncontrollable catastrophic life events occur.

Many also noted the ease and care taken by Dr. Sheridan during their challenging times:

The process was extraordinarily compassionate and well managed, thanks to Jennifer Sheridan, who spent hours on the phone and in person with, initially, a faculty friend who approached her as my advocate, and then, with me, when I could barely function. Thank you, Jenn, and thank you, Trustees.

*****
The whole process went really very efficiently and professionally conducted.

*****
The application and notification processes were smooth and without problems.

*****
All were excellent; no improvements to offer. I found it quite personally useful and therapeutic to write the application.

*****
The application, notification and administration process were super easy and user friendly. I appreciated all the support provided throughout the process!
Experiences and Outcomes
Section III provides documentation of the grants proposed and awarded, manuscripts, presentations, and other forms of scholarship that are directly attributed to the VLCP funds. A few descriptions of these outcomes are described here, while the full list of each awardee’s outcomes is found in the following section.

This award allowed me to continue research projects that were crucial to obtaining preliminary data for publications and large research grant submissions. In the past year (due to the Vilas award support), I was able to submit 5 grants (of which I have received 2 intramural awards with others pending).

*****

During the years of VCLP funding I wrote two articles and did, eventually, return to my original second book, which is now complete. Importantly, the VCLP afforded me the ability to work on my research from home, since I used much of the funding to purchase books and a laptop for my home office. I am very grateful for the books that I consult every day, whether for my teaching or research.

*****

The funds provided by the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship were instrumental in allowing me time and support to catch up on several research projects and move my overall program of research forward... The funds helped me to complete several project deliverables, dedicate time to dissemination of research findings, and supported me in writing for a 3-year $300,000 grant, which I received.

*****

There were five publications that emerged during the VLCP. Three were managed by co-authors primarily. Two were partially complete before the VLCP period and were finished. Two were written completely and published during the VLCP period. The grant substantially helped in supporting this work.

Besides the direct and quantifiable impacts from this award, the grantees also indicated a number of other outcomes that served to support them and help them progress in their careers. As an example, approximately half of the respondents indicated they would have left the UW if they had not received the award. Others indicated that they were at risk for taking an extended leave off, which would have negatively impacted their progression and would have also affected their departments and students. In either case, the award allowed them to remain active and productive. Some of the awardees provide evidence of this:

Due to many years of reduced faculty hiring, our department would have had significant struggles to fill teaching and service gaps if I had taken a full leave of absence. To protect my research and still meet departmental needs, it was essential for me to receive some support for my research program – this is where Vilas funds were critical. The university can support these life event situations better by supporting faculty hiring such that departments have more wiggle room to accommodate shifts in teaching and service needs.

*****
These kinds of events are the kinds that can completely sideline or end a career. Relatively small investments of money and time *may* prevent such outcomes. In my case, nothing could really have prevented or ameliorated the nearly complete shutdown of professional productivity from 2016 onwards short of a cure for [me]. But it helped.

*****
I really don’t know what I would have done without the funds, since my research program was not progressing until this infusion of funds...As above, I was despairing of being able to revive my research program and didn’t know what to do.

*****
Yes – despite having tenure, my department has been threatening me with negative performance reviews based on slowed research productivity due to the life events. Having the Vilas funds allowed me to keep my lab running through the worst of the life events so that I am now in a position to not have to start from literally zero in building up research momentum again.

The majority of respondents used the funds to support and retain staff, such as lab technicians and managers, graduate students, and post-doctoral scientists. In this way, the grantees were able to provide others with opportunities to be successful and productive.

The grant allowed me to retain a research scientist in the lab at a higher FTE which provided continuity of scientific guidance and mentoring in the lab in my absence. This helped to keep the newest trainees on track...Having the senior scientist in the lab allowed us to continue collecting essential preliminary data which we used to prepare a new NIH application and a collaborative NSF application which developed a major new direction of research in the lab. The NSF application was funded and feedback from the NIH application were incorporated into another application...Without the Vilas support for senior scientist continuity in my lab, I would not have had the bandwidth to guide my lab remotely and continue with my teaching and service duties (including a faculty search) remotely. The time needed to handle teaching and service while away handling personal matters severely impacted time I had available for my research. It may not have been immediate, but the loss of momentum and training for my students would have put us at much higher risk of losing research funding.

*****
I was able to hire two graduate students as PAs and this grant also helped them financially during the summer and also because of the pandemic.

*****
It is affecting graduate students in my lab positively. They will be able to use the lab more effectively, and they will also be able to build upon the results with their own research.

*****
It had a positive impact on the Research Specialist on my team, whose salary was supported by the grant. She also had a chance to participate in scholarship activities in our Team
Science environment and has her name on a publication for the first time. I was able to give her a significant promotion at the end of the Vilas funding period.

When asked if they discussed it with others and how it was described, some noted:

I have discussed it with some. Most UW-Madison colleagues seem aware of and supportive of the idea. Most outside of the university are shocked to hear of such a mechanism and often voice desire to have something similar in their institutions.

*****

Yes, I have been sharing very encouraging comments about the grant on how it’s a valuable support when it comes to unexpected circumstances that might affect your life, work and research. My colleagues perceive this grant as a very helpful resource for all of us.

*****

Only positive outcomes. It is wonderful to work at an institution that acknowledges the interplay between personal lives and career trajectories, and the dilemmas professionals – most often, women – find themselves in. I felt supported by the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship, and feel it made a real difference in my on-going efforts to establish a successful research program in the highly competitive environment of UW-Madison and the research field in general.

*****

I talked to my colleagues about it. My feeling is that women get sandwiched into very time consuming and sometimes emotionally draining tasks of caring for parents and caring for children. This is even more true as people like myself start families a bit later in life. Often when women academics fall behind in their work, money does become the main issue. Grants start to run out and we haven’t had the time to keep up with writing new ones. In the case of graduate student training it is always a balance of spending time writing and publishing articles or writing grant proposals. Since students need publications, writing articles often takes priority.

*****

There were no negative outcomes. There was another positive outcome. Specifically, I had submitted UW2020 proposals in two different years that were not funded by WARF, and I was starting to feel unappreciated by my own institution. The Vilas Life Cycle Award made me revise my thinking to some degree. I felt seen and cared for by the institution.

*****

I have not had any occasion to do so. The limited notion I have about how the grant is perceived is that it is seen very positively, as something most Universities would not think to offer. A recognition of the inevitability of frailty.

In summary, the VLCP award came at a critical juncture in the faculty or staff member’s life and due to the grant, they were able to be retained and productive while facing a multitude of personal crises. Unlike previous years, two faculty members did leave for other institutions, yet found great value and appreciate this award. Besides the recipients themselves, others were positively impacted by this award—staff, postdoctoral scientists, graduate students, and
undergraduate students. These secondary effects are hard to quantify, yet clearly, as described by the awardees themselves, are important outcomes from the grant. Specific, primary outcomes are described next.

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.