

Key Findings and Recommendations from the Ralph M. Parsons Foundation 2023 Grantee Perception Report

Prepared by the Center for Effective Philanthropy

In February and March of 2023, The Center for Effective Philanthropy conducted a survey of Ralph M. Parsons Foundation's (referred to as "the Foundation" or "RMPF") grantees, achieving a 73 percent response rate. The memo below outlines CEP's summary of key strengths, opportunities, and recommendations. Ralph M. Parsons Foundation's grantee perceptions should be interpreted in light of the Foundation's goals and strategy.

This memo accompanies the comprehensive survey results in the Foundation's interactive online report at <https://cep.surveymresults.org> and in the downloadable online materials, including grantees' written comments. The Foundation's full report also contains more information about survey analysis and methodology.

Overview of Findings

The Center for Effective Philanthropy is pleased to share the results of Ralph M. Parsons Foundation's fourth Grantee Perception Report. When surveyed in 2023, grantees continue to report positive experiences with the Foundation compared to grantees at other funders in CEP's dataset. Also, ratings have remained strong since 2019 across the majority of the themes in the report, including for the Foundation's impact on and understanding of their fields, communities, and organizations and the quality of its relationships.

- ▶ As one grantee writes, "The Foundation has really taken the lead locally in what I would call "humane" grant-making. That is, they have worked to NOT be aloof; instead, they have been very intentional about coming to our locations, learning the organizations and our challenges, following up with ideas and conversation, and actually making introductions between organizations..."
- ▶ In their suggestions for improvement, grantees acknowledge that RMPF is currently in a moment of transition and express a desire for greater communication regarding potential changes to the Foundation's goals and strategy. Above all – and strikingly similarly to its 2019 survey – grantee suggestions highlight opportunities for the Foundation to consider adjustments to its processes and grantmaking characteristics to better support their work.

Incredibly Positive Perceptions of Impact

- ▶ RMPF grantees continue to feel that the Foundation has stronger than typical impact on their fields and communities, providing ratings that place the Foundation in the top fifteen percent of CEP's comparative dataset and higher than the typical funder in its California and Regional peer cohorts.
 - Ratings for the Foundation's understanding of grantees' communities and the contexts in which they work are similarly strong, with grantees, for example, noting the

Foundation’s “deep understanding of the sectors where the funding will land and the communities it will enrich...” and willingness to “listen to the needs of grantees and applicants” in written comments.

- ▶ Furthermore, as in years past, grantees rate RMPF in the top quarter of CEP’s dataset for its impact on and understanding of their organizations and awareness of their challenges.
- ▶ Interestingly, a much smaller than typical proportion of RMPF grantees – only about a quarter – report receiving non-monetary support. Grantees who receive this support rate significantly higher for the Foundation’s impact on and understanding of their fields, communities, and organizations.
 - Also, nearly 15 percent of grantee suggestions relate to requests for more non-monetary support, such as greater collaboration and convening, which would allow for grantees to “lift up best practices, and develop solutions to shared challenges,” and “discuss challenges in the field and how we might support one another’s work.” Other suggestions ask for connections to additional funders and more capacity-building support.



“The Ralph M. Parsons foundation has a significant, positive impact on the sector. They understand the barriers and challenges within the sector and strive to create channels of streamlined support with little to no red tape.”



“I think all Foundations have a unique position by which they can leverage their sphere of influence with their networks and community organizations to better work together (i.e., hosting events that further enhance and promote collaboration).”

Requests for Longer, Larger Grants and Grantee-Oriented Timelines

- ▶ Seventy percent of Ralph M. Parsons Foundation grantees – a significantly larger proportion than in 2019 – report receiving unrestricted funding, now placing the Foundation in the top 5 percent of CEP’s comparative dataset.
- ▶ In contrast to the change in grant type, the Foundation still provides grantees with smaller than typical grants, with an unchanged median grant size of \$50K since 2019. In their suggestions, 12 grantees speak of how they, “would love to see the foundation increase funding to organizations that are showing measured growth,” while another says, “The money doesn't pay for what it paid for 5 years ago, and the total amounts haven't changed.”
- ▶ The most prevalent opportunity from grantees’ perspectives is the length of grants awarded by RMPF. Only 11 percent of grantees indicate they receive grants spanning at least two years, placing the Foundation in the bottom five percent of CEP’s comparative dataset and as the very last funder in both of its peer cohorts.
 - As in 2019, the largest category of suggestions for improvement were requests for longer grants (N=25). Grantees note that multi-year grants from the Foundation would allow them to “better plan for the future,” and “reduce fundraising costs and allow for more strategic investments.”

- Interestingly, when asked whether grantees would prefer a one-year general operating support grant of \$50K or a two-year general operating support grant for up to \$75K, grantees are nearly split down the middle.
- ▶ The short length of RMPF grants also came up in additional comments in an unrelated area: its selection and renewal process. Specifically, some grantees explain how the long approval process coupled with one-year grants means they “receive 1-year grants approximately every other year,” making it “difficult for budgeting purposes” and can result in “unfunded times” without overlap between grants.
 - More broadly, grantees would like to see a quicker turnaround and shorter timeline between submission of an LOI, the full proposal, and board approval, especially for “repeat applicants” or in cases where the “overall scope of programs/services is not dramatically different from year to year.”
- ▶ Despite these suggested changes, grantees do find the selection process to be significantly more helpful than in 2019 and clearer and more transparent than typical when it comes to the application timelines, requirements, and criteria. Ratings are also typical for the extent to which the selection process required an appropriate level of effort given the amount of funding received.

High-Quality Relationships Characterized by Responsiveness and Trust

- ▶ Like in 2019, grantees have very positive perceptions of their relationship with the Foundation, despite a higher than typical caseload. Grantees provide higher than typical ratings for the Foundation’s approachability and for its exhibition of trust, respectful interaction, and compassion, and RMPF receives typical ratings for its openness to grantees’ ideas and its candor about their perspectives of grantees’ work.
- ▶ Importantly, higher than typical ratings for staff responsiveness have been maintained since 2019, placing the Foundation in the top quarter of CEP’s overall dataset, and “responsive” was the most commonly word to describe the Foundation.
- ▶ Over three-quarters of grantees report receiving either a virtual or in person site visit during the grant period, and these grantees rate significantly higher for the Foundation’s responsiveness, candor, compassion, understanding of their organizations and contexts, and for its awareness of their challenges.
- ▶ Closely mirroring RMPF’s 2019 results, about 60 percent of grantees report having contact with their program officer once every few months, and the other 40 percent report having contact yearly.
 - Again, as in 2019, grantees who have contact with their program officer at least a few times a year report significantly higher ratings than grantees who have less frequent contact on measures related to the clarity, consistency, and transparency of the Foundation’s communications. They also provide higher ratings for the extent to which they understand how their work fits into the Foundation’s broader efforts.
 - When asked how RMPF could improve, building strong relationships is the second most common theme, with most grantees encouraging more frequent interactions and site visits.



“The Foundation’s interactions with grantees are exceptional. They prioritize building strong relationships with their grantees, and they take the time to understand each organization’s unique needs and goals. Their approach is collaborative and supportive, which creates a positive and productive working relationship between the Foundation and its grantees.”



“I would welcome the opportunity to engage with Program Officers or other staff more frequently - to align on projects, share more regular updates, and strategize on implementation. We are grateful for autonomy and flexibility, but also value thought partnership and collaboration!”

Eager for More Insight into Future Plans, including Approach to DEI

- ▶ Grantee ratings for the clarity and consistency of Foundation’s communications continue to be higher than typical, despite a significant decrease since 2019 on the latter measure. Grantees also find RMPF to be more transparent than typical.
 - In written responses, some grantees express concerns about potential changes at the Foundation, and thirteen grantees ask RMPF to acknowledge the uncertainty and communicate “sooner [rather] than later if there will also be a change in direction.”
 - Also, communications about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) was raised as an area of opportunity by grantees (N=13), who encourage the Foundation to be “more transparent and communicative about their DEI efforts.”
- ▶ In addition to communications about DEI, grantees provide typical ratings for the Foundation’s explicit commitment to DEI and combatting racism and for staff’s embodiment of DEI. Importantly, analyses show significant differences in perceptions when segmented by two demographic characteristics.¹
 - Grantees who identify exclusively as women agree significantly less strongly than those who identify exclusively as men for all four survey measures about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Women also rate significantly lower for their comfort with approaching the Foundation if a problem arises, for their understanding of how the funded work fits into the Foundation’s broader efforts, for the Foundation’s openness to their ideas, and for the clarity and transparency of application criteria.
 - Grantees who identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community rate significantly lower than grantees who do not identify as a member of LGBTQ+ community for three of the four DEI measures. LGBTQ+ grantees also provide significantly lower ratings for the clarity and consistency of the Foundation’s communications, the clarity and transparency of application requirements and timelines, RMPF’s understanding of the people and communities they serve and for the extent to which the Foundation’s priorities reflect those needs, and for the extent to which the reporting process was straightforward, adaptable, relevant, and helpful.

¹ CEP also analyzes ratings by respondent person of color identity, disability identity, and transgender identity. There were no consistent significant differences by person of color and disability identity, and there were too few responses to analyze ratings by transgender identity.

Recommendations

Based on its grantee feedback, CEP recommends that Ralph M. Parsons Foundation consider the following in order to build on its strengths and address possible areas for improvement:

- ▶ Celebrate the consistently excellent ratings for the Foundation's impact on and understanding of grantees' fields and communities. Codify the values and practices that have contributed to deep understanding of grantees' contexts and continue to find ways to connect knowledge in the field with work in local communities.
- ▶ Given persistent grantee feedback across the past two surveys, consider revisiting past decisions about longer and larger grants, and discuss what barriers remain. If these changes are not aligned with the Foundation's approach, focus on making adjustments to the selection process that mitigate challenges associated with these grantmaking characteristics.
- ▶ Work to close the gap in experiences for women and members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially on measures related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Review RMPF's processes and communications and reflect on any aspects that may be contributing to these differences.
- ▶ Recognizing the potential changes at the Foundation, explore options to provide grantees with more opportunities – in one-on-one or in group settings – to engage with and hear from the Foundation directly. Use these moments to reinforce the Foundation's commitment to its values and partnerships.

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