

Ask the funder: The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation (Part 1)

Thurlow/Associates sat down with Piper Kamins, program officer at The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, to discuss the foundation's process, philosophy and preferences, as well as its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We're pleased to share the first part of our interview with Piper here.

Have the foundation's funding priorities changed in light of COVID-19? What important qualities is the foundation looking for in a prospective grantee?

The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation remains dedicated to improving the lives of Angelenos through responsive grantmaking in the areas of civics and culture, education, health and human services. Amidst COVID-19, we have strived to maintain a sense of normalcy and stability for our nonprofit partners by continuing "business as usual": Our funding priorities remain the same; we have kept our phones and grant portal open and responsive to inquiries; and we continue to make grants in the same cadence as we did before COVID-19. Many grantees have shared that they're relieved we have remained a steady, consistent funder during this time of instability and shifting priorities.

In addition, we took the following actions in an effort to be responsive and collaborative with our nonprofit partners:

- In the early months of the pandemic, we provided \$500,000 in emergency grants to critical services such as food banks, child care for first responders and essential workers, and health care;
- We offered grantees the option to convert capital- or program-specific grants to unrestricted support (although more than half of our grants were already for general operating support);
- We expedited future payments for any grant commitments due through the end of the year;
- We waived final reports through the end of the year; and
- We increased funding, with our board authorizing a 10-percent increase of our payout — bringing our 2020 grantmaking budget to \$20 million. We will likely take a similar approach in 2021.

Anticipating the long-term impacts of this pandemic, we have also made significant investments in efforts that support nonprofit capacity building and the arts, to ensure that our region remains vibrant, thriving and supportive.

What are some common "mistakes" that nonprofits make while trying to solicit funding?

We find it most helpful when nonprofits present their work as clearly as possible, helping to paint a picture for us of the organization's mission, programs, outcomes and funding needs. Here are a few tips to consider when applying to the foundation:

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1. Before applying or reaching out with questions, be sure to look at our website, as it contains helpful information about what we fund and how to apply.
 2. Anticipate our “due diligence” questions. If, for example, your organization’s financials show a significant operating loss, or you have had several leadership changes in a short time, help us understand why this happened, and how you are planning to address it.
 3. Ask for what you really need. Especially since we make general operating support grants, we would prefer that organizations let us know their needs, rather than trying to twist themselves into what they think the foundation wants to fund. If you are requesting unrestricted support, be sure to highlight a few of your top organizational priorities.
 4. Present a realistic budget. We know that budgeting can be a delicate balance. We encourage organizations to avoid being too “bare bones” in their financial planning (for example, underpaying staff, making no plans for reserve funds, etc.), while also staying away from creating a budget so large that it is unattainable.
 5. Especially for first-time applicants, come to us when you feel strong in your organizational capacity. Remember that as foundation staff, we are the stewards of the foundation’s resources, responsible for evaluating applicant organizations for excellence and making a case for support to our board. In this way, we tend to be different than an individual donor, who might feel inspired to make an investment based on the mission alone.

Watch for next month’s e-newsletter for the second part of our interview with Piper.

Does your organization need help with institutional donor relations? Contact us for a no-cost consultation. You can reach us at (310) 675-6497 or at hello@thurlowassociates.com.