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MAP Fund's David Blasher on the End of Its Grantmaking for Individual Artists

Wendy Paris | December 19, 2024



The [MAP Fund](#) has been supporting new performance pieces by individual creators, artist duos and ensembles for 35 years, making it one of the rare arts organizations focused on individual artists rather than institutions. Thus, its announcement this month that it is ending its grantmaking program, effective immediately, struck me as big, bad news for artists and the arts ecosystem. The cuts are especially surprising given that in 2024, MAP distributed \$2.8 million to more than 90 projects, its largest annual investment in artists to date, as [we reported](#) in March.

Founded at the Rockefeller Foundation in 1988, MAP became a fiscally sponsored group under Creative Capital in 2001, then went out on its own in 2016. Over the past three-plus decades, it has given away more than \$40 million to some 2,500 individual artists and ensembles in the U.S. and globally. Grantees each receive a two-year project grant of \$30,000 and an additional \$1,000 microgrant for other creators within their communities. Previous MAP grantees include Anna Deavere Smith, Bill T. Jones and Larissa FastHorse.

So what happened? While MAP has backing from various philanthropies, it does not have an endowment. Since 2008, the [Doris](#)



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DAVID BLASHER. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MAP FUND.

[Foundation](#) has been its primary funder, to the tune of \$21.8 million over the years. In 2010, [Mellon Foundation](#) threw in its support; it has now given \$6.8 million total. Other key funders include Jerome Foundation and Howard Gilman Foundation, as well as Walder Foundation, individual donors, the NEA and New York State and New York City. Both Doris Duke and Mellon Foundation decided to end their support of MAP this year, a move that will cut almost \$2 million from its annual budget (\$1.43 million from Duke and \$500,000 from Mellon).

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The nonprofit has said it will fully support its current cohort of fellows, announced in August of 2024, then stop making grants and focus exclusively on its coaching program, called Scaffolding for Practicing Artists (SPA). We reached out to MAP Executive Director David Blasher for a combined condolence call/Q&A about what's next for MAP. Blasher joined me by Zoom from his home in Harlem. This is our edited conversation.

We just wrote in March that MAP announced its largest grant cycle ever. So are you thinking “WTF?”

Well, we did announce in August the largest grant cycle ever. We also were in the position of figuring out what was happening with our two major funders, who ended their support at the same time in the same fiscal year. They have decided to no longer fund regranting through MAP. They have been fantastic pillars of support. They made it possible for this to be a national, open-call program for artists whose work wasn't going to get recognized out there.

Did you know this would be happening when you took the job in 2023?

In the summer of 2023, right as I was getting started, Duke held a summer convening of the national arts service organizations it had been supporting — there are dozens of organizations it was supporting — to say, “We're wrapping this up.” We didn't know what that would mean. Whose funding is ending? When is it ending? Is there a possibility for bridge capital?

This last year, we were working to figure out what, exactly, that would mean, and what other opportunities there might be with them. Once we got clarity that that was not happening, and we didn't secure new funding at this level, that's why the national regranting program [is ending].

You said that you're seeing other regrantors lose funding, too. What will this loss of funding mean for the arts communities in which you work?

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We believe that this network of intermediaries and regrantors has been instrumental and critical to reaching more individual artists in more communities. We believe in that structure because of the networks that we and other organizations create. There's no question that support is still needed.

What's going to happen to all the artists who don't have recognition yet, who don't have known names? I think that's some of the importance of what MAP has represented. Looking through the dozens of comments we've gotten this week, people say, "this award legitimized me. It opened the door to more awards and opportunities. It put a spotlight on my work, bringing something from the margin into the spotlight." If we lionize artists to be the dreamers and innovators for our society to help us through tough times, we have to make sure that they're funded, and that's what MAP has been doing.

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How exactly is MAP responding to this cut?

We are supporting our current cohort of artists, and then will be continuing our services to provide coaching and gatherings and support to artists through SPA. We're not pivoting away from regranting because we want to; SPA is more sustainable at this point. We have a couple of years already set up with classes that haven't even begun yet, both Jerome Hill fellows and MAP grantees. So, we'll be starting another class of SPA next year.

We're also having a lot of conversations with other potential partners for providing SPA to see how we can supplement their awards

programs and their financial support with SPA coaching and SPA gatherings. The success of the partnership with Jerome has provided one model, to provide SPA to other groups. We've been partnering with them since 2019 to provide SPA to their fellows. So we're aggressively communicating with other foundations about their fellowships and residencies, regional and national. That's the big project, to continue building out that support.

We've heard that MAP is a trusted name to artists, the *how* — artist-centered, mission-driven, values-driven. It's really important to us to bring that spirit, to bring that "how" to the next stage of work.

Partnering with other arts organizations to offer coaching for artists seems valuable and timely.

It is really necessary to have that support and accompaniment. It's not necessarily someone more advanced in your discipline, like a mentor, but really someone who is trying to focus in on the artist's values, the artist's wisdom, the artist's expertise, and ask the questions within the questions within the questions to help that artist have more clarity about the help that they want, the support they're looking for. We'd like to think that by having that coaching experience, an artist then has a little bit more agency, like, "Oh, now I know how to engage with a marketing person," or "now I can talk to a finance person, because I understand a bit more where my practice is going," or "now I can think about how I want to network."

So MAP Fund will pivot to something like MAP Artist Coaching—MAPAC. But is this really it for grantmaking from MAP?

There's nothing we would love more than to relaunch our grant program. But that's not something we can promise or provide a timeline for right now. We've reorganized our programming and budget to ensure a stellar experience for the current grantees and SPA participants. But obviously, there's only so far down the road we can look right now.

This is a new business model, to base it on SPA versus regranting. I mean, is SPA possible in university settings? Grad school programs for young artists? It's untested. That's what we're actively exploring right now. This tool that we have, having a coach, where is it a good fit? Are there other residency programs where it comes in and out? It has to be values-aligned.

What about you? You just started in July 2023, and then the organization you're leading faced this dramatic retrenchment. How has that impacted your work and your interest in this work?

I'm really grateful, frankly. I know it's a little cliché, but I'm really grateful for the humanity I've seen in the way the MAP staff works, and the MAP board, the artists, the reviewers. We had 93 artists and art workers who were reviewers for this last cycle, reviewing applications that came in for MAP grants. It was exquisite to see the ways that these artists and art workers as reviewers really implemented MAP's values in the review process. I've learned a lot from all of them.

But I mean, you know, it takes at least a year just to get your feet under you even when you have all of the funding. This last year and a half would already have been really full, just with coming in after our legacy executive director, who had been there for two decades. We had a lot on our plate with running these growing programs. And then, on top of that, we were navigating the implications of these existential funding gaps. It was a lot to hold, and I'm really proud of how the MAP staff and community supported each other through it.

We had this question, too: Do we pause this current grant cycle? We have obligations to continue it. We had money that we needed to distribute, so that's a lot of work to keep that going while also trying to find a new supporter. It's certainly been a circus act — taming the lion, and high trapeze, and bringing the clown here and there for levity — being responsive to artists, listening. It's been a lot, but I'm grateful for it. I live life this way: What are the roles I can play right now to steward a staff and program from one side of the river to the

next? How to bring the seeds that we would like to plant elsewhere,
how to bring them across the water?

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