

Frequently Asked Questions

Is the Diagnostic Lab Professional Advancement Ladder (DLPAL) a system for rewarding work performance or for promoting professional staff?

The DLPAL is intended to provide an opportunity for professional advancement based on a composite level of clinical service, contributions and achievements across several areas of activities. Some of these activities will align directly with the job description and key responsibilities and some are “extracurricular” activities.

The DLPAL is a promotion program that, at the higher levels, affords a salary adjustment. This program complements, but is separate from the Pay for Performance, or “merit pay,” system in place at VUMC. Pay for Performance provides a mechanism to reward staff annually based on their job performance relative to their job descriptions and key functions.

Is the DLPAL a ranking system?

Promotion is not intended to rank staff as “good, better, and best” employees; rather it is a way to recognize those individuals who, in addition to being independent, competent, reliable, multi-skilled professionals, are individuals who also have acquired specialized expertise, have become a resource to their program, Department, and their professional communities, and have demonstrated professionalism and leadership beyond their basic job description.

Who is eligible to participate in the DLPAL?

The DLPAL is a clinical advancement program open to designated (when required, licensed as well) professional staff, in the Vanderbilt University Medical Center Diagnostic Laboratory departments. It includes the following staff: Medical Laboratory Scientist, Cytotechnologist, Cytogenetics Technologist, Histotechnologist, Medical Laboratory Technician, Cytotechnician, and Histotechnician.

How does the DLPAL allow for individual differences between staff members in their career development?

The behaviors and activities described under Level 2 are considered to be the standard expectations for all staff who work in the VUMC Diagnostic Laboratory departments. Beyond those standard expectations, individuals may additionally select to take on responsibilities and become involved in activities related to four defined categories: Technical Operations, Process/Quality Improvement (QI), Professionalism/Leadership and Education/Teaching. Those decisions are a natural consequence of individual interests and abilities. All staff who wishes to advance will need to indicate achievement with those activities that are starred under each professional category. However, within the categories of Technical Operations, Process/QI, Professionalism/Leadership and Education/Teaching, opportunities and interests are likely to vary and individual differences in activities listed and achievements in these areas are expected. Candidates may select to highlight all or only the minimum number of selected dimensions within

these categories in their advancement profile report. The expectation is not that “one size fits all”; rather that each individual has natural interests and abilities and these contributions are equally worthy. By supporting the individual variability, preference, and opportunities, the DLPAL encourages the development of a diverse team of laboratory professionals.

Can the candidates select the activities in the categories they want to emphasize in their DLPAL profile report?

Yes. It is important, however, to emphasize areas where there is past, present, and potential and continued involvement. The team leader or sponsor may help the candidate identify the best areas to highlight, but the report should present the career pathway the candidate has taken and the activities emphasized in the report should reflect that pathway.

How is DLPAL related to the Annual Performance Evaluation?

The annual performance evaluation is an entirely separate process from that of career advancement recognition. These processes are linked, in that the annual performance evaluations are considered to be the beginning point of the discussion about clinical advancement and candidates must have ratings of at least a “3” on all key functions of their jobs and six (6) points of the VUMC Credo to be considered for promotion. Key functions are based on the candidate’s current job description. Upon advancement, individual job descriptions will change to that of the new level, and may contain additional “department specific” key functions consistent with new expectations.

If certain activities are not in our current job description or not something that is available to us in our work setting, how can we demonstrate that we can do them?

Does a candidate have to already be performing all of the activities at the next level to be promoted to that level?

You do not necessarily have to be performing all the activities at the level you are seeking to advance to, but to meet criteria for advancement you should demonstrate readiness for responsibilities at that level.

Opportunities for performing certain activities will vary depending on the candidate’s current work assignment and job description and some kinds of activities cannot be done until the candidate has been promoted. For example, for Professionalism and Leadership, Level 2 technologists may be participating on a committee within a professional society where there were limited opportunities to lead a committee; but when applying for a Level 3 promotion a candidate may provide evidence to demonstrate he/she is competent and ready to begin leading (for example, by demonstrating skills in supervision of students). There is flexibility in the kinds of evidence candidates need to provide the Review Board across the various categories. In smaller labs, opportunities for leadership may be more limited than in larger labs, but leadership can be demonstrated in other avenues, such as through professional associations. Oftentimes candidates may already be performing most of the activities described at the level to which they are applying for

promotion by going slightly beyond their basic job expectations in technical operations, professional and leadership development, process/quality improvement, or education and teaching areas. That level of activity will be the impetus for team leaders to encourage pursuing promotion.

What is the time frame for the activities reported in the advancement petition?

In general, activities reported for advancement from Level 2 to 3 should occur no longer than two years ago and for advancement from Level 3 to 4 should occur no longer than three years ago. Any outstanding career achievements may be included, if pertinent, regardless of how recently they occurred.

Is advancement from Level 1 to Level 2 automatic?

No. Advancement to Level 2 occurs following the completion of 12 months of employment if the team leader has assessed that the individual has acquired the level of independence and competencies required to perform the Level 2 job description and appears to demonstrate the behaviors consistent with those listed under Level 2 in the DLPAL behavioral descriptors. In most cases, those targets should have been reached by the end of the first year of employment, but occasionally additional time is required for targets to be achieved. Level 1 and Level 2 are at the same pay grade; consequently there is no salary adjustment associated with advancement from Level 1 to Level 2.

What are the “standard” expectations at each Level?

The behavioral descriptors listed under Level 2 are the required expectations for all designated (when required, licensed as well laboratory staff with one year of experience. The expectations listed under Levels 3 and 4 are in addition to the required expectations.

Is advancement mandatory?

No. Advancement is an opportunity to encourage and recognize professional development and expertise. It is intended to provide both recognition and a salary adjustment; in addition, advancement beyond Level 2 is encouraged as an avenue for job satisfaction and recognition of the level of activity or achievement an individual has reached within the department.

Does “promotion” mean you are being recognized for already working at the target level, or is it for having demonstrated you are ready to work at that level?

Both. To be a candidate for promotion you should have shown the initiative to assume responsibilities and be involved in activities that are “above and beyond” your standard duties at your current level. By doing so, you have demonstrated you are prepared to assume the responsibilities, duties and increased demands of the next career level. You may be given increased release time to take on new tasks following promotion, but the need for and amount of release time given is up to your team leader and must be consistent with the operational needs of your work unit.

What are the expected timelines for career advancement?

In general, advancement from Level 1 to Level 2 is expected to occur after one (1) year of full-time equivalent employment experience. Advancement from Level 1 to Level 2 will be considered after three (3) years of full-time equivalent employment experience and advancement from Level 3 to Level 4 may be pursued only after five (5) years of full-time equivalent employment experience. Not all professional staff will choose to advance in these time frames for a variety of reasons.

Can I choose not to advance?

Certainly. Promotion is optional. This program is an opportunity and you will not be punished for not pursuing advancement. Your job performance will still be evaluated and rewarded through the annual “Pay for Performance” program at Vanderbilt.

Can you advance if you are a part-time employee?

Yes. See full-time equivalent requirements listed in DLPAL Manual Section II – General Descriptors of Clinical Advancement Levels.

What happens if I decrease my work hours or change my job activities? Do I have to “drop down a level” and take a pay cut?

If you reduce your time to part time or make a change in your duties; your role in the program/department may not be affected. Working fewer hours may affect the relative quantity of activities you can be involved in, but it may not necessarily affect the range of contributions you are making, the expertise or qualities of your work, or “levels” of your activities. In other words, there is no need to “drop down a level” if you are still working as a “specialist”, still considered a “resource” to the program, department, and community, remain a “mentor” to others, and still meet the technical operations, professional development and other criteria upon which your advancement was based. Even with reduced hours there should be no need to make an adjustment in your designated Level unless you are unable or unwilling to perform the duties described for that level.

However, if you reduce your hours or change your duties such that your team leader determines your role is sufficiently narrow and qualitatively changed and you no longer meet the minimal criteria for a given level, then you could potentially be placed at your previous career Level and a correction on the previous adjustment in salary would be made. In that case, “dropping down a level” could involve a subsequent salary adjustment, but this is expected to be a rare occurrence and is a decision that would be made by the team leader based on an assessment of the overall range of activities and contributions that are maintained. The Review Board will be informed of the decision but not involved in the decision.

What are the maintenance expectations?

Once a staff member has been promoted to a new level, he/she is expected to maintain activities at that level. Not only will they assume a new job description commensurate with the new level, but additional “department specific” duties may be added to their job description. Consequently, the annual performance evaluation will address these new expectations. Team leaders rather than the Review Board are expected to assure maintenance of these new expectations. Team leaders will have Level 3 and 4 staff complete the DLPAL monitoring tool twice a year (as part of the annual performance evaluation and as part of the mid-year performance conversation).

If a staff member is not performing to their current level for a period of 6 months as demonstrated by using evaluation tools, the manager will discuss the situation with the staff member. The staff member will be given the choice to move into their former level (a salary adjustment to align with the updated level will occur) or commit to improving performance to meet the standards and expectations of their current level and this must be maintained consistently thereafter. The manager will meet with the staff member to develop an action plan that is to be completed within 90 days. At the end of that time frame, if the staff member is not performing at the desired level, the manager will determine the appropriate job level placement within the staff member’s classification. Please refer to the DLPAL policy Section XI for details.

What is the composition for the Review Board?

During the first two years of activity, the Advancement Review Board (ARB) will be comprised of nine members from the following areas: Cytology, Histology, Molecular, Core, Blood Bank, Microbiology/Virology, Immunopathology, MLS Program and a representative from one of the VHAN laboratories. Each member has one vote. In addition, the ARB will include two (2) non-voting member: HR and a representative from an existing VUMC career ladder.

How many votes do I need from the Review Board do I need to achieve promotion?

Your DLPAL report profile in addition to the Review Board’s face-to-face interview will be considered by the Review Board in its deliberations. Advancement is contingent on a minimum of two-thirds of the members present voting in favor of advancement.

How can I be sure the Board will act fairly, considering there are differences between labs at VUMC?

The Review Board recognizes that opportunities and activities will differ to some degree depending on the populations served, the professional discipline of the candidate, and the setting where services are provided. The Board is designed to give a balanced representation from various facets of the department. In addition, sponsors are free to highlight the context of the work-setting in their support statement. Nonetheless, candidates are expected to meet the criteria described under the target levels regardless of work setting, discipline or specialty area, and their DLPAL report should be sufficiently

thorough and substantiated to convince two-thirds of the Board that the candidate merits advancement. The criteria are generic and the range of activities required to meet criteria within each dimension is sufficiently varied to encompass opportunities that exist across all professional work settings.

If a candidate's sponsor is on the Review Board, the sponsor will not be permitted to vote, ask questions or comment on the candidate's application during this process.

Are there opportunities to appeal or reverse the Board's decisions?

Should a candidate wish to appeal or challenge the decision of the Review Board, the candidate should notify the Chair in writing asking for a formal appeal within 14 days of promotion notification. Upon that notification, the chair will convene a five person group (members of the existing board) who will determine the merit of the appeal. This group will interview the candidate and the Chair of the Review Board and review the application documents to determine if a fair decision was reached. During its deliberations, this group may decide to: 1) support the decision of the Board; or 2) request a reconsideration of the candidate's application by the Review Board. A reconsideration request must include a statement containing the reasons the Appeal Board believes reconsideration is warranted. If, upon reconsideration, the Review Board determines the candidate warrants promotion, then the candidate will be promoted to the target Level and a salary adjustment will be made retroactively to original expected promotion date. If, upon reconsideration, the Review Board does not determine that promotion is warranted, then the candidate will remain at the current Level and no salary adjustment will be indicated. The candidate may, in that event, wish to pursue the normal Dispute Processes available to all staff at the VUMC through Human Resources. The candidate is encouraged to apply for promotion in the future and any application will be examined without prejudice.

Do you envision a quota or maximum number of Level 4s?

The Laboratory administration supports professional advancement and the decision to accommodate this opportunity will not be budget-driven year-to-year. The amount of funding budgeted for our department overall is expected to be sufficient to absorb merit increases and the career advancement program. There is no ceiling or "maximum" number of Level 3s or 4s expected. The requirements for activities and achievements for Level 4s are rather demanding. Not everyone would want nor be expected to meet those criteria or would seek to take on new jobs and duties. We expect everyone to be performing at the top of their game regardless of their job level.

Are competency levels measured in DLPAL?

Various entry-level and acquired competencies are assessed during orientation to a new position or when new skills or knowledge are required for a job. Part of the orientation process and the annual performance evaluation process may involve an assessment of competencies (i.e., competency checklist). Maintaining certain skill levels and competencies is a routine expectation for all employees. The DLPAL evaluation process

is not “competency-based”. It does not measure specific skills, nor is it directly linked to the ratings of performance on the “key functions” of your job, other than that candidates are required to have at least a rating of “3” on all key functions during their most recent performance evaluation. The DLPAL is intended to be a performance-based system. It is designed to help VUMC Diagnostic Laboratory departments identify those individuals who are displaying certain behaviors, making significant contributions, and engaging in particular activities that indicate they are performing at a given career level and, thus, merit advancement.

How is competency measured when we are not observed in our work environment?

Again, as indicated above, “competency” assessments are linked to ongoing team leader evaluations or the annual performance evaluations. The DLPAL assumes that the required competencies to perform a job are being met. The DLPAL is linked to the performance evaluation only in a sense that performance expectations to achieve a “3” on all key functions have to be met before career advancement candidacy is a consideration. After achieving career advancement to a new level, the clinician’s job description will change and in many cases new “unit specific” key functions may be added. Consequently, there can be new duty requirements (and maybe some new competencies) that will need to be met and evaluated by the team leader. It is assumed that the team leader conducting the annual performance evaluations will be familiar with the employee’s work performance and can make a fair assessment based on direct observations, audits, peer reviews, and so forth.

How is our level in the clinical ladder determined when the program begins?

At the beginning of the program, all staff will be placed in the Level 2 for their respective profession (Technologist or Technician). New staff hired into the organization will be placed into the level commensurate with their experience (new grad or less than one year will be placed in Level 1, all others will be placed in Level 2).

Will there be further changes in the policies, procedures or processes of the DLPAL?

It is anticipated that policies and procedures will be reviewed at least annually and revisions made as indicated. These changes will be made mindful of the need to maintain consistency in standards and criteria from year-to-year to ensure fairness.

I haven’t met the minimum years of experience expected to advance to a Level 3 or Level 4 however I believe I am completing the work based on the Activities List.

Do I have to wait until the years of experience are met?

The staff member may submit a portfolio to the Advancement Review Board. The staff member and the manager review the body of work. If the manager determines the work may support advancement, the staff member will follow all of the steps noted in the Advancement Manual, including completing a “Request for Consideration” form, to be included in the portfolio.

Can I promote directly to a level 4 or do I have to be a level 3 first?

During the first year of implementation for the DLPAL, the staff member and the manager review the body of work. If the manager determines the work may support advancement, the staff member will follow all of the steps noted in the Advancement Manual, including completing a “Request for Consideration” form, to be included in the portfolio. A staff member will need to demonstrate meeting a total of ten (10) activities to promote directly to a level 4.