

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 sections¹:

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

SECTION I: ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS

The 2023/24 academic year marks the 19th year of Vilas Life Cycle Professorships at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) program is administered by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Inclusion in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute (WISELI), as authorized by the Office of the Provost. The Vilas Trustees awarded \$624,278 for the program in 2023/24. For this year, all funds must be expended within the fiscal year; no grants were pre-awarded from the FY23 round.

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. 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.

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

- **Nicole Perna.** Dr. Perna is a Professor of Genetics, and represents the Biological Sciences Division.

Applicants and Awards

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 2022/23, we offered three rounds of funding.

- **Round 1.** Deadline June 9, 2023. Applications received: 15. Total amount requested: \$515,520. Applications funded: 9. Total amount awarded: \$268,149.
- **Round 2.** Deadline September 29, 2023. Applications received: 14 (2 were reapplications). Total amount requested: \$498,130. Applications funded: 9. Total amount awarded: \$222,244.
- **Round 3.** Deadline December 29, 2023. Applications received: 8 (1 was a reapplication). Total amount requested: \$189,489. Applications funded: 6. Total amount awarded: \$133,630.

- **SUMMARY, 2023/24:** Applications received: 34 (3 were reapplications). Total amount requested (minus reapplications): \$1,051,586. Applications funded: 24. Total amount awarded: \$624,023.

Recipient Demographics

Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants are very diverse (34 unique applicants in 2023/24):

	Applicants	Recipients
GENDER		
Female	20	14
Male	14	10
RACE/ETHNICITY²		
Faculty of Color	15	12
Majority Faculty	19	12

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.

TITLE		
Assistant Professor	14	11
Associate Professor	5	5
Professor	15	8
Permanent PI/Academic Staff*	0	0
DIVISION		
Biological Sciences	8	6
Physical Sciences	4	2
Social Sciences	9	6
Arts & Humanities	13	10

* 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 2023/24

Issues surrounding the inability to make awards that span a fiscal year boundary continue to be problematic for many faculty, as the summer months are important times for research. In addition, the graduate student stipend minimum has been raised and the \$40,000 ceiling is no longer enough to fund a 50% RA or PA.

On October 23, 2023, Dr. Amy Wendt and Dr. Jennifer Sheridan had the privilege of meeting with the Vilas Trustees, and presenting a summary report of the important outcomes of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program. We valued the opportunity to thank the Trustees for their commitment to this unique program, which not only supports individual faculty but also enhances the reputation of the UW-Madison across the U.S.

SECTION II: IMPACT AND OUTCOMES OF THE VLCP

At the end of the year in which they received the funds (2022/23), the recipients were asked to identify benefits to receiving the grants and to describe any impacts or outcomes on their professional lives, both positive and negative. They were also invited to provide their perspective on the overall value of the program and to suggest improvements to it. This next section is a compilation of the responses to a structured list of questions by a sample of VLCP recipients (n=21).

Reasons for Applying

Similar to previous years’ recipients, it was never due to one issue or event that caused the applicant to apply. Rather, it was several crises that happened simultaneously while the applicant was in a critical juncture of their career. Although this round occurred during the years of the pandemic, only four

specifically mentioned the effects of COVID along with their other challenges. When describing this, they noted how it exacerbated the issues, it was not the cause of the issues per se.

Many applicants were the primary caregivers of sick children or parents, and/or were suffering from their own physical or mental health issues. A few experienced the death of children, spouses or parents, and were dealing with the aftermath and consequences of these losses. Many talked about having no support or the inability to get support due to the pandemic. One grantee was deployed multiple times for military service. Others suffered from accidents, divorces, and the care of young children. In short, multiple factors led to their applications.

Risk of Leaving UW-Madison

Approximately half of the respondents said they were at risk for leaving their positions and the UW. Tenured faculty members indicated that they considered taking a leave of absence and perhaps, leaving the UW altogether. A faculty member, who was of retirement age, noted the value of these funds and their ability to continue to be productive:

While I was not at risk for leaving UW-Madison for another institution, I had been seriously contemplating retiring from academic life. The Vilas funds gave me the time and resources to find alternative activities that helped me remain active in research within the confines of my abilities.

The pre-tenured faculty noted that they definitely considered leaving had they not been able to revive their research programs and turn their professional lives around.

Approximately half of the grantees said they were not considering leaving and in fact, felt loyal to the UW because of things like the VLCP. One grantee noted:

I have to say the VLC support has been a bright spot that has kept me here. That and a campus teaching award let me know that, at least at the campus level, UW can be a very supportive environment.

I have spoken about it with colleagues in my department as an amazing resource for faculty who are at critical junctures in their career and whose research productivity has been disrupted by personal life events. I have spoken about it with colleagues outside UW-Madison as something that distinguishes our university and a prominent example of why I feel valued and supported at UW-Madison and want to spend my career here.

A few noted that they are “not out of the woods” yet and are waiting to hear about potential funding:

If my laboratory cannot be sustained financially through extramural funding, I do not see myself being able to stay at UW-Madison. Funds like these were absolutely essential for allowing me to persist in the current funding climate. I am not out of the woods yet -- if my current pending R01 isn't funded, I will need to cut my workforce, and I don't think my research program will recover.

Impact on Research Funding and Scholarship

All of the recipients were able to identify ways in which their careers were significantly impacted by receiving this grant. Most described using the funds to get preliminary or pilot data that allowed them to

submit proposals for grants and write manuscripts or chapters for books. These grant submissions have led to millions of dollars of grants that support the grantees and others who work with them. Examples of these outcomes are provided below.

The funds facilitated the generation of preliminary data that I used in an application for an R01 grant in February 2023, allowed those data to be presented to colleagues and potential grant reviewers at a conference, and gave me time to write a key manuscript that will be necessary for future applications for funding. The pending grant was well-received by the reviewers, garnered an excellent score, and has a good chance of being funded by the NIH once pay lines are finalized for FY24.

During the last two years, I was able to collect data needed to finish up two manuscripts. Other life events mentioned above have caused my progress to be very slow, but I hope to publish soon the data I gathered that would not have been possible without these funds.

The VLCP grant supported me to get several new grants, as a PI and Co-PI/Co-I. As Co-I, I received two new NIH R01 grants, which total about \$5.2 million. As PI, I received one new NSF grant, which total about \$700,000.

I was able to conduct a complete study with the Vilas awards that will lead to multiple publications and provided critical preliminary data for a future grant submission, planned for summer 2024. It also led to an opportunity to develop new interdisciplinary collaborations and new partnerships with research sites.

I was able to develop relationships with new collaborators and new research sites as a result of the funds. I was able to secure more data than expected during the award, which both raised new questions that need to be addressed before submitting a grant, but also helped identify several additional potential future research projects.

The Vilas life cycle grant allowed me to start a new line of research which has, in part, reinvigorated my research program. The grant helped generate preliminary data for a successful NSF proposal and has generated new ideas in my lab that have resulted in several conference and journal papers, one of which was awarded best technical paper at the [NAME] Conference (July 2023).

Without funding for a part-time researcher, I would have been unable to manage student research interns, apply for even small grants, or complete and submit any

manuscripts. I would not have been able to complete the three small grants, so I would not have the exploratory data to support larger grant proposals. I don't believe I could return to productivity without VLCP support.

Investment in UW Faculty and Staff

Many of the respondents noted that they felt the UW was invested in them due to this program. Not only was the investment felt psychologically, the funds allowed for a continuation of their work and decreased the likelihood of their research ending and their labs folding.

The VLCP funds were extremely important for me to progress professionally. From a practical standpoint, it allowed me to keep researchers onboard to continue data collection for ongoing projects. This allowed me to have pilot data for grant applications. From a psychological perspective, the funds allowed me to focus my mental energy on writing new grants. If I hadn't had the VLCP funding, I would have instead focused on how to slow/shut down my lab due to lack of funds.

Besides the positive impacts on their professional lives, they also felt it psychologically:

*I've told everyone who would listen about this grant. I've described it as a lifeline to support faculty when "s*** gets real", as they say. I've encouraged one colleague to apply who is having health issues and looking at a funding cliff and I could hear him exhale with relief that this exists. Just the idea of it is comforting in my view and reflects so well on UW-Madison as an institution that recognizes its faculty as humans.*

Others felt positive feelings, yet also noted that these are a temporary fix:

The funds are never enough to really sustain a lab until the next grant comes in -- it's just enough to keep it from closing down. It's hard to sustain cutting-edge research on patchwork budgets because it makes it impossible to generate preliminary data and sustain momentum. Once the lab shrinks, it's difficult to come back, even though the science is ultimately fundable. The Vilas investments in individual investigators in need is precisely the kind of assistance needed to keep creative, high-functioning individuals in the scientific workforce at the university. It has been critical for my success, and it has given me confidence that I will get through this very challenging time.

I feel that there is a perception that the grant is meant to be completely transformative for faculty in many fields. The realistic use of these funds in any experimental field can only really be a stop gap to help transition from one type of activity to another. Additionally, the impact of this grant on faculty in experimental fields has to be measured well beyond the year of the grant. Surveys like this should be taken at other intervals beyond the period of funding.

Impact on Others

The impact and investment on human resources goes beyond the primary grant recipient. The funds are often used to retain or hire new staff—undergraduate students, graduate students, postdoctoral

researchers, and technicians. The following comments describe the positive effects and impact that the VLCP has had on others.

The grant has very positively affected others working with me. My student was able to stay in my lab because of the Vilas grant. She was able to carry out experiments that facilitated a training grant slot for her, and that has been terrific for her experiments, training, and career development.

This grant allowed my lab manager/research specialist to keep her job until I got another grant. This allowed her to have more job stability in her position.

As a result of the funding, I was able to more easily help colleagues in collaboration without worrying about running out of funds myself. I was able to prepare materials for a colleague which could lead to a collaboration. I was able to extend an existing collaboration by working on experiments which may have been out of my reach in terms of resources. This keeps important connections viable for future collaboration.

Aside from my immediate family, it has positively affected one undergraduate and one graduate student who I have been able to retain as research/project assistants (using other funding). The volume of materials I collected was so great that I required assistance processing, cataloging, and screening them for relative value. The hours that my assistants have devoted to these tasks have provided them with valuable financial support and have further contributed to their professional development as [researchers]—something for which they have repeatedly thanked me. They would not have derived these benefits had I not collected the materials I did thanks to the grant.

The grant has certainly positively affected my remaining graduate student, who was able to complete the studies that he had embarked on and helped prepare him for an academic career. Without it, he would have likely had to finish with a less ambitious academic project and would have most likely left academia for industry.

I think it has benefited those around me in that I was able to support a doctoral student to work with me as a research assistant, and that student, other students working with me, and my faculty collaborators have all benefited from my enhanced ability to move our mutual projects forward. My student and faculty co-authors are positively affected because I was able to prepare and submit abstracts for conference presentations and manuscripts for publication, and able to clarify my next steps and identify funding sources.

The Value of the VLCP

All of the recipients recognized the value of the VLCP. They note that this program is unique in that it supports faculty and staff when they need it most. The effects of this are seen in the following quotes, in which many describe how they share the program's value and its support.

There is so little support for individuals experiencing life events, and such taboos about discussing life events, that I think the Vilas Award program is necessary and unique in its ability to provide meaningful support. Events that happen personally need attention that is usually impossible to garner. Work circumstances usually get plenty of attention, and it seems like something that the institution should be handling as part of regular operations.

I totally appreciate that some recipients don't want it known by their colleagues, but I see the positive reflection on the campus far outweighing how being a recipient reflects on me as a professional. It is so incredibly helpful to have this opportunity to apply for support when events in your personal life become major obstacles in your professional life.

I've told colleagues about the VLCP grant, especially new hires and assistant professors on whose mentor committees I serve. I wanted them to know that a severe life event wouldn't necessarily derail their careers. They are always grateful to be made aware of the funding.

I think the Vilas Life Cycle Professorships are an essential resource that should be sustained and well supported. This program is an important investment and demonstration of support that I believe will pay dividends in terms of faculty resumed / enhanced productivity and commitment to remaining at UW-Madison. I think it would also help if the university had stronger policies to support faculty during major life events (e.g., better family and medical leave). The support I received during major life events came from kind and generous department leadership and colleagues (e.g., helping to cover my teaching when I wasn't well enough to teach), but better university policy would ensure that all faculty are well supported.

Suggestions for VLCP and Other Programs

The recipients were asked to provide suggestions that could be considered as additional supports for faculty and staff who find themselves in crises during their professional lives.

The University can develop shorter- and longer-term grants similar to VLCP, say a summer grant and a two-year grant. In the latter, I'm thinking about the time it takes to prepare federal grants for submission.

Departments should create policies that explicitly support faculty who have experienced disruptive major life events. This could include reduced committee work, reduce teaching load, and funds for student hourlies or a reader/grader. The policy should also explicitly state that the circumstances will not negatively impact annual reports, merit exercises, or PT considerations. I

understand that many departments do this informally, and perhaps some already have written policies. All departments could be compelled to adopt similar policies.

The VLCP funds are imperative, and the university should keep supporting this initiative. The university should also consider providing career coaching that is specifically designed for faculty. The coach could help folks learn to balance difficult times and their job responsibilities.

Provide course releases/leaves of absence as appropriate and supportable. Direct faculty to resources—to include this grant—that can aid faculty in mitigating and/or recovering from such events

One faculty member provided several suggestions and specifically highlighted the ways in which the culture could be improved:

- *Work to change the university and department cultures around caregiving and service.*
- *Give faculty real support. Support = funding.*
- *Root out misogyny/sexism and shine a bright light on it.*
- *Establish a university culture of acceptance (and not judgement or blame).*
- *Recognize that major life events are rarely resolved in less than a year (and may take longer than that). There's often support in the short-term, acute need situation, but little understanding that the needs can extend well beyond a single moment in time. The life events that caused me difficulty did not affect me substantially professionally until they delayed grant submissions for extramural funding. I am in need of support for those events more now than when they were occurring, but now the department has moved on and "forgotten" how severe and dangerous the crisis was.*

Grant Administration

Finally, the recipients had many positive comments about the process of applying for and receiving the grant. Many mentioned Jenn Sheridan, in particular.

Jenn Sheridan helped me with all aspects of applying for and receiving the grant. She communicated important information in a timely manner, answered my questions thoroughly, and helped me understand all aspects of grant administration. She was so helpful and a tremendous support.

I really appreciated that the application was easy to complete and focused more on reasons the funds were needed to support research rather than requiring an extensive and lengthy research proposal. This was critical to making it possible for me to apply as I did not have the bandwidth at the time of application to write a lengthy proposal.

The whole process was very streamlined, which is important and I was struck by how compassionate Jennifer was throughout and really willing to go to great lengths to make sure I could get the right mix of resources to fit what I thought I needed. She was also great about indicating flexibility in case my needs changed, which they did after I was relieved of my admin position. It was all very professional and discreet for those that need that aspect of the award process. I am so impressed and grateful to her for that.

I cannot be more effusive in my praise for Dr. Jennifer Sheridan, who was incredibly helpful and prompt at every step of this process.

The application process is well administered. The grant application is straightforward, and the budget restrictions are simple and understandable. All my questions were answered almost immediately.

A few provided suggestions to the program:

The grant application process was straightforward. For me, it was even a bit cathartic, as I had to describe my life challenges that I hadn't described in detail to many others. My only criticism relates to the slightly strange need to break the award into two parts, due to the fact that the award period did not fit within the Vilas standard fiscal year. It made the tracking of the award funding challenging and resulted, in my case, in an overage that I had to cover with discretionary funds. Not a big deal, but a bit cumbersome in my opinion.

Overall, the grant application and notification process were very clear. The only constructive feedback I have is that the funds are a little difficult to keep track of when they don't appear in WISER.

The application, notification, and administration process were smooth. My biggest hurdle in the application process was the decision to apply. I wondered whether my life events were big enough / bad enough / exceptional enough to warrant applying. I wonder if others might also feel embarrassed or unsure about whether their situation is the type of situation that the Vilas Life Cycle Professorships are intended for. I had seen an email about the program but didn't consider applying. It took my chair and a faculty colleague encouraging me to apply for me to consider that I should apply. I think it would be great to do outreach to encourage chairs / faculty to encourage other faculty experiencing major life challenges to apply, in case others may also feel unsure and need direct encouragement in order to consider applying.

While the grant application process was fairly straightforward in retrospect, it can still be a bit daunting in the moment. Life events often unfold fairly quickly and unexpectedly, and it can be hard to try to foresee how things are going to proceed. It was very helpful to talk to the program staff to better understand how to frame the application, but all applicants may not understand how to navigate this.

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.