

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Why I Resigned From The California Arts Council In The Middle Of A Pandemic

Sarah Rafael García · Wednesday, November 18th, 2020

I am a [Chicana activist, author, and award-winning artist](#) from Orange County, California who resigned late October as an Arts Program Specialist at the California Arts Council (council). The year prior to obtaining my position at the council, I served as a grant panelist reviewing over 100 grant applications between three grant programs. I had hoped by obtaining the Arts Program Specialist position I would be able to assist in creating a pipeline from state-level funding to Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) artists, grassroots cultural producers and BIPOC-led small organizations often overlooked in regions like [Orange County, which is approximately 60% people of color](#).

My decision to leave the council after less than a year was a hard decision to make since I had spent the last five years attempting to secure full-time employment with benefits. However, during my time at the council I felt I wasn't able to build enough support to counter issues in the grant process and align my work with the Racial Equity framework the council had promoted. Acknowledging these issues directly would ensure decisions were in the best interest of the most disadvantaged artists' communities—BIPOC artists and community-based organizations—that initially motivated me to become an arts administrator of color in the first place.

Before my position at the council, I was living and working as an artist with support from various grants and fellowships for the last four years, including being partly supported by the Andy Warhol Foundation in 2016 and was recognized as a 2019 University of Houston Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts and Project Row Houses Fellow.

Born in Brownsville, Texas and raised in Santa Ana, California, I am a first-generation artist and graduate of Texas State University, where I received a M.F.A. in Creating Writing in 2015. Through my literary arts advocacy work as an author of two books and founder of grassroots projects [Barrio Writers](#) and [LibroMobile](#), I've presented at numerous academic and cultural institutions across the nation in addition to recently joining the "Read in Color" Diverse Books Advisory Group with the Little Free Library initiative. My projects are centered in cultivating diversity and inclusion for BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ communities and locally-based creators.

I was hired late February 2020, weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic. I was particularly excited to be part of a work environment that was approximately 70% people of color — with the Executive Director being white and, the next in the "chain of command," the Deputy Director being African American. But since my arrival, six of us have resigned. Out of the six, five of us are

people of color. After questioning the number of staff leaving the agency, my former colleagues reported that the turnover rate has been quite high over the last four years, especially among POC staff.

My arrival to Sacramento in July 2020—and return to the world of cubicles and hierarchical practices—to serve as a representative for the state’s Arts Education programs was a long-term goal I had established after experiencing racial and gender biases in the Orange County arts community.

I tried to address these issues in O.C. to no avail. “There are far more complexities in the arts industry than the lack of funds,” I said during my acceptance speech at the [2018 Orange County Arts Awards organized and run by Arts Orange County \(currently a white-led state local partner with the council\)](#). “There is racial, gender, and socioeconomic stratification that keeps this audience, and the gatekeepers, mostly white.”

The various reasons for my unsatisfied experience are even more complex. Part of it has to do with COVID–19 and the stay home mandate after being hired, which occurred after only three weeks in my new position. It’s hard enough to build community and teamwork in a new place without having to do it over Zoom and Microsoft Teams — something all of society has been learning over the last seven months. Part of it, too, has to do with the wider inflexibility of U.S. capitalist structures to keep productivity high while experiencing trauma and health issues.

My position required relocation to Sacramento, which was again enforced by the council’s Deputy Director (who has a Master’s degree in Public Health) even after I requested a delay due to the pandemic and stay home mandate established by Governor Newsom. I was only granted 2 months and during that time I tested positive for COVID–19 (asymptomatic) and was still expected to move as per my hiring agreements. After 14 days in quarantine, I continued with relocation to Sacramento. Within a couple weeks of arriving, I found out there was no protocol in place for employees who tested positive to enter the office building.



As for why I resigned after such a notably brief [Click to expand.](#)

time spent as an Arts Program Specialist at the council, I can offer a collection of emails and unanswered questions to the council’s leadership regarding lack of transparency and accountability in the grant and administrative processes at the state level. At one point I was asked to approve final reports submitted by grantees without reviewing them. I refused since it was unethical, yet I was confronted by the Director of Program Services during a one-on-one meeting in which I was told to not bring up such issues since it was considered as “challenging leadership.”

Through the months that followed, I reviewed contract documents reporting to leadership that some grants were awarded without signed letters of agreements at the time of applying, others included funds matched directly from school districts and often budgets were unbalanced between operational funds and equitable hourly wages for teaching artists, many times favoring the

operations rather than the artists. All of these actions were specified as unacceptable in the grant guidelines but somehow the grants were approved for funding.

Leading to my last months with the council, I read letters from concerned applicants who felt they were misguided by a council representative regarding the [Innovations + Intersection grant program](#) (I+I), some were simply dismissed for not having signatures on a Payee Data Form, which is only needed to receive payment. That form doesn't speak to an organization's financial health or programming capabilities but the requirement was enforced by the Deputy Director who also served as a review panelist for the I+I program. One BIPOC applicant shared they were even dissuaded from applying:



Regardless of their efforts, the aforementioned applicant, along with other BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ artists and organizations who offered similar statements, was not considered for the grant. I, along with another colleague, kept raising our concerns regarding the I&I process.

It became obvious I was being targeted and silenced when we were referred to as “support staff” rather than specialists and told as a team we had to refrain from entering questions and comments in the “zoom chat” during team meetings. Additionally, if we wanted to ask questions or make comments we had to turn on our videos. I had rarely turned on my video during team meetings prior to that directive. With this directive, we were all reminded that we could not contact colleagues outside our department, especially those in “higher” positions without going through the “chain of command,” which in this case meant we had to go through the Director of Program Services who was hired in July 2020.



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Then in late September, I received an “Overpayment Notification” from the [California Department of General Services \(DGS\)](#) due to an administrative mistake that the council failed to acknowledge. They also failed to notify me at the time they tried to rectify the issue. Over a one-on-one conversation my immediate supervisor related that my paycheck would be deducted from 10–25% more after the 9% furlough deduction in July 2020. After insisting on speaking to someone at DGS, I had an extremely disgruntled DGS employee accuse me of refusing to pay, even though I contacted DGS numerous times before my calls and emails were returned.

The latter was the catalyst to submit my 30-day resignation on October 1st, 2020, which inevitably led to more issues of intimidation and a hostile work environment. I was harassed several times by the Director of Program Services to make my resignation public to the agency via email and text messages regardless that she made me believe that there might be a way to resolve my issues over a one-on-one phone conversation (after the text message provided on Oct. 5, 2020).

Just a couple of weeks before my last day, I encountered another issue while reviewing contract documents for 20–21 Arts Education grants. One grant didn't receive appropriate scoring for funding and a second was recorded at a higher score than what the panelists had finalized, but since both scores were recorded incorrectly in our grant management system they were approved and

funded. I reported this situation to the Executive Director. This situation led to an audit for the specific Arts Education grant program, something I had been requesting from the Deputy Director since my first months at the agency. However, the audit is being conducted by the Director of Program Services and the Deputy Director and no decision was made before my departure.

A week after resigning, I fell ill, which included a visit to the emergency room, and texted that I was out sick. The Director of Program Services never confirmed receiving my notice. I decided to log into my laptop to request the time off via email and it was there I read an email she sent out approximately 30 minutes after I text her stating she would announce my resignation to the agency — without my permission. I responded saying I was out sick and asked her to refrain from making my resignation public and copied the Executive Director in the email.



Thankfully labor rights make it mandatory for the agency to obtain consent before announcing resignations (refer to email excerpt from Oct. 8, 2020). During all of this, I contacted my [SEIU Local 1000](#) to provide guidance with my work experiences at the council. A week before my last day of employment DGS disclosed that the council requested my time-change from full-time to ½ time on a retroactive basis which resulted in the overpayment from late February through mid May. Regardless, ½ time was not part of my initial hiring agreement with the Deputy Director. The Deputy Director and Executive Director have yet to reply to any emails regarding this issue.

The lack of meaningful support and with nearly 700 grant documents to manage—on top of the daily race and equity lip service—meant my workload was absolutely overwhelming. Race is never far from the surface of any situation in the U.S. [and even more so in the arts](#). Having come directly from being a woman of color (WOC) artist and activist, I thought I was prepared for the way microaggressions manifest in a state agency. I quickly learned that I couldn't bend my ethics and assimilate into such an environment.

The lack of respect and empathy in calling out inadequate practices, being told to not bring them up in team meetings and that my actions were perceived as challenging WOC leaders rather than the lack of transparency in our processes led to mental and physical health issues. It also left me wondering, if I, too, was perpetuating a white hierarchical model. As a WOC myself, I wondered if such disempowerment would be administered to me if I was a white man. I suppose I'd say in the end that my resignation was an act of self-preservation rather than bureaucratically confronting women of color leaders perpetuating a white supremacy model.

Now I fear these “divide and conquer” tactics will be used against others, especially towards one particular former colleague who has been targeted by leadership prior to my own conflicts with the Deputy Director. As it is, we were told we could not contact our HR liaison within our department without including the Director of Program Services in the conversation.

Since my resignation, I took an additional week off to monitor my health (Oct. 8–16, 2020). The Director of Program Services asked for a doctor's note, which I provided. I was redirected to stop forwarding timely and relevant work-related emails to colleagues because I had to choose between being sick or working regular hours. I returned to work on Monday, October 19th through the end of the month.

In reflection and to affirm myself, I recounted all my barriers, challenges and triumphs as an artist of color and my role as an Arts Program Specialist. I printed and laid out my work emails

addressing inequitable practices and the Arts Program Specialist's duty statement. I forced myself to create a timeline and deal with the last seven months and how it all came to affect me and the BIPOC artists who had shared their concerns during my time there. It was then I noticed the pattern in inequitable and unaccountable practices. If I didn't speak out, then I too would be perpetuating those processes.

Here's what I can offer to all of you: A Call to Action

As underserved residents of California — BIPOC, grassroots and LGBTQIA+ arts communities — you should be receiving the majority of state funding. Prior to this upcoming grant cycle, approximately 68% of council funding went to \$1M+ non-profit organizations, predominantly white-led. This speaks to the inadequacies in our society of acknowledging the cultural producers who take on the most underrepresented participants and audiences and cultivate them into the arts — art for and by the communities they represent. This was just one fact I brought up to the council, along with reiterating the community's request for direct funding to individual artists — an initiative that has not been supported by the council for nearly 20 years. I was fortunate enough to propose the guidelines and obtain approval to develop the funding program.

In the next months that follow, the council will release new grant programs under three sections: General Operations, IMPACT Projects and Individual Artists Fellowships. All are supposed to prioritize BIPOC communities and organizations \$250K and under.

Here's what we can do to make sure the most underserved communities are being prioritized:

1. Volunteer to be a [California Arts Council panelist](#). You can decide who gets the funding based on your read of the materials at hand — this way they can't say there isn't enough BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ folks to review the grants. Yes, they do pay. BUT it's not enough, the value is in the knowledge you obtain.
2. Attend [Council Meetings](#) and speak at them too! If you cannot attend, read the council notes and hold them accountable.
3. If you think an organization in your region is creating a disservice to BIPOC/LGBTQIA+ communities in the grant process and they were awarded a council grant, request a copy of the awarded grant — it's all public info! Your state taxes pay for it. [Just email the relevant Arts Program Specialist](#) with the request.
4. Be familiar with the grant guidelines inside out, schedule a 15-minute consultation with an Arts Program Specialist before submitting and get an experienced grant writer to review your applications (prior to this job I helped folks in my community submit, and I will continue to offer reviews).
 1. If you don't get the grant, ask for feedback, it might take awhile, but keep asking. They have to provide it. *Unless they change the policy...*
5. Overly communicate with the Arts Program Specialists. Believe me more of them are on your side than you might think. My internal conflicts barely scratch the surface; I witnessed 7 months of specialists trying to get more money in your hands.
6. Flood them with applications from BIPOC/LGBTQIA+ organizations and artists. Apply, apply, apply to all the grants! Some of the barriers to applying have been amended to make these upcoming 2021 grants more accessible and somewhat equitable.

Now, also note they might place more barriers to some of my suggestions. That's ok. Hold them

accountable. After all, it's your tax money at work. They are providing a service we already paid for as California residents.

What do I want out of this?

- I want my former colleagues and those replacing me to have a healthier and more equitable work environment.
- I want more BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ centered small organizations and artists to receive direct funding — and lead the arts in their region.
- I want a transparent process to call out lack of transparency and accountability **internally and externally** at the California Arts Council.
- I want council leadership to move towards restorative justice practices by changing how they interact **internally and externally**. And hey, if they want to apologize to me, cool. I'll accept it. But not necessary. I know who I am and what I experienced.
- I want council leadership to keep their [Race Equity Statement](#) and [Creative Impact: The Arts & the California Challenge strategic framework](#) at the forefront of every interaction in-and-out of the council office located on the 9th floor of the Department of Justice building in Sacramento. (The office I never got to experience because I worked from home the entire seven months, even after I moved.)

¡Muchas Gracias! It was my pleasure to serve you all, even if it was only for seven months. Now, go get that grant money! Remember, you already paid for the public service.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, November 18th, 2020 at 1:58 pm and is filed under [Discourse](#), [Visual Art](#)

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