

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 sections:

- Section I:** Administrative details of the program.
- Section II:** Experiences and outcomes of VLCP recipients.
- Section III:** Progress and highlights of recipient's scholarship and productivity.¹

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 2011/12, an increase of \$72,000 from the previous year. 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.

Review Panel

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

- **Jennifer Sheridan.** An associate 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 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.
- **Jane Zuengler.** Dr. Zuengler is a professor of English and Associate Chair of the department, and represents the Arts & Humanities Division. Dr. Zuengler replaced Dr. Cecilia Ford on the review panel in 2007.
- **Nancy Mathews.** Dr. Mathews is a Professor in the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, and represents the Biological Sciences Division. She became Director of the Morgridge Center for Public Service in 2010. Dr. Mathews is a former recipient of the original LCRG program.

Applicants and Awards

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

Because flexibility is of utmost importance to faculty who are experiencing life crises, we established three deadlines for applications for the VLCP program for 2011/12.

- **Round 1.** Deadline May 31, 2011. Applications received: 10. Total amount requested: \$292,415. Applications funded: 5. Total amount awarded: \$132,924 (\$6,106 of this sum will be spent in the 2012/13 academic year.)
- **Round 2.** Deadline September 30, 2011. Applications received: 5 new and 1 reapplication. Total amount requested: \$155,859 (not including reapplications.) Applications funded: 4. Total amount awarded: \$85,767 (\$34,332 of this sum will be spent in the 2012/13 academic year.)
- **Round 3.** Deadline December 30, 2011. Applications received: 9. Total amount requested: \$258,197. Applications funded: 4. Total amount awarded: \$103,292 (\$59,632 of this sum will be spent in the 2012/13 academic year.)

• **SUMMARY, 2011/12:** Applications received: 24 (plus 1 reapplication). Total amount requested: \$706,471 (does not include the 1 reapplication). Applications funded: 13. Total amount awarded: \$321,983 (\$100,070 of this sum will be spent in the 2011/12 academic year.)

Recipient Demographics

Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants are very diverse:

	Applicants	Recipients²
Gender		
Female	12	7
Male	12	6
Race/Ethnicity³		
Faculty of Color	5	0
Majority Faculty	19	13
Title		
Assistant Professor	8	4
Associate Professor	6	4
Professor	10	5
Permanent PI/Academic Staff	0	0
Division		
Biological Sciences	4	3

² One recipient applied twice, and is only included once in this table.

³ 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.”

Physical Sciences	4	2
Social Studies	5	2
Arts & Humanities	11	6

Issues Arising in 2011/12

No major issues arose in 2011/12. Dr. Nancy Mathews decided to remain on the review committee for the Vilas Life Cycle grants for the foreseeable future, as the mission of the program was so important to her.

Five faculty of color applied in 2011/12, but none were awarded grants. Three of the five were invited to resubmit their applications for a future round; two of them will definitely be resubmitting in May 2012, assuming funding. The third faculty member, who was invited to reapply, chose not to do so.

Section II: Recipient Outcomes and Experiences

The Vilas life cycle program has been evaluated every year in which funds are available. To conduct the evaluation, the previous year’s recipients are invited to complete a survey or interview of open-ended questions. For this report, nine faculty and staff members who received funds in 2010/11 were invited to complete the evaluation, and eight were able to do so. One faculty member, a 2009/10 recipient, was unable to complete the evaluation last year, but has done so subsequently. Her responses, as well as the other recipients’, are covered under the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects Research, and are reported herein.

The VLCP Serves to Retain UW Faculty and Staff

Similar to previous year’s results, the majority of the recipients reported their own and/or a family member’s illness as the primary reason for applying for funding. Yet in this cycle, approximately 2/3 of the recipients were at risk of leaving the University due to their situation, which is significantly greater than in previous years. They noted that without the funds, they would have ultimately done so.

For two assistant professors, the life situation occurred pre-tenure, which significantly hampered their ability to conduct research and publish at a level necessary to achieve tenure. One noted that although the actual event would not cause her to leave, not getting promoted would have done so:

I was not at any immediate risk of leaving UW-Madison. That is, the health issue on its own was not causing me to contemplate leaving UW-Madison. However, if I do not get tenure I will have to leave UW-Madison. Thus, to the extent that this grant helps me get tenure – and I believe it will – then it has prevented me from having to leave.

Since receiving the VLCP, the other assistant professor did get tenure. She notes:

This life event pretty much always puts me at risk for leaving UW-Madison, because of the nature of the life event. But I can say very confidently that the Vilas Life Cycle funds

made a huge difference at the juncture at which I received them...It is absolutely no exaggeration for me to tell you that I wouldn't have gotten tenure without the Vilas Life Cycle Award.

The VLCP was critically important for these former assistant professors, who are now associate professors with tenure. Yet at the same time, the importance for senior professors has not gone unnoticed, as reflected by this recipient's comment:

Without this funding, I would have had to let my specialist go (and thereby her organizational skills and productivity) and drastically reduce the size of our mouse colony, which is widely recognized as a unique resource in the cancer research community. Loss of these assets would have initiated a powerful downward spiral in my research program. Even if these losses had been for a relatively short period, the need to train a new person would have been a substantial drag on productivity and morale. Moreover, this would have occurred in conjunction with loss or dramatic reduction of my mouse colony. It takes months to reestablish a genetic line and begin to generate experimental animals. In addition, since we study cancer, many of our experiments take a long time for the mice to age sufficiently to develop disease. Dramatic reduction in colony size would therefore necessarily require terminating ongoing experiments. The key timing of the VLCP award allowed me to continue at a very critical juncture for me. Without it, I am convinced that I would have endured a personally frustrating and institutionally taxing period, and then have opted for an early retirement. Instead, my laboratory is flourishing today.

And finally, even those at the rank of associate professor found it invaluable:

The life event did put me at risk of ending my career at UW-Madison. I was quite ill and faced a funding gap for my research program. The funds really were invaluable in keeping me afloat and positioned to apply for other grants. Had I not received any support, the outcome could have been quite different because no support for my research program may have been 'the straw that broke the camel's back' in terms of my ability/willingness to continue in my chosen career path.

Used to Bridge a Productivity Gap

Similar to previous years' recipients, the majority of the participants (approximately 80%) used the funds to either hire or retain current personnel to help them continue their research, write additional grants, and publish. This "bridge funding" proved to be very beneficial, as many of the recipients noted a marked increase in their productivity and extramural support. Ultimately, the VLCP funds were used to apply for long-term grants:

Data derived from the use of these funds resulted in two publications presenting experiments to support an important new hypothesis to explain cancer progression. More importantly, new data was acquired to form the basis for a new extramural grant application.

We were able to supplement other funds and obtain meaningful results for a research project that otherwise might have failed. A publication has been accepted pending minor revisions... We have obtained larger scale funding through application to the [NAME] Committee to expand on the above work. Other applications for funding from NIH have received promising scores.

With the grace provided by this grant, we were able to complete 2 papers and prepare extremely strong grant applications, which received the highest scores from both the CDMRP and NIH. Without it, in combination with the harsh grant climate, the effective outcome of my situation would have been a grinding halt to our research progress. The resulting additional barriers to productive funded research, in combination with ongoing personal demands, may have well been insurmountable.

Finally, as suggested earlier, the funds provided faculty with the ability to be productive and close the gap between pre-tenure and tenure:

I used the funds to gain access to a large, nationally representative sample of individuals who took a survey I had designed. The publications that will stem from this research project (two publications in good journals) will play a large role in determining whether or not I get tenure. I will go up for tenure next year. Having the research projects that stemmed from this fund in the pipeline makes me feel a lot more confident about my ability to achieve tenure. I think they will put me over the edge and help me get tenure...I definitely would not have conducted this project without the funds – there is no way I could have afforded this study without the Vilas funds. Thus, I would be going up for tenure with two fewer publications, putting me at greater risk.

View of the VLCP Program

Overall, the VLCP program is viewed very positively. Most of the recipients discussed receiving this grant with their colleagues, yet were vague about why they received it to keep theirs or their family members' illnesses confidential. A few noted this tension:

I have not really discussed the grant with others very much. When I do, I discuss it as a career support/development grant. I don't know how others perceive it, but I see it as a necessary and useful tool to retain talented faculty in academia. I don't know how the department sees it; however, support from all sources is always welcome. I have colleagues who have also benefited from this grant. I have not sensed any disadvantage in receiving the funds.

It's a puzzling situation. I definitely have told others about this grant – and have actually used it as an illustration of the UW-Madison's family-friendly work environment. The 'life event' for which I received Vilas Life Cycle support involves a member of my family, and so for very good reasons the details have not been shared with many people. So the result is that other people in my department have been a bit confused about it. This confusion can itself be a bit upsetting to the recipient (at least, it was to me) but I'm not sure there's anything that you can do about that!

And another voiced concern about how people were supposed to apply for this grant in their department:

I have not personally told anyone about the grant, but the announcement is circulated widely in my department and college. The one disadvantage now, however, for applying for this grant in my department is that last year the department asked that people notify a departmental committee if they wished to apply for the grant. If I had to do that, I would have not applied, since I am not sure I would have liked to describe the details of my family and personal situation to a departmental committee.

Finally, when asked where the program falls in terms of its value on campus, the recipients noted:

This program is unique and fills an important niche among others on campus. During periods of crisis, it is possible to lose ground in research because of the need to devote time and energy to something else. The Vilas life cycle award provides that added relief, to enable what time one does have to be used most effectively for scholarship... For my case, the relatively small investment enabled me to become a contributor to the communal pot, rather than just a dependent. It would seem that it could do the same for others.

Very high value. I wish the UW talked about this program more, in fact. It's a selling point for our culture and an indication of the way that a progressive workplace can treat women if it wants to! Not that anybody, male or female, wants to be in a situation where they need the help this program gives – but lightning can and does strike us all.

They noted its effect on their self-esteem, “The award returned my sense of self-worth,” and suggested continuation of the program,

I think continuing this fund is critical! This fund is a great example of a concrete action the university can take to help faculty undergoing significant life events. For faculty who are pre-tenure, it would be nice to have a way to add time to the tenure clock without having to make the faculty member have to broadcast a personal health issue. I don't know how this could be accomplished, but adding time to my tenure clock might have been helpful – but I would have needed to share my health situation with my entire Executive Committee, which I did not want to do.

As noted in Section III, all of the VLCP grant recipients were able to continue their research programs and many applied for and received additional funding from other sources. They also completed books, publications, and other forms of scholarship consistent to their fields of study.

Section III: Research Progress and Scholarship Highlights

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