



# The Berkeley Existential Risk Initiative's Semi-Annual Report

The Berkeley Existential Risk Initiative was incorporated in February 2017. Our mission is to improve human civilization's long-term prospects for survival and flourishing. We work to reduce risks from technologies and events that may pose significant civilization-scale risks by providing support for research and other activities aimed at reducing those risks. Over the last six months, we have made substantial progress building out our team, operations, and available funding, while also collaborating with the Center for Human-compatible AI (CHAI) at UC Berkeley on some small projects. We appreciate the donors who have made our existence possible and look forward to ramping up our support for x-risk mitigation over the next six months.

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## What we have accomplished

### For x-risk-motivated researchers and advocates

Since our founding in February, most of BERI's efforts have gone towards creating a new organization and preparing for large projects on which our help has been requested. However,

BERI has also been able to assist AI researchers at the [Center for Human-Compatible AI \(CHAI\)](#) with several small projects:

**Event coordination for CHAI's first conference.** CHAI hosted its first conference in May 2017. However, because CHAI was arranging the conference on short notice and outside business hours, UC Berkeley's staff were unavailable to assist with setup. BERI quickly stepped in, hiring an event coordinator to assist CHAI. A Berkeley staff member's testimonial follows:

"CHAI's workshop this year fell outside of our regular working hours, and university personnel were not available to help on short notice. Working with BERI's event coordinator Roxanne Heston was extremely helpful to us, as she was able to be there when nobody else could be... If we had an ongoing collaborator like BERI that is familiar with Berkeley's contacts and policies, they could be counted on to fill in gaps like these between department administrative staff availability and the needs of CHAI that happen outside our normal business hours. If BERI continues to foster a relationship with Berkeley faculty and staff, they can help extend the best of Berkeley culture to our visitors and collaborators." —**Gianna Kone, UC Berkeley; Administrator and Programmatic Assistant to Stuart Russell**

**Web development for CHAI's website.** During the first half of 2017, while CHAI worked to hire a web developer through UC Berkeley, BERI lent a contracted web developer's services to assist in maintaining CHAI's website. BERI's contractor turns around change requests very quickly without using up the time of a student researcher. The student who previously maintained the website offered the following comments:

I created and used to manage CHAI's website. Since we began collaborating with BERI, now BERI's professional web developer is taking care of it instead. I (or others in CHAI) can just email him a request and he takes care of the rest. He finishes our tasks quickly, usually on the same day, which is much faster than I was able to respond to website requests, and requires almost no oversight. This means less of my attention is spent on maintaining our website, and I can focus even more on developing my expertise in AI and AI safety." —**Smitha Milli, incoming UC Berkeley CS PhD student**

**Supporting interim CHAI operations.** CHAI is in its early stages of growth as a research center, and BERI is helping CHAI with operational tasks that CHAI does not yet have the staff to support. For example, BERI has helped CHAI streamline reimbursements for research lunches, and assisted in attracting job applicants. BERI is also in the process of producing some content for CHAI's website.

## Finances

When BERI was founded, a few generous donors seeded BERI's efforts, including [EA Funds](#), Ben West, and several anonymous donors. Their combined funding was about \$54,000, which allowed BERI to pay for legal assistance when setting up, hire its first employee, and move forward with hiring contractors.

Over the last few months, BERI has reached out to several large funders seeking grants to support additional collaboration with CHAI (see "[Current Activities](#)" below). BERI has heard back

positively from the Open Philanthropy Project, which will donate enough funding (approximately \$400,000) to cover our core operations and continued collaboration with CHAI. BERI has also received restricted donations for a project that we will announce at a later date. Finally, BERI has secured strong interest from a funder in supporting a Personal Assistant program for high-impact x-risk researchers and activists (see “[Plans for the Future](#)” below).

BERI’s expenses since its founding through August 1st have been about \$18,000.

We appreciate all of our donors’ contributions and assistance! Our work would not be possible without them, and we are thrilled by the support BERI has received so far.

## Additions to our team

BERI’s team currently comprises three board members, two employees, and eight contractors.

**Board.** BERI was incorporated with Andrew Critch as our Executive Director and Board Chair, Eric Rogstad as our Board Treasurer, and Qiaochu Yuan as our Board Secretary.

**Employees.** McKenzie Amodei was hired as a Deputy Director in July, after two months of working with BERI as a contractor. Rebecca Raible was also hired as a Writer and Operations Manager in August, after working with BERI for two months.

**Contractors.** Gina Stuessy advises BERI’s operations and HR work, Michael Keenan provides website and IT support, and Eli Tyre manages our recruitment process and assists with other projects. BERI has also recruited one contractor to advise on our projects with CHAI, two standby illustrators, one administrative assistant, and one writer.

You can learn more about our [team](#) here. We are also [hiring](#) for several positions. We’re looking for committed, responsible candidates; if you know of anyone who seems like a good fit, please send them our way.

## Current activities

BERI has started work on two large projects: our CHAI collaboration and a property-donation regranteeing project. BERI also continues to develop its internal operations, so that we can complete projects quickly when they come to our attention.

**The CHAI Collaboration project.** CHAI has expressed interest in collaborating with BERI on CHAI’s existing research agenda. As a small non-profit, BERI can quickly hire developers and other contractors on task-oriented projects. To this end, BERI is seeking to hire engineers and other staff to collaborate on the development of AI virtual assistant software and related research efforts. CHAI expects its work to advance our understanding of how to control and align the behavior of advanced AI systems with human values. We are currently in the process

of hiring contractors to assist CHAI researchers. We also continue to work closely with CHAI and remain on the lookout for ways we can help.

**Exploring property donations for reducing x-risk.** BERI is exploring the logistical and legal details of accepting property donations. Ideally, we would like to set up a fund where donors concerned about x-risks can give their property, which BERI would sell, using the proceeds for regranteeing with input from the original donor.

There are two reasons we're excited about this project. First, it helps donors reduce the taxes on their property donations, therefore allowing them to donate more to x-risk mitigation. Second, this program allows us to build up our own knowledge of property donations, enabling us to advise or assist others in future property donation efforts.

**Building out internal operations.** We are in the process of setting up financial tracking and improving our website, we have learned how to legally hire part-time employees and independent contractors both inside and outside the United States, and we are working on an employee and contractor handbook to store institutional knowledge and principles. We continue to develop our bureaucratic skills in support of our long-term growth.

## Plans for the future

Going forward, we hope to:

**Develop a Personal Assistant program.** Our CHAI Collaboration project provides *research assistance*: planning events, checking code, formatting papers, etc. We expect many of our future collaborations to also provide research assistance. However, BERI would like to go above-and-beyond for x-risk-motivated researchers and activists, providing them with *personal assistance*: scheduling appointments, booking travel, finding skilled professionals (doctors, cleaners, etc.), and more. We are still evaluating under what conditions and to whom we would award these services, but we hope to find a way to connect valuable human capital with existing x-risk-motivated researchers and activists in a way that furthers the growth and diversity of the x-risk reduction ecosystem. By saving time and attention for the recipients, we hope to both empower them for future work and show them a high degree of appreciation for the work they are already doing to protect our civilization from harm.

We currently have a large funder interested in supporting BERI in developing a Personal Assistant Program and an incoming employee ready to lead such a program.

**Collaborate with other x-risk-motivated institutions to provide research assistance.** Just as in our collaboration with CHAI, we hope to reach out to other x-risk-motivated institutions and support them with research assistance.

## How you can help

BERI is not actively seeking additional donations at this time; we intend to fundraise for specific projects as they appear. However, if you feel highly aligned with BERI and desire to support us, please get in touch. We *are* looking for:

- Talented and dedicated individuals to join our team
- Information about small x-risk initiatives that donors might be interested in funding
- Ideas about other projects or ways in which BERI can support x-risk-motivated researchers and advocates. We are a small, flexible organization: we can quickly hire contractors to complete tasks that would be useful to x-risk-motivated researchers and activists. If you know of a project that could be a good fit for us, please let us know!