



Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program

2005 - 2023

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Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program: Mission and goals

The Vilas Life Cycle Professorships provide funds to faculty and non-emeritus permanent PIs at the University of Wisconsin–Madison who are at critical junctures in their professional careers and whose research productivity has been directly affected by personal life events (e.g., illness of a dependent, parent, spouse/partner, or oneself; complications from childbirth; combination of major life events).

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Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program: Mission and goals

- *Promotes knowledge* by providing small grants to outstanding faculty in crisis, so that they do not lose momentum in their research
 - Direct financial benefits to the University of Wisconsin-Madison by retaining outstanding faculty and maintaining their productivity;
 - Increased loyalty of faculty to a University that supports them as a whole person;
 - Enhanced ability to recruit new talent to a University which clearly values and supports its faculty; and
 - Enhanced reputation as a premiere research University when talented faculty are retained.

Pribbenow & Benting 2004; Sheridan, Pribbenow, Carnes, Handelsman, and Wendt 2015.

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A little history...

- Program conceived of by Drs. Jo Handelsman and Molly Carnes as part of a National Science Foundation ADVANCE grant.
 - Piloted under the name “Life Cycle Research Grant Program” from 2003-2004, with NSF and Graduate School funding.
- In 2005, Provost Peter Spear identified the Vilas Trust as a potential funder of the program, and invited WISELI to submit a proposal.
- First offered in 2005, with \$310,000 budget from Part B of the proffer.
- Program not funded by Vilas Trust in 2009 and 2020. The UW-Madison campus provided funds in these years.

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VLCP reviewers

- Arts & Humanities
 - Ceci Ford, English, 2005-2007
 - Jane Zuengler, English, 2007-2012
 - Jim Escalante, Art, 2013-2018
 - Thomas DuBois, German, Nordic & Slavic Languages, 2019-Present
- Physical Sciences
 - Amy Wendt, Electrical & Computer Engineering, 2005-Present
- Biological Sciences
 - Nancy Mathews, Nelson Institute, 2005-2013
 - Katrina Forest, Bacteriology, 2014-2016
 - Molly Carnes, Medicine, 2015
 - Nicole Perna, Genetics, 2017-Present
- Social Sciences
 - Jennifer Sheridan, WISELI, 2005-Present
- Evaluator
 - Christine Pribbenow, WCER, 2007-Present

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VLCP selection process

- Application questions:
 - Why is this a critical juncture in your career?
 - What is the life event you are experiencing, and how has it affected your research progress?
 - How will the requested funds help you through the crisis and enhance your research program?
 - What are the costs/consequences of not receiving the funding?
- Applicants must explicate BOTH the “life event” and “critical career juncture” criteria.
- Three rounds of application review a year, to account for unexpected “life events” and to maximize the flexibility of the awards.
- Approximately 61% of applications are funded, in part or in whole.

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Information about applicants

	All Faculty	Applications	Awards
Total N	2292	430	264
Individuals	2292	329	243
Gender	40% women	63% women	68% women
Race/ethnicity*	26% nonwhite 10% URM 12% WOC	24% nonwhite 14% URM 17% WOC	23% nonwhite 16% URM 18% WOC
Rank	Assistant: 26% Associate: 20% Full: 55%	Assistant: 40% Associate: 24% Full: 36%	Assistant: 44% Associate: 23% Full: 33%
Time in Rank (at time of application)		Assistant: 3.7 years Associate: 4.3 years Full: 10.0 years	Assistant: 4.0 years Associate: 4.6 years Full: 9.6 years
Division	A&H: 17% Bio Science: 32% Phy Science: 24% Soc Science: 27%	A&H: 26% Bio Science: 29% Phy Science: 14% Soc Science: 31%	A&H: 26% Bio Science: 27% Phy Science: 13% Soc Science: 35%

* **URM** includes faculty who identify as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian, or 2 or more races. **Nonwhite** includes all URM faculty plus those who identify as Asian. **WOC** are nonwhite faculty who also identify as women.

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Why do people apply? Life Events

	Applications**	Awards
Total N	380	264
Total events mentioned*	533	328
Own health	31.0%	32.1%
Child-related	22.5%	23.3%
Parent-related	19.7%	19.0%
Spouse/partner-related	8.6%	8.6%
Household-related	8.1%	8.6%
Workplace-related	6.8%	4.6%
Miscellaneous	3.4%	4.0%

*One-third of applicants cite multiple "life events."

** Reapplications removed.

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Why do people apply? Critical Career Junctures

	Assistant		Associate		Full	
	Applications	Awards	Applications	Awards	Applications	Awards
Total N	137	109	100	70	143	85
Total junctures mentioned*	147	118	120	87	152	92
Next career step	83.7%	83.9%	31.7%	33.3%	2.6%	4.4%
Stalled projects/low productivity	8.2%	8.5%	27.5%	26.4%	44.7%	47.8%
Funding-related	2.7%	2.5%	24.2%	24.1%	30.3%	27.2%
New projects	0.7%	0.9%	8.3%	10.3%	11.8%	13.0%
Research group/lab issues	0.7%	0.9%	3.3%	4.6%	6.6%	6.5%
Miscellaneous	4.1%	3.4%	5.0%	1.2%	4.0%	2.0%

**7% of Assistant, 20% of Associate, and 6% of Full rank applicants cite multiple "critical career junctures"*

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VLCP outcomes

	Awardees	Non-Awardees
Total N	264	148
Time to tenure	7.1 years	7.0 years
Time to full	7.0 years	7.5 years
Enter leadership	20.5%	19.6%
Major campus award	19.5%	17.1%
Non-retirement attrition	21.2%	20.3%
Left within 5 years of application*	14.0%	12.2%
Left within 10 years of application*	19.3%	20.3%
Length of time stayed after application (among those who left*)	4.8 years	4.5 years

Dataset removes reapplications but retains multiple applications/awards. None of these outcomes are statistically significant.

* Non-retirement attrition

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In the words of the recipients...

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Analysis of evaluation reports

- Each year, WISELI's evaluator (Dr. Christine Maidl Pribbenow) asks VLCP recipients a number of questions about their experience with the program. The Trustees are sent a copy of this report annually. Responses are anonymized.
- 18 years of reports (2006-2023) were coded and analyzed for common themes for outcomes associated with the awards that are consistent across the entire time span:
 - Instrumental to achieving tenure
 - Enables future achievement
 - Provided psychological support
 - Impact beyond the faculty member
 - Decreases attrition
 - Example of UW-Madison at its best
 - Continued stigma

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Instrumental to achieving tenure

- “The combination of this grant and an extension of my tenure clock has made a tremendous difference in my scholarship quantity and quality. I go up for tenure soon. I won’t really know how much of a difference they’ve made until I get tenure (or not). However, I am feeling much better about my prospects.” (2006 recipient; she did achieve tenure)
- “It is absolutely no exaggeration for me to tell you that I wouldn’t have gotten tenure without the Vilas Life Cycle Award.” (2011 recipient)
- “Based on the research during the VLCP...the tenure process went extremely smoothly, and my candidacy received unanimous votes both from the Executive Committee of my own department and from the Divisional Committee, with some mention of high merit. My promotion to Associate Professor thus went into effect in the summer of 2016. And I have published plenty since then.” (2016 recipient)
- “The risk was in not getting tenure, or potentially in being so exhausted that I just quit, which I did think about quite a bit. The funds helped to feel valued and supported at UW-Madison, which has contributed to being more motivated to stay.” (2018 recipient)

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Enables future achievement

- “These funds allowed me to establish three projects...[and] a new research agenda. It is an area that is more likely to receive funding from external agencies in the future.” (2007 recipient)
- “I finished my first book, and presented some results from this project in major conferences, and prepared manuscripts for publication. One of the papers has been published in an edited book. Meanwhile, I applied for and received other funds.” (2014 recipient)
- “Without the support I feel I may very well have had to close my lab. Now I have 5 federally-funded grants.” (2015 recipient)
- “I published a high-profile paper that simply would not have happened without this grant. This has opened up invitations for more collaborations and for presentations at other universities.” (2020 recipient)

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Provided psychological support

- “The grant gave me the space to continue my work and it also gave me the confidence to get back to my writing after my recuperation. Thus it was important to me both financially (funding the research) and emotionally.” (2006 recipient)
- “The grant didn’t just help with my research. It really was the catalyst to an entirely new and reinvigorated approach to every aspect of my work life (and personal life, frankly.) I feel like a new and better person as a result of this grant.” (2015 recipient)
- “Receiving the VLCP funds was an emotionally supportive act. Initially, the funds were an affirmation that inspired me to keep trying...the funds gave me support and encouragement; it was a tremendous boost just knowing that UW valued me enough to invest in me.” (2019 recipient)
- “The Life Cycle funds greatly alleviate distress and improved the morale of the entire lab.” (2022 recipient)

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Impact beyond the faculty member

- “A terrific outcome was that it resulted in funding a graduate student who otherwise would have been a TA. This gave him wonderful research experience that he will use in his research and it also gave me access to some technical skills that I would not have had otherwise.” (2006 recipient)
- “The funding allowed my student to complete her PhD...She is now a postdoc at...University in the top lab in my field. Her career indirectly boosts mine.” (2015 recipient)
- “Because [the postdoc hired with VLCP funds] was able to stay in the lab and complete projects, she has been able to secure two grants. Without the funding, she would have had to look for a new lab and a new project, delaying her career by several years.” (2016 recipient)
- “I was able to maintain my grant competitiveness. 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.” (2017 recipient)

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Decreases attrition

- “This Professorship is important in the retention of women, faculty of color, and faculty who come from low-income background who may be more likely to have family responsibilities and distractions that keep them from tenure.” (2005 recipient)
- “Without [the VLCP], I am convinced that I would have endured a personally frustrating and institutional taxing period, and then have opted for an early retirement. Instead, my laboratory is flourishing today.” (2011 recipient)
- “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.” (2012 recipient)
- “It’s no exaggeration: the Vilas funding saved my career at UW-Madison. Not only did it allow me to get my research program back on track ...I was able to transition to new research interests.” (2013 recipient)
- “Vilas 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.” (2019 recipient)

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Example of UW-Madison at its best

- “This program generates a feeling of commitment to this institution, and a desire and willingness to give back, to help ensure that others benefit from similar institutional support in the future. . . I have told others about the grant in the context of explaining why I think UW-Madison is such an exceptional institution. For example, I have mentioned it to job candidates as an illustration of how this institution takes seriously life cycle issues and is genuinely humane and supportive in not just accommodating but actively supporting faculty through periods where personal and professional life pressures may be unnaturally intense or exacerbated by unforeseen health issues.” (2007 recipient)
- “I wish the UW talked about this program more. It’s a selling point for our culture and an indication of the way that a workplace can treat [people].” (2011 recipient)
- “I describe [the VLCP] as one of the best examples of the unique pro-faculty policies of UW-Madison. I have colleagues at..other institutions...and all are highly impressed by the progressiveness of UW-Madison’s faculty policies. They are all jealous of how well UW treats its faculty! (2014 recipient)
- “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.” (2017 recipient)
- “Colleagues at other universities are astonished this grant exists, and view UW-Madison in a more favorable light.” (2019 recipient)
- “When I talk with prospective tenure track faculty during the hiring process, I mention the Vilas Life Cycle grant as an example of the range of support for research that is available at UW-Madison. I say that it is reassuring to know that the UW has resources to support research at all different career stages and for different needs.” (2022 recipient)

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Continued stigma

- “I haven’t told others about the grant. I’m still embarrassed that I needed to apply for it, but I am very grateful to have received it.” (2010 applicant)
- “In my department, we do not share personal information, so I have not discussed the nature of the award with my colleagues.” (2013 recipient)
- “I appreciated that my description of need was confidential, and that I didn’t have to share it with my senior colleagues.” (2015 recipient)
- “Certainly, I would not have felt comfortable sharing the combination of life events with others in my department because I wouldn’t want to be seen as a ‘complainer’ or ‘whiner.’ To this day, I have never told anyone in my department about all the adverse life events I experienced during the 2-year period that led me to apply for this program because having a façade of invincibility is so critical to maintaining the appearance of being talented and successful, particularly for young women of color whose role in the University as a tenure track faculty is always open to scrutiny.” (2022 recipient)

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What else can be done—suggestions from awardees

- More funding so that “routine” pregnancies/adoptions can be included
- Allow course buyouts, semesters off with pay
 - Don’t penalize for time away!
- Allow funding for childcare while on research/conference travel
- Protect faculty from heavy service obligations
- More support and empathy from leaders, senior colleagues, chairs
- Consider “work” events that also can impede research progress
- Consider other tracks (CHS, Scientist) for support
- VLCP application process can help steer all applicants to additional supports on campus

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Issues faced by the review committee

- End-of-career as a critical career juncture
- Workplace-related “life events”
- Question of how work would have been funded in the absence of this program
- Department chairs and/or mentoring committees co-opting the application process
- Communication with applicants who did not receive an award

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THANK YOU for your continued support of
the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program!

Questions?

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