EA Course: Overview and Future Plans

Note: I encourage you to first read the One Page Summary at the bottom and then skip to the sections you're interested in.

Background

- Oliver Habryka and I taught a student-led class ("DeCal") during the Spring 2015 semester at UC Berkeley called The Greater Good, on effective altruism
- The class was taught under the banner of Effective Altruists of Berkeley, a student organization we founded the previous semester
- Overall, I think it was a success and satisfied most of our initial goals (details below)

Goals

- **Goals for the class:**
  - Primarily, we wanted to recruit people for our newly created Effective Altruists of Berkeley club
    - Having to engage with/debate EA for a semester beforehand would allow people to really understand if they wanted to become involved in it
    - It would also allow them to contribute to the club's projects without having to be given a whole lot of background first
    - We also felt that going through a class together first would make people more motivated and more comfortable with us/each other
  - We also hoped to improve or increase people's personal donations, altruistic intentions, and/or reasoning ability
- **Goals for the club:**
  - We'd prefer a smaller group of unusually dedicated members to cultivating a broad appeal
    - This is deliberately different from how we believe most college clubs operate (trying to get as many members as possible)
  - For example, currently, everyone in EAB (11 people) has taken the GWWC pledge and a majority are vegetarian or vegan
    - It's a high priority not to dilute this average commitment level
    - We will probably not force everyone to take the pledge or go vegetarian, but we'd like to selectively recruit people who want to make or already made similarly significant commitments
  - We're looking for people who want to use their careers or a substantial part of their money to make as much of an impact as possible
    - We are less interested in recruiting people who want to help on a smaller scale (eg, occasional small donations) or help only in specific cause areas (eg, cancer research)
  - Planned or potential club projects
    - Altruistic career advising for students (especially undeclared freshman)
    - Hosting speakers/debates/dinners/giving games
    - Research and data collection like Harvard EA did
    - Literature reviews on relevant topics
    - Advocacy for students to take the GWWC pledge
    - Potentially other behavioral advocacy

- ○ We expect most of the impact of the club to come from changing the career paths of its members and serving as a network of like-minded people that could eventually grow into one or more businesses, nonprofits, advocacy organizations, etc that can improve the world
- ○ Activities club members do right now are therefore important not just for direct benefits but also for how they affect members' future careers/giving
- **Ideal student:**
  - ○ Unusually driven/ambitious and dedicated
  - ○ Unusually caring/empathetic
  - ○ Brings knowledge/skills we think are currently lacking in the EA movement (for example, writing or chemistry)

Class Structure
- **Basics:**
  - ○ We had 18 students from a diverse set of majors
  - ○ The class meet once a week for two hours (Mondays, 4-6 PM)
    - ■ Most weeks had assigned reading (1-2 online texts)
    - ■ Some weeks had outside speakers
  - ○ Details on readings and speakers [here](#)
- **Giving games:**
  - ○ Most of the time, we would present two charities, give each student in the class $20, and have each person individually decide where to donate
  - ○ Exceptions:
    - ■ For Impact Evaluation, we asked for a consensus within a small group rather than individual decisions
    - ■ For Risk and Uncertainty, we gave people a choice between $20 or a 40% chance of $60 and a 60% chance of nothing. Additionally, we made it a whole-class consensus
    - ■ For Lifestyle and Happiness, we let people choose from all of the charities we had considered so far
    - ■ For Animal Welfare, we asked for small group consensus
  - ○ Around 30% of the grant money was used for giving games
- **Final project:**
  - ○ The other 70% of the grant money was dedicated to a final project
  - ○ Students broke up into small groups and each presented a proposal for spending the money (~$7000) to do the most good possible
  - ○ The class voted on the project proposals, and the winning project is on track to be implemented next semester
- **Potential changes in Class Structure:**
  - ○ We plan to experiment with meeting twice a week for 1-1.5 hours so students see each other more frequently
  - ○ We'd like to have class on better days (like Friday), so we can do things after

- ○ We'd also like to change up the giving game structure more
  - ■ Consensus-based giving helped students be much more engaged
  - ■ Introducing risk also improved student engagement

Course Content

- The idea behind the syllabus was to present EA concepts like prioritization and impact evaluation using the relatively uncontroversial example of global poverty, and then examine other causes such as animal welfare and existential risk reduction
- I'm unsure whether this is the best approach, and want to try introducing broad cause areas earlier in the curriculum next time
- I'd also like to try to gear the curriculum to be less theoretical and more focused on integrating EA into someone's lifestyle and future plans (more on career and happiness, more on figuring out what causes you consider most important and why)

Advertising and Recruiting

- We didn't have a particularly targeted or aggressive advertising campaign
- We listed the class on the www.decal.org website, promoted it through Facebook, and held giving games on the main student plaza
- Our initial interest form released a couple of months before class started got over 60 applicants, but ultimately only 18 applied to be in the actual class (all were accepted)
  - ○ I think this might be because there was too much of a gap between the initial interest form and the follow-up application
  - ○ The application form might have been too much work, because it involved reading an article
  - ○ Students may also have gotten tired of answering questions, or ignored the email because they didn't recognize the course anymore
- This was the initial interest form (we got 64 responses). The application form is here, which we sent out after a significant delay to sort out who we would accept.
- I'd like to advertise starting sooner and be much more visible next semester
  - ○ Advertise to specific departments (such as Philosophy, Public Policy, Public Health, Economics, Statistics, Business, and the sciences)
  - ○ Kick off the class with some sort of public event that will attract a lot of people
  - ○ Combine the application and interest form, and reduce the response time

Speakers

- Overall, I think our speakers were well-received by the students
- However, some speakers were not used to undergraduate levels of understanding/areas of interest, so they went over people's heads or bored them
- We hope to change our speakers in two ways next time:
  - ○ Plan early/get more influence to invite more famous speakers

- - Communicate better with speakers about what they should do to engage students (eg, discourage long talks without interactive elements, encourage humor or personal stories)
  - I'd also like to experiment with panels, debates, workshops, field trips, and other ways to involve other people besides talks
  - For all speakers except Prof McCoy, we held a free dinner after class, inviting students, speakers, and members of the EA community
    - Only a small number of students (2-3) attended these dinners
    - We don't believe it was effective to change people's minds, but it was likely effective for bonding

Financial Management

- **Banking:**
  - ASUC: Our club is required to bank with the Associated Students of the University of California in order to use the ASUC's nonprofit status to receive tax-deductible donations
  - Wells Fargo:
    - We aren't allowed to open an external organizational bank account under the name of the club
    - So I ended up opening a personal account and giving Oliver the password to access it
    - Our Wells Fargo account has an attached PayPal
- **Sources of money:**
  - $10,000 grant from Good Ventures, deposited by check to the ASUC account
  - $400 in donations for class logistics from our GratiPay account
  - A little over $100 in donations
  - Center for Effective Altruism reimbursed me for spending on speaker dinners
- **Financial management issues:**
  - The way we handled money was often a hassle and is something I want to work on significantly
  - **Communication issues:**
    - The shared Wells Fargo account had only a couple hundred dollars of personal money in it, and there was no overdraft protection instated, so sometimes Oliver would pay through our PayPal assuming there was sufficient balance and we would get charged for overdrafting
    - Email alerts about the shared account status only come to me because I'm listed as the primary owner
    - This cost us around $100 in fees (we didn't use grant money to pay fees; I simply transferred from my personal account)
    - Other funding channels, like GratiPay and CauseVox, were managed entirely by Oliver, so I wouldn't know their status until I asked him and he had time to get back to me

- - ■ We had an internal miscommunication about our class size and funding needs, leading to the GratiPay advertisement stating a much greater expected class size and need for funding than was actually the case
      - Ben Kuhn pointed this out to me and we changed it soon after
    - ■ It took us some time to put up the accounting page on our website, and there were some miscalculations on it that a student pointed out (we believe it's reasonably transparent and clear now)
  - ○ **Payment issues:**
    - ■ We didn't notice that Fred Hollows Foundation didn't have a way for American donors to give less than $500, so we had to route that through an Australian contact
    - ■ To promote the class, we held a giving game on campus in which we gave students $1 and had them choose between AMF and Howard Hughes Medical institute
      - $18 was donated to AMF
      - $8 would have gone to HHMI, but it turns out I actually couldn't find the "donate" button on their website and I suspect they only accept large grants
    - ■ Students' decisions for giving games were just on small strips of paper we collected and manually entered into a spreadsheet -- this was pretty annoying and there was a risk of losing information
    - ■ We held a GWWC pledge-taking party at the end of the semester, and ended up ordering much more food than necessary, as well as a projector and projector screen that we didn't actually use
  - ○ **Reimbursement issues:**
    - ■ Our model through the semester was for me to pay for Giving Games donations through my personal account, then apply for reimbursement through the ASUC
    - ■ This worked, but was kind of stressful because it was a lot of money and I had to wait to get it back
    - ■ We later learned ASUC can directly send checks to people and organizations from our ASUC account, so we plan to do that in the future
- ● **Potential changes:**
  - ○ Let the ASUC directly pay vendors and nonprofits without routing through me
  - ○ Institute overdraft protection on the external account and come up with a system for ensuring everyone in charge knows when money is spent in real time
    - ■ Maybe something like a Mint account would work better
  - ○ Have regular meetings about finances and create a schedule to update the website (rather than doing it in bursts)
  - ○ Have students enter their giving game decisions online through our website

Website

- The class website (eab.berkeley.edu) has a posted Schedule here with links to reading, and an accounting page here with a breakdown of spending
- Oliver designed and created the website with WordPress
- My original plan was to post a summary of the class discussion every week, but I didn't end up doing that
    - It was a combination of forgetfulness and lack of time
    - I don't know if it would be that valuable to include. If we decide that it is, we may consider giving a club member that responsibility
- We didn't post a full syllabus on our website ahead of time, but we may do that in the future
- Our speakers page unfortunately only has the first three speakers, because at the time we made the page, they were the only ones confirmed, and we forgot to update it later
    - Full list of speakers:
        - Impact evaluation: Sandra McCoy
        - Lifestyle and happiness: Julia Wise and Jeff Kaufman
        - Animal welfare: Allison Smith
        - Rationality education: Kenzi Amodei
        - Far future: Nick Beckstead
- I plan to maintain a page of testimony from students/former students who have taken the GWWC pledge, as well as updates on the club's activities

Final Project

- **Goals:**
    - We really wanted the final project to be broad and open-ended
        - Wanted people to think of ways to multiply their impact beyond simply giving away all the money now to a direct nonprofit
        - Wanted to allow for unconventional/creative ways of doing good
    - This wasn't really achieved
        - On the whole, people were far less able to handle the really broad project description than we anticipated
        - We ended up revising the original plan to provide much more structure
        - In general, people seemed less motivated by the project than we hoped
- **Winning project:**
    - Largest project group, with 6 students
    - A campaign to promote Berkeley students to take the GWWC pledge
        - We'll begin work on this in Fall 2015
    - It's probable this was based off a suggestion I came up with in a conversation with one of the students
    - It's unclear if the whole team participated in its conception or if a few people did all the work

- ○ It will require a lot of budget revision before it's viable, and will likely not use all of the money
- **Potential changes:**
  - ○ Begin work on it earlier
  - ○ Provide some structure to begin with -- not sure exactly what kind
    - ■ For example, banning direct donation
    - ■ Requiring that the project demonstrate a multiplier effect on direct donation
  - ○ Break up the project into multiple smaller steps that can be individually evaluated
  - ○ Provide examples of things student groups have been able to do in the past

Evidence of Impact

- **Collection:**
  - ○ We planned to do a pre- and post-survey ([here](#)) to try and see if the class changed people's minds/behavior
    - ■ We got 15 of 18 students to take the pre-semester survey
    - ■ I forgot to send out the post-semester survey while class was in session :(
  - ○ Evidence of impact on opinions mostly comes from the pre-semester survey combined with informal observation and testimony
    - ■ Approximately ⅓ of the class expressed in personal comments to me or Oliver that the class significantly changed their thought process
  - ○ We observed occasions of students changing their minds or changing other people's minds based on information from the class content
  - ○ We required attendance but tracked it mostly informally. We did fail three students who didn't attend most classes
  - ○ We collected records of each student's giving game decisions, but we don't have much insight into their thought process and if their opinions later changed
  - ○ We planned to give students a mid-term essay to assess their progress, but didn't end up doing it for a couple of reasons
    - ■ We wanted to focus on the final project since people were struggling more than we expected with it
    - ■ We didn't have too much time to grade papers
- **Outcomes:**
  - ○ The members of the winning final project group (6 students) have agreed to join the club and have committed to working on the final project
  - ○ Some students and friends signed up for the GWWC pledge. Of the 9 people who took the pledge during the semester (besides Oliver and me), I believe
    - ■ 3 were mostly influenced by friendship
    - ■ 2 were mostly influenced by the class content
    - ■ 4 were already inclined to donate and only had to be told about GWWC

- ○ For those who weren't primarily influenced by class content, we still believe the existence of the class provided opportunities to persuade that we wouldn't have otherwise had.
- **Potential changes:**
  - ○ I really want to collect evidence of impact more thoroughly and consistently next time
    - ■ Collect pre-, mid- and post-semester survey data from everyone (require it to pass)
    - ■ Record people's reasoning for giving game decisions
    - ■ Make students do more writing in general to understand how they're thinking about the material
  - ○ In terms of *having* more of an impact, I would like to ask people to do more hands-on activities relating to their own life, like career planning or cause prioritization

Future Plans

- We expect to have a larger class next semester
  - ○ Because we had 18 students this time, we can see anywhere from 20-40 students next time
  - ○ We feel we can get a similar fraction of students to make commitments like actively participating in the club and taking the GWWC pledge (especially since we weren't optimizing for that this time) so the extra money would be worth it
- We hope to do more activities with students such as field trips to local EA organizations (like the GiveWell research seminar this May) and career planning with 80K
- We hope to hold more public events like talks, panels, and the pledge-taking ceremony
- We hope to be able to compensate speakers for travel expenses, so we can bring in more people from out of state or out of country
- We would still like to hold speaker dinners and we believe we can get more interested students if we give them more of a heads-up
  - ○ We expect these to be catered since it's pretty stressful to cook for ~15 people during the school year
- We would still like to have a final project with enough of a budget to allow students to do ambitious things (students may include ways to raise more funds in their plans, though)
- We want the club to have some standard club things like T-shirts and some social activities

Funding Goals

Purpose	Low	High	Expected	This time	Notes
Giving games	$4000	$8000	$6000	~$3000	$20 / student / week * 10 weeks * 20-40 students
Speaker dinners	$280	$630	$450	~$200	$7 / person / week * 4-6 weeks * 10-15 people
Speaker reimbursement	$1000	$2000	$1500	~$400	Compensating speakers for travel or lodging (uncertain)
Class "scholarships"	$1500	$2500	$2000	$0	80K consultations, CFAR mini-workshops, or sponsorships to EA global for selected students
Final Project	$3000	$4000	$3500	~$4500	We had $7000 to spend, but about $2500 will likely roll over, so we need less
Advertisement	$200	$300	$250	$40	Posters, flyers, candy, money for small giving games, etc
Club t-shirts	$150	$250	$200	$0	$8-10 / shirt * 20-25 shirts
Club social budget	$300	$500	$400	$0	Activities like bowling and rock climbing, renting space for events, snacks
Total	$10,430	$18,180	$14,300	~$8100	Estimates assume unspent money will roll over. I'd probably use additional funds for more students, more scholarships, more club activities, or a larger final project

One Page Summary

- **What went well:**
  - We got at least 6 club members who I believe will be engaged and valuable
  - We had 9 people besides us take the GWWC pledge and I believe they're likely to stick to it, especially because of the club's social reinforcement
  - As side effects of the class and dinners, one meat-eater became vegetarian and three vegetarians became vegan
  - We observed many students' reasoning improve over the semester
  - Many students have told us the class changed their thought processes and probably will change their behavior
- **What didn't go so well:**
  - The way we handled money was a hassle, and sometimes a liability when miscommunication resulted in fines or an impression of dishonesty
    - Seems we also had a misunderstanding with GiveWell/Good Ventures about what proportion of the money would go to giving games
  - Students were mostly lost and confused about the final project, and we got fewer good suggestions than we hoped
  - We were sometimes disorganized and dropped plans, such as sending out a follow-up survey, tracking attendance carefully, and giving out a midterm essay
  - We didn't get as much engagement and understanding as I believe we could have if we employed better teaching strategies, especially in the beginning
- **Future plans:**
  - Aim for a larger class size
  - Advertise much more, target advertising to highly ambitious students, advertise through specific academic departments such as philosophy or public health
  - Have students engage much more in applying EA principles to their own lives (planning careers and budgets, prioritizing causes)
  - Incorporate "field trips" to events such as the GiveWell research seminar, incorporate scholarships for 80K consultations, CFAR workshops, EA global, etc
  - Simultaneously maintain and involve the club -- regular meetings, t-shirts, club events, etc
- **Funding situation:**
  - All sources combined, we got about $10,400 last time, and will likely have spent about $8,100 of that before the next class starts
  - Assuming the remaining money rolls over, we estimate that with a larger class size, field trips and activities, and club budget, we could use $10,500-$18,000
  - Additional money will be put into
    - Accepting more students
    - Bringing in more prestigious/expensive/far away speakers
    - More "scholarships" for 80K consultations, CFAR workshops, EA Global
    - More public club events to increase visibility
    - A larger final project