

EAGxNYC Retrospective

Things to learn:

- Start organizing and outreach as early as possible.
- Be prepared for possible staffing changes and difficulties; develop resilience through clarity of team roles, proper usage of shared tools, and multiple eyes on critical tasks.
- Schedule EAGx events as far away from EAG conferences as possible.

EAGxNYC 2023: Retrospective

TL;DR: We consider EAGxNYC, NYC's first-ever EA conference, to be a definite success. Number of connections per attendee, one of CEA's primary metrics for conference value, was ~10.8, the highest reached at a US event. However, even with ~5,400 connections, the total cost in dollars-per-connection is still high. This is almost entirely due to the expense of venue rental in NYC on relatively short notice. Most respondents of the attendee survey indicated a high likelihood of recommending a similar event (8.94/10), and many complaints were for impossible to optimize variables (e.g. a roughly balanced number of respondents indicated that talks were "too general" vs "too niche"). While impact of the conference is hard to evaluate shortly after the event, several attendees have reported important career connections, high chances of new hires, donation pledges taken, and research collaborations that would not have occurred counterfactually.

What is the purpose of this post?

Building on past EAGx retrospectives, this longform document is intended primarily as advice for future EAGx planners, and feedback for the CEA events team from our EAGx planning team.

Some of the information is included in a shorter [forum post](#) that is intended to serve as a general recap/update about the event, and will hopefully be a catalyst for comments about how we can improve EA conferences in the future. Public-facing comments should go there; comment here for specific discussion of EAGx planning.

High-level facts and figures

Dates: August 18-20, 2023

Location: Convene, near the Financial District of Manhattan

~655 Applications --> ~540 accepted applications and 75 direct invites --> ~510 registered attendees

70 Speakers

89 Sessions of programming (talks, panels, speed friending, meetups, and office hours)

20 Orgs represented at the Career Fair

~5400 Estimated connections made based on feedback survey, ~10.9 per person (6,954 connections on Swapcard, ~13.4 per person)

1 [Podcast recorded live](#)

Summary

Things we think we did well:

- Ran a good event that provided the general EAG(x) experience to both newcomers and experienced EA conference attendees.
- Were responsive to various unknowns as they appeared (e.g. dialing up outreach and communications in response to low number of early applicants, then pivoting away as it became clear we would hit capacity).
- Found and negotiated a pretty amazing venue that, despite being expensive, was both the best and the least-expensive option for our available dates.
- Assisted making valuable connections via active stewardship.

Things we could have done better:

- Started earlier:
 - To have more time building the team (both by considering more candidates and via team building)
 - To have more runway for exploring a conference with an alternative focus.
 - To have more time for outreach to speakers and potential attendees
- Established more defined protocols for financial tradeoffs (i.e. where to aim on the spectrum between minimizing cost and maximizing number of attendees, or maximizing attendee satisfaction)
- Improved internal communications and processes. Insufficiently clarity led to interpersonal difficulties; failure to stick to shared tools led to missed deadlines and rushed tasks.
- More redundancy in task coverage. Multiple eyes could have prevented some balls from getting dropped when issues inevitably arose
- Established a clearer process to track attendance at the conference

Strategy

Reference: [One-pager from April](#)

Early discussion of the conference included less-typical strategic possibilities for the event, including:

1) A conference more dedicated to teaching EA principles to important non-EA audiences. This, theoretically, could have looked like a more publicly accessible conference with most content being general/introductory. Invitees would have included some knowledgeable EA “ambassadors” and a larger selection of non-EA attendees. These would be selected from New York City’s extremely high concentration of traditional philanthropy and activist organizations.

2) A specifically student/education focused conference. New York City has a very large student population, spread among a large number of colleges and universities, as well as some very influential high schools. However, only a small number of these schools have an active EA

presence. A student focused conference could have introduced EA ideas (both core principles as well as community building and student organization practices) to a large audience very quickly, and help establish a broad base of networked student groups.

3) A conference focusing on a narrower band of EA cause areas (e.g. when one venue possibility conflicted with the Animal and Vegan Advocacy Summit, we considered pivoting towards a specifically longtermist conference)

These ideas (and some others) all seemed like intriguing possibilities, but with the relatively short lead-time until the conference it seemed imprudent to risk trying a new strategy. The organizing team therefore decided to execute on the more established “default” EAG(x) strategies of serving those who have demonstrated activity in EA fields, delivering a broad spectrum of content, and largely optimizing for the number of potentially impactful connections between attendees.

Admissions strategy: We decided to follow the standard of other EAGx’s and heavily favor locals in our admissions process. This was especially important with our conference, in part because of the relatively short time between EAGxNYC and EAG Boston (EAGxNYC in August and EA Global in October, which would serve a more international audience), and in part because this would allow us to conserve our limited budget for the event by reducing the amount dedicated to travel grants.

It became clear early on that the gender ratio of those applying to the conference was worse than average (<30% applicants indicating pronouns other than “he/him”). Initial acceptance rates also leaned towards a higher percentage of rejections in the minority group (this seemed largely to be due to chance and a small sample size; most rejections were due geography, the most objective criterion). We discussed various ideas to improve the representation of underrepresented groups; as a result we focused as much as possible on outreach to encourage more diverse applications.

On the subject of considering “affirmative action” considerations of demographics: there was notable pushback from participants in the discussion (from a female perspective) that “lowering the bar” for non-male applicants could make them uncomfortable (i.e. by exacerbating a sense of imposter syndrome and their place at the conference was unearned). However, due to the unblinded and largely subjective application review process, we nonetheless gave some preference to admitting applicants from underrepresented groups. It is impossible to know whether this amounted to preferential admittance or merely correcting for unidentified bias, and the net consequence of a more diverse conference seemed to justify the choice.

[Final demographics of accepted applicants: 51% male pronouns, 31% female pronouns, 4% other, 15% undeclared.]

Core team

After a closed hiring round, the team came together in a relatively short time, ~5 months before the event, with the roles as follows: Arthur Malone as Lead Organizer, Kaleem Ahmid as

Content and Production Lead, Robi Rahman as Admissions Lead, and Lauren Mangla as Communications and Volunteer Lead. Lauren unexpectedly departed the team about halfway through the process, and was replaced on short notice by Rachael Woodard.

While some of the team had worked with each other previously, some had never even met. These factors might have contributed to some interpersonal difficulties/misunderstandings, especially when coupled with text communications over Slack and a lack of time for more team-building activities.

It was good to have an agile time that was able to adapt to a slate of difficulties (unfortunately in the span of the few months of conference organizing, members of our team were impacted by outside events that impacted work availability, including multiple health issues, changes in employment status, and significant personal issues). We believe that our team handled these unforeseen circumstances well, although we could have built more slack into the responsibilities and would recommend that future planners include such non-work elements in their premortems (i.e. consider the [“bus factor”](#) for crucial tasks).

It is also clear that tasks could have been assigned more effectively (i.e. elaborate on BIRD more so that it is clear where members were intended to contribute and who owned each task, and share publicly when task ownership has changed hands). Having more redundancy in the number of eyes on some tasks would likely have helped.

The communications on and use of shared tools (the project management system, Asana, as well as a shared Google drive and Gmail account) were also somewhat inconsistent and led to some additional confusion around certain tasks, deadlines, and expected bottlenecks. Some team members voiced preference for using independent tools for both task management and communications, so not all shared tools were consistently updated. In retrospect, we would advise more synchronizing and oversight (e.g. if someone wants to use their personal email to correspond with individuals they know, there should be a protocol of CC'ing the shared inbox; filters can be put in place to automatically send these to a folder so multiple people don't need to read the same threads).

Interfacing with the local group: The team structure was perhaps especially loosely defined between the core EAGx team and EA NYC, the local community building group. EA NYC was defined early on as a core stakeholder with some decisive input, but the specifics were never fully elaborated. During event organization, EA NYC staff were only available for intermittent support, which occasionally led to some confusion about who was doing what and to what extent. This led to some tasks where there was less support than needed as well as some tasks where there was unhelpful redundancy and ambiguity about oversight. EA NYC was nonetheless integral to the planning process, and it seems clear that both the conference and the permanent city group benefited from close collaboration.

Budget

The available budget for EAGxNYC was not definitely established until less than 4 months before the conference. This made venue negotiations and conference planning somewhat difficult, but not impossible (and in fact, probably served as a useful negotiation tactic to reduce the overall venue cost). Once the budget was established and the venue signed for, it became clear that all other costs would have to be minimized in order to stay in budget.

Balancing cost-minimization efforts against other organizing tasks proved difficult. Arthur estimates that he spent ~50 hours just on trying to reduce costs (\$1,900 at \$38/hr) and in that time likely found at least \$5000 in counterfactual savings (one notable result: buying extra furniture turned out to be cheaper than renting, and re-use by EAG Boston was lined up before purchase). In direct ROI this proved a good use in time, but it also distracted from other organizing. Additionally, exploring for savings was very hit-or-miss, so the process was often discouraging due to many dead-ends.

Some cost-minimization choices were likely noticed only by a minority of attendees. For example, after noticing the view counts of talks uploaded to the CEA YouTube channel from previous EAGx events (mostly <100 views) and receiving extremely high quotes for professional video recording, we elected to only have volunteers record talks, and only when speakers requested it (under the premise that a speaker who wants their own talk, to share or to learn from, will likely gain more value from the recording than anyone else). A few attendees who wanted to watch a specific talk expressed dissatisfaction at not having recordings available, but it is very unlikely that this choice affected more than a handful of attendees.¹

Content

Overall reception of content indicates that most talks were well attended and generally appreciated. We aimed for a mix of broader/more accessible content, as well as more high-context/technical content; survey responses both positive and negative seem to support our choice. The negative feedback is a good indicator that “you can’t please everybody,” as many responses were diametrically opposed (i.e. roughly equal numbers complaining about “overly general” and “too niche”). It is possible that a conference could be optimized for a narrower band of EA exposure (e.g. an educational intro event or an event for just established EA professionals), but the target audience would be much smaller.

We did have to expend additional effort trying to match content to declared attendee interest on short notice (primarily trying to find experienced AI professionals to speak, as interest in AI safety and governance far outpaced other EA cause areas). This crunch may have been a product of not announcing speakers/talks in advance (e.g. if we had announced some of the

¹ This individual choice saved >\$5000, and is not the type of counterfactual cost-reduction addressed above. The choice to record had to be made one way or another; the time invested in finding savings was time spent actively looking for alternative options for inventory purchases, alternative merchandise and labor providers, etc..

non-AI material earlier, we may have gotten more applications from those interested in those topics, resulting in a more balanced supply and demand).

One concrete point to emphasize is that we could have improved the descriptions for each session. The feedback on both sides saying that sessions were either too introductory or too in-depth often included reference to not knowing what to expect based on the title/description. Similarly, there were also some complaints that the format of the sessions was a little unclear (for example, highly interactive vs lecture-based). Likewise, sometimes people didn't know if an event would feature a Q&A or if it would entirely be a lecture. Lastly, some attendees were not clear on Office Hours sessions (both how they worked and that they existed).

With all of these issues, it seems clearer session descriptions and directions might have helped attendees understand how to make the most of the events and have more accurate expectations. Specifically with Office Hours, it's possible they could have been entirely renamed (e.g. "Group Q&A"), as some attendees apparently thought they were intended to be serial 1-1 sessions with the speakers as opposed to small group discussions with the speakers (this apparently led to confusion at multiple sessions).

A primary reason for the lack of clearly informative descriptions and titles was delay in receiving the necessary information from speakers, and a lack of time to request clearer/more informative summaries. In the future, this could be remedied by reaching out to speakers earlier, as well as making it transparent to them that talk descriptions should inform attendees what to expect as clearly as possible..

Admissions

To learn: Plan for a (potential) large increase in application volume near the admissions deadline. Multiple people should be prepared to work on admissions at that time, because otherwise it will be a bottleneck.

Cross-posting: Some applicants reported confusion between "apply" and "register". This might have been partially due to some email filters truncating subject lines, or simply because people thought "register" meant something like "sign up," so parsed "reminder to register" emails as "reminder to apply," and they thought they already had. This confusion was reported by another conference as well, so it may be necessary to prioritize clear messaging about the need to 1) apply, 2) be approved, and then 3) register.

There may have been some discrepancy between the original admissions criteria and some marketing efforts from the EA NYC team. It's unclear if this tangibly affected any decisions, but it likely led to some confusion at the very least.

NYC residents might have also been slower than usual to apply to the conference, and this made for more confusion with the admissions process. Since the goal was to prioritize local

NYers, many otherwise qualified applicants were waitlisted. As it turns out, many local applicants were just fashionably late to apply.²

In the end, it seemed that about $\frac{1}{3}$ of admits and $\frac{1}{3}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ of attendees were locals (anecdotally, it seemed that people from farther away seemed to have a higher cancel rate).

Community Health

There were a few community health incidents that came up during or around the conference, largely tied to one person. The incidents were relatively swiftly handled, but in hindsight, might have been prevented with more careful communications and inspection around admissions.

Registration

Several people tried to join the conference without registering, at the recommendation of admitted attendees. This may have been worth trying to avoid via including something in the logistics email or attendee guidebook indicating that the conference only serves ticketed attendees who have applied and registered. The registration team could have also had a clearer system for tracking attendance.

Our venue had a large, official reception desk that turned out to be a good place for some of the organizing team to work for the majority of the conference. A visible person in charge (or several) was very helpful to address issues quickly as they arose; this wasn't a plan made in advance, but it worked well for us and we would advise considering something similar.

Stewardship

Stewardship allowed for some impactful connections that likely wouldn't have been possible otherwise. When applications were being evaluated, admitted and waitlisted individuals were subjectively flagged for being especially likely to be a good mentee/mentor in X area, and then the appropriate lists of potential mentees/mentors were shared directly. Though there was some difficulty making pairs without knowing the full range of attendees, the team still put in a lot of effort to make as many connections as possible. It was unclear if the strategy to do this was as efficient as possible, but it seemed to work. The strategy also required a lot of time towards the end of the admissions process, so it might have helped to proactively account for this to help reduce the bottleneck.

One of the identified mentors was given a list of fifteen potential mentees, then proactively set up a joint one hour meeting with a majority of the mentees, early during the conference. This self-initiated office hours session was apparently very well-received, and the mentor considered a much better use of their time, in large part because it was specifically framed as mentor/mentee focused. It also led to more productive followup 1-1s with some of the mentees.

²We could have also potentially lowered the target number of attendees for the conference, but we were firmly aiming for 500 attendees.

Suggesting this as an option to all mentor options may be a way to improve stewardship matchmaking in the future.

Production

Note from Arthur on design

Beware making aesthetic choices by committee. The organizing team all believed that design and branding can be impactful, and may even be undervalued (by EA in general, though apparently other EAGx organizers also invest significant time on aesthetics). In our experience, the deliberative process can be far too time consuming; everyone is likely to have a take on subjective things like t-shirt design and slogan choice, and it is unlikely that inexperienced contributors will be able to create something that looks as professional as a designer. As the lead organizer I posted: "Do not consider time spent on [design deliberation] necessary or a good use of organizer hours, only participate if you find it fun." I do think we had a good time spitballing, but I still think far too much time was spent.

Once the process had been opened to everyone, it seemed unfair to then close it off without everyone getting an equal chance to contribute. This led to multiple rounds of votes, new suggestions, and further votes. To future organizers: consider hiring or recruiting professional designers early on, and if you want to solicit votes from the team, it might be best to wait until you have a limited selection of completed designs and to hold a single vote.

Shirt sizing: We tried to adjust for previous conferences' tallies of having too many large shirts, and likely overcorrected and ran out of all smaller sizes early. Kaleem noticed the difficulty in projecting size demand and suggested in the #shared-learning channel that T-shirt size/cut be asked on the application. Based on this experience at EAGxNYC, we strongly recommend that all further conferences ask in advance if they intend to provide shirts, and it has been added to the default application questions for EA Global.

Our experience as a data point: getting production handled early (ordering merchandise, inventory, and printing) is likely worth the difficulty and/or cost of storing things before the conference. We attempted to coordinate many production and delivery needs to fall within a narrow window before the conference and this led to significant unnecessary stress.

Venues

Venue search and determination

Venues followed the pattern of many things in NYC: there are a lot to choose from, and they're all expensive and in high demand. Much of the venue hunt is specific to NYC, but may also apply to other highly trafficked, high-CoL areas. Over the span of 2.5 months, organizers found well over 150 potential candidates, communicated with 40+, went on 12+ venue visits, entered the negotiation stage with 4, almost closed on one candidate until another conference (with

overlapping potential speakers and attendees) was announced on the same date, before finally selecting the eventual site. The final selection was, contrary to appearances, the most inexpensive option that fit our constraints. This very likely could have been different if the time window for the conference was both larger and farther away; despite NYC's large number of possibilities, the majority of them had very limited availability.

Venue specifics

Most people liked the venue, though some thought it seemed overly expensive. It would have been great to be able to communicate to them that this was due to the circumstances of the constraints and that we chose the least expensive option available (to signal that the conference was optimizing for impact-per-dollar and not spending EA funds on less-tangible concerns like “high class appearances”).

Choosing a relatively upscale, all-inclusive venue left comparatively few choices to be made (we had previously been vetting catering and A/V companies for other venue options, but the final venue choice required we use their in-house providers). This largely proved positive; catering was mostly well-received (only repeated complaint was consistent with most vegan catering: more protein options would have been better. This concern was brought up early on in meal planning with the venue, and the venue did generate some more substantive vegan protein choices than their original menu offerings, but still less than optimal.)

There was an A/V issue that negatively impacted at least two sessions, which turned out to be a mistake on the part of the venue's staff. We asked for, and received, a substantive discount as a result of this error. Do not hesitate to ask for such concessions, even after the event when negotiating power seems limited.

One notable planning difficulty with this venue was its pricing model that largely depended on headcount. Rather than pricing for a full buyout with catering on a per-person basis, the venue charged a “full meeting package” price per attendee that folded more of the cost than just catering onto each admitted person. This meant that the provided headcount could swing the cost a dramatic amount. Combined with the relatively late changes to admissions/registrations allowed by CEA's policies made for very stressful uncertainty (this is addressed in the [forum post](#) as part of a push to move towards earlier planning and deadlines at all stages of EAGx planning). If you choose a venue with a similar pricing model, we recommend considering methods to firm up attendee numbers as soon as possible.

Other venue notes:

- By default content rooms were named “Hub 1/2/3” and “Hall 1/2” and these similar names led to some attendee confusion; in the future ambiguous names can easily be changed on floorplans and with quick signage.
- We had a room designated as a “parents’ room” with a bare countertop for changing, but an actual changing table (soft and with supports to avoid infants rolling off) would have been preferable.

- We relabeled all 4 restrooms as “gender neutral with/without urinals.” We had reports of some attendees who were uncomfortable with others standing in stalls without closing the door (using standard toilets as urinals) in “without urinal” restrooms. Other attendees would have preferred some gendered restrooms in addition to the gender neutral. In the future, if available, we would recommend mostly gender neutral bathrooms with some gendered restrooms available. We do not know if our feedback indicates that stall doors should have signs indicating that they should be closed (may have been a unique problem with a small number of our attendees).

Volunteers

Volunteer management was overall well done. With greater than one volunteer per ten attendees and a well-staffed venue, we often had volunteers with little to do. This was intentional, and much better than too few! It would have helped to have a volunteer shift that started early on Friday morning to assist with setup, rather than have the shift schedule start just before registration opened. There also could have been improvements in communications and training in general for the volunteers so they had clearer expectations, schedules, and directions sooner (our shift schedules went out Tuesday before the conference, and volunteers viewed this as conflicting with their ability to schedule 1-1s).

Team leads were particularly helpful and required very little direction due to experience with past conferences. Even so, there could have probably been additional communications to help prep for each team lead role.

Communications

The conference might have benefited from more communications as well as getting communications out sooner. These were partially a result of incorrect prioritization, but also a result of unique difficulties:

- We didn't have a venue confirmed for a while and couldn't send out “save the date” emails until the contract was pinned down.
- We lost a communications contractor partially through the event process and had a limited handover process.

Particular consequences about the communications included:

- Some attendees noted that emails nearer to the time of the conference seemed rushed
- Some attendees did not know that they needed their name tags at all times
- Some attendees were confused about the difference between admissions and registration
- Some attendees seemed to be inviting people to come to the conference who did not register (or even apply)

Satellite events

EA NYC added substantively to their normal programming in the weeks before and after the conference in order to provide additional opportunities to engage with visiting attendees and to build hype for the event. These seemed largely successful** especially a virtual “how to get the most value out of an EAG(x)” session that helped reaffirm to newcomers the importance of Swapcard.

There were unofficial parties every day of the conference; these seemed to be well done, safe, and appreciated.

Notable takeaways from feedback survey

Attendee experience

Overall, attendees seemed to report a good experience and appeared to be having productive conversations. Based on attendee feedback, organizer observations, and anecdotal experience from people in the community, it seems there might have been room for improvement in areas like:

- the financial accessibility of the conference (and/or communications around ticket pricing)
- Attendee’s experiences of feeling qualified / feeling able to contribute
- Demographics (ie. attendees tended to skew towards young people, males, and/or people who work in tech)
- Attendees agreeableness (ie. lack of productive disagreement and updates)

Meetups

There were several reports saying that meetups were not well-organized (ie. they should have had a mic/bell and had clearer networking rounds), though many still reported that they were helpful (perhaps particularly for identity-based groups). It’s unclear how valuable meetups were for actually networking or meeting people; with numerous, well-attended demographic and cause-area meetups, it’s possible that the number of connections generated during the conference is substantively higher than those reported on Swapcard if meetup participants exchanged contact info directly without going through the app.

Swapcard

As expected, there were some moderate glitches and several people were somewhat dissatisfied with the Swapcard app.

There were often dramatic attrition rates between reserved seats for events and actual attendance (anecdotally this seemed to be about 20-60% attrition sometimes). There were several complaints that people missed talks they could have gone to because the events were labeled as fully booked and/or people spent too much time stressing about unreserving their seats. In our Slack and guidebook we tried to convey a “be polite” message about checking to

see if full sessions had empty seats, but it's possible that eliminating reserved seats entirely could have been preferable.

Food

We purchased limited Soylents (meal replacement drinks that are relatively expensive but beloved-at-EA-events) and they ran out on the first day. Budget constraints at the end of organizing necessitated limiting the number purchased; it is unclear whether it is better to have too few or none at all, given that they are expected by a fair number of attendees (so there likely would be complaints either way). With a limited quantity, it could have possibly been better to ration and stock them in intervals throughout the whole conference.

The labels also could have been clearer to indicate that everything was vegan (ie. some labels said "V" and some said "VG," which caused some confusion). The venue assured us that labels would be up to date, but they clearly reused some from earlier events with different meal ingredients. Asking to see these beforehand could have prevented the need to check each individual serving station at every meal.

It was absolutely cost-prohibitive to serve dinner on Saturday and Sunday; this apparently made people leave the venue. EAGxBerkeley reported significant evening attendance even without serving dinner; however, we are guessing that in their case a large number of attendees were staying at the hotel in which the conference was held, making it very low cost to return to the event. Our venue was almost entirely (but not completely) empty after 8pm; we did not expect this and the cost savings from venue overtime fees alone would likely have justified an early closing.

Considerations when not serving dinner:

- Some guests had trouble finding dinner partners. A dinner coordination sheet (with nearby recommendations) was made, announced, and reminders sent, but saw very little organic use. This appears to be bystander-effect: when organizers entered a dinner time and place, several attendees signed up and had productive conversations over dinner.
- Many guests were fine with sourcing their own dinner (at a much lower per-person cost than would have been spent on catering), but this did cause some discomfort for others (especially considering food costs in NYC).
- Even though we dismissed many staff and volunteers early, we could not finish closing procedures until all attendees left. This meant that we had as many staff on site for the last hour as there were attendees, which is a very poor return on organizer and volunteer hours.