

Evaluation of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorships Program  
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This report details the process and outcomes for the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, funded by the Estate of William F. Vilas. The report is presented in three sections to the Vilas Trustees and the Office of the Provost:

**Section I:** Administrative details of the program.

**Section II:** The experiences of the recipients of Vilas Life Cycle Professorships.

**Section III:** Research progress of the recipients (2006/07 and 2007/08 cohorts).

The public will have access to only Sections I and II.

### Section I: Administrative Details

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 generously awarded \$372,000 for the program in 2007, a 20% increase over the 2006 funding level. 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 to be used for the recipient's salary and individual awards are not to exceed \$30,000. 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.

WISELI has enlisted the following faculty/staff to read applications and make funding decisions:

- **Jennifer Sheridan.** An assistant scientist and a sociologist by training, Dr. Sheridan represents the social studies division. Dr. Sheridan has administered the original Life Cycle Research Grant (LCRG) program since its inception, as well as serving on the review panel from the beginning.
- **Amy Wendt.** A professor in the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department, Dr. Wendt represents the physical sciences division. Dr. Wendt has served on the review panel of the former LCRG program since its inception.
- **Jane Zuengler.** Dr. Zuengler is a professor of English, and represents the arts & humanities division. Dr. Zuengler replaced Dr. Cecilia Ford on the review panel.
- **Nancy Mathews.** Dr. Mathews is an Associate Professor in the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, and represents the biological sciences division. Dr. Mathews is herself a former recipient of the original LCRG program.

Because flexibility is of utmost importance to faculty who are experiencing life crises, we established three deadlines for applications for the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program for 2007/08. Due to the urgent nature of the proposals we received in Rounds 1 and 2, we canceled the 3<sup>rd</sup> (December) round of awards, as the funds were all allocated.

- **Round 1.** Deadline June 1, 2007. Applications received: 9. Total amount requested: \$248,500. Applications funded: 6. Total amount awarded: \$125,643.
- **Round 2.** Deadline September 28, 2007. Applications received: 10. Total amount requested: \$236,316. Applications funded: 5 (with 2 applications deferred to next year). Total amount awarded: \$115,561 (\$43,990 of this sum will be spent in the 2008/09 academic year should the Estate fund another year of awards).

- **SUMMARY, 2007/08:** Applications received: 19. Total amount requested: \$484,816. Applications funded: 11. Total amount awarded: \$241,204 (\$43,990 of this sum will be spent in the 2008/09 academic year should the Estate fund another year of awards).

Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants and recipients are very diverse:

	<b>Applicants</b>	<b>Recipients</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	15	10
Male	4	1
<b>Race/Ethnicity*</b>		
Faculty of Color	6	4
Majority Faculty	13	7
<b>Title</b>		
Assistant Professor	9	6
Associate Professor	4	3
Professor	6	2
Permanent PI/Academic Staff	0	0
<b>Division</b>		
Biological Sciences	8	5
Physical Sciences	1	0
Social Studies	6	6
Arts & Humanities	4	0

\* Faculty of Color are those whose “heritage code” is listed as Black, Asian, Native American, or Hispanic in University records. Majority Faculty are listed as “Other”.

*New Issues Arising in 2007.* The large number of funded applications from 2006/07 depleted this year’s funds faster than we anticipated. Thus, we were unable to fund all of the worthy applications in 2007/08, and in addition we canceled the December round of competition. These actions should allow us to stay on budget for 2008/09, as very little of the 2008/09 budget was allocated due to the December cancellation. If the number of faculty in need causes us to spend faster than expected again in 2008, we may have to permanently cancel the December round of awards, or request another budget increase.

## **Section II: Experiences of Vilas Life Cycle Professors**

Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) recipients were very positive about the program and grateful to receive support during a difficult and critical time in their lives. They came from a wide variety of fields of study, and had a range of complicated events that negatively affected their personal and professional lives. Receiving a Vilas Life Cycle Professorship significantly improved their various situations, and most reported a positive outcome that would not have been possible without the extra funds the grant provided. This evaluation highlights the recipients’ experiences with the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program.

### **The VLCP program helps people maintain career success and productivity**

The most commonly reported outcome of receiving a Vilas Life Cycle Professorship was its effect on the recipients' career trajectories. Particularly, it allowed them to keep up productivity or "get back on track" when a personal crisis threatened to derail their careers.

James<sup>1</sup> explains his situation:

The program was very helpful to me. It allowed for me to continue my research while I did not have the time and will to write grant proposals. Eventually, I got more grant funding from NSF.

Margaret describes a similar experience:

The grant supported some [research activities] that I would not otherwise have been able to accomplish. I feel that my research trajectory is back on track.

Richard also benefited greatly from the VLCP support and the continued operation of his lab:

Because of the grant, we were able to continue functioning, which allowed us to continue publishing at a crucial time in the research program of our laboratory. . . . Being able to maintain our research program allowed us to have sufficient preliminary data to submit competitive grant applications, which led to [two major] NIH [grants].

Respondents often mentioned that had they not received the funding, they would have suffered a series of setbacks in a sort of "snowball effect," damaging their careers, and their students', tremendously. Richard comments:

The events occurred at a crucial time in which our research investment was starting to pay off. Having to seriously reduce my research operations at that time would have resulted in a significant loss of our research potential. Without the grant we would have had to dismiss a PhD student, which would have seriously hurt her career in biomedical research, seriously affected the lab morale, and jeopardized our ability to continue functioning to produce scientific reports and obtain additional funding. . . . I was also at the time coming up for tenure and having to dismiss PhD students because of lack of funding could have potentially triggered a series of perceptions where I may have not been offered tenure (I did get tenure).

Margaret and Linda explain what would have happened to their programs had they not received funding:

Certainly, my research would have fallen even farther behind than it already was. I doubt I would have been able to complete enough new data collection to produce the 5+ manuscripts that have already been published/accepted for publication, and I certainly would not have felt the intellectual freedom to explore new theoretical paths.

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I probably would not have been able to get much done beyond teaching my courses. I would not have received the additional funding from [funding institution], not been able to return to my [research] project, and not compiled data for [a different] project.

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to protect individuals' identities.

Some respondents were in danger of leaving UW-Madison. Patricia explains that in the absence of VLCP support, she might have moved out-of-state:

Without the extra help made possible by this grant, I would probably have explored possibilities for either an unpaid leave of absence or a move to a job closer to my [family] in [another state]. The latter option was really starting to look like the best thing for me to do at the time, even though it would have almost definitely meant a downward move in my career trajectory.

Linda describes how she might have lost her job:

Without the ability to return to research I would have lost my job because I am an untenured assistant professor. The funds helped me to return to research, which is the only possible way that I could hope to ever keep my job.

As described above, the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program provided support to faculty at critical junctures in their career – times when they were untenured or between major grants and were unsure about what the future held for their research programs. Happily, the extra support sometimes did even more than keeping them afloat; some respondents mentioned that the grant enabled them to explore new areas of research that significantly *advanced* their careers. Patricia, Margaret, and Linda relate their experiences:

During the time I had a PA funded by this program, a colleague offered me the opportunity to take on a completely new research project, using a not-yet-released public dataset, and complete with assistance from one of his graduate students. I would never have even considered taking this on were it not for having the Project Assistant supported by the Vilas Award helping me with my primary research agenda during this period. With a semblance of balance restored to my personal/professional life, I agreed to take the new project on. It was a great opportunity to pursue a new line of research that capitalized on my previous research experience while allowing me to explore a new direction for my research program.

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I was able to train a new cohort of graduate and undergraduate students to work on another and radically different lab project and appreciably expand data collection and analysis, which has already resulted in two papers in edited volumes, three forthcoming in edited volumes, and will lead to papers in peer-reviewed journals and a comprehensive monograph. Surprising to me, the work accomplished during the time of the Vilas Life Cycle laid the foundation of a new theoretical framework to my research that I am now pursuing.

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These funds and [help from my research assistant] allowed me to establish/reestablish three projects. I worked on a new research agenda . . . an area of research in which I have become more interested [recently], and which I had not worked on since graduate school. It is also an area that is more likely to receive funding from external agencies in the future.

Many summed up the VLCP as providing a short-term boost that created a long-term outcome. Patricia's comment regarding this phenomenon follows:

I think this program represents precisely the kind of institutional response to a major life event that is most needed-- enough support to make sure that faculty can get through the acute phase of distress without sustaining major collateral damage to their longer-term career trajectories.

And Elizabeth provides a clear example:

With the support of the Vilas Life Cycle Grant I was able to fund one student for one year, during which time she obtained data that clinched an NIH grant that will support my lab for five years.

The Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program benefits others, too. As seen in the comments above, one very common way to use the VLCP funds was to hire a research assistant. They often performed basic research tasks that the award recipients were unable to do because of what was happening in their personal lives. In this arrangement, VLCP recipients got the help they needed, while the research assistants gained valuable skills and knowledge to advance them in their own careers. Some respondents provided examples of the VLCP award's direct influence. Michael and Elizabeth explain:

[The VLCP] also helps one of my students to focus on his research to finish his PhD thesis.

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If I had not received the [VLCP] grant, this student would probably have TAed (again!), which would have severely limited her productivity and possibly not enabled her to collect the data that she did.

### **The Vilas Life Cycle Professorship program is very valuable**

All respondents commented that the VLCP was a very valuable program. Some of their comments follow:

- The best.
- I appreciate this program a lot.
- Extremely high [value].
- Very high [value] . . . it fills a need that is not filled by other grants.
- Everyone I have spoken to thinks it is a great idea.
- Only positive [outcomes].

Many talked about it in relation to other major programs on campus that provide valuable support. Linda, Patricia, and Elizabeth provide the following comments:

I think this program may be even more valuable than the graduate school research competitions.

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I would put it on the top of any list. Certainly rivaling the Graduate School Fall Competition, which has been the other major program that has made a tremendous difference for my trajectory since arriving on campus.

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I think it's a fantastic opportunity for those of us facing life cycle-related challenges to get a break. Stoppage of the tenure clock for women giving birth is nice but it doesn't support students, fund the lab, get more papers out or do any of the things that actually help one achieve tenure. Financial

support can do all those things and thus can have a much larger impact on career success and satisfaction, which are necessary for retention.

Margaret talks about the program's value to the campus in more general terms:

I think the value of the Vilas Life Cycle program is higher than almost any other campus-based research support. All of the campus-based research support programs of which I am aware are, including the Vilas Life Cycle, highly competitive. However, with the other programs, a gap in productivity might negatively impact the evaluation of the application, or a proposal to complete a project that was already funded through internal sources is likely to be turned down. The Vilas Life Cycle program provides an invaluable service for people whose productivity and ability to complete projects in a timely fashion have been negatively affected by life experiences outside the norm.

Some respondents mentioned how personal issues and work activities intertwine, and that the grant greatly improved both aspects of their lives. Patricia and Elizabeth explain:

The award enabled me to hire a graduate student research assistant, which made it possible for me to continue advancing in my research while keeping up with daily obligations and coping with the acute sources of distress at home. As a result, when the home situation improved, I was able to quickly get back into stride and get papers written and submitted to journals. . . The funds alleviated the sense of immediate crisis enough to give me a better perspective on my situation.

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It enabled me to enjoy my time at home . . . and not be resentful of work.

As a result of receiving the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship support, Patricia talked about getting a sense that UW-Madison really cares about her as a person, and in turn she feels a renewed sense of commitment to the institution:

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. The distinction between "accommodation" and "support" that is embodied in this program is crucial, and it really sets it apart from the kinds of institutional responses to life cycle issues that are the current norm in American universities (not to mention other kinds of workplaces).

### **The process of applying for and receiving the grant was a positive experience**

Most respondents who discussed the process of applying for and receiving the grant reported that it was simple. Their various comments follow:

- The application is extremely flexible so that it can handle a wide variety of life events as well as the wide variety in disciplines and research areas.
- Easy, and absolutely the best administrators I have ever come across in my three years in the university.
- It is quite good. Jennifer Sheridan is really helpful.
- The notification process was prompt, respectful, and flexible.

The exception to the mostly positive comments came when respondents mentioned some difficulty related to the “statement of need,” due to that aspect of the process being wholly different than the typical approach to requesting research funds, as well as the sensitive and deeply personal nature of the situations that caused the need for funds. Margaret provides the following comment, with a positive note toward the end:

The application process was straightforward, but very painful and difficult to complete because it involved writing about hurtful and difficult personal experiences, and forced me to objectively confront and evaluate the negative impact on my career of [my situation]. Although difficult to write, I found that the process helped me to realize that I wasn’t a victim, and that I could jump start my research program again. I also knew that the proposal would be read and evaluated in the strictest confidence.

Patricia discusses how she had difficulty requesting funds based on need, especially when she had some doubt about whether she actually “deserved” the help. She explains that, looking back, applying for the VLCP was unquestionably the right decision:

Were it not for the extenuating circumstances of my situation, I would not have had the nerve to apply for this award. I barely had the nerve to apply as it was – I felt I was not deserving of help . . . and that even the extenuating circumstances my situation were not unusual enough to warrant asking for help. Even after writing the statement of need, I struggled until the last minute over whether to submit the application. I almost didn’t submit it. In retrospect, I can see that I really did need help, and that without it I would have made (and rationalized) poor decisions about my career.

## **Suggestions**

Finally, respondents gave suggestions for improving the VLCP program in the following areas:

1. **Improve the usefulness of the funds**
  - The funds were useful, but they were also designed solely for research. It would be helpful to acknowledge and figure out a way to also have some of the funds used for travel grants for minor children and/or their caretaker. The cost of finding care for my [child], and for arranging travel around his/her care, was really difficult. I wish I could have used some of my travel money to either bring him/her with me, and care for him/her myself, or towards funding care for him/her while I continued my research.
  - This grant is a great way to help faculty get back to research during major life events. It would be great to reduce their teaching/research load without financial penalty.
  - First, flexibility in work assignment is hugely beneficial. For example, because of the nature of my [life event], it was very difficult for me to lecture . . . for about a year.
2. **Publicize the VLCP’s existence to more people in need**
  - Grants such as these are excellent means to help people. Increased awareness for these possibilities amongst departmental chairs and heads of faculty mentoring committees would help.
3. **Provide more help for “routine” childbirth/adoption**
  - While understanding that limited resources must make a higher threshold for application for a Life Cycle Award necessary, ideally “routine” childbirth/adoption would also make one eligible for support. I suspect that many junior faculty who undergo the transition to parenthood would benefit tremendously from even limited support, but would not have the nerve to ask for it. If the threshold for applying were lowered to include “routine”

pregnancies and adoptions before tenure, or if this program could be linked in some way to the UW's institutional response to routine childbirth or adoption before tenure, it would be a tremendous accomplishment for this university.

- It should provide paid leave for childbirth and adoption for the primary caregivers.

### **Section III: Research Progress of Vilas Life Cycle Professors**

*Section III has been removed to protect the confidentiality of the VLCP recipients.*