



CFAR
CENTER FOR APPLIED
RATIONALITY

Essential Background

Organization: Center for Applied Rationality (CFAR)

Mission: “Developing clear thinking for the sake of humanity’s future”

Key Personnel: Timothy Telleen-Lawton (Executive Director)
Anna Salamon (President, Chair of the Board, Cofounder)
Michael “Val” Smith (Senior Instructor, Cofounder)
Duncan Sabien (Curriculum Director)

Our Research: CFAR exists to try to make headway in the domain of understanding how human cognition already works, in practice, such that we can then start the process of making useful changes which will better position us to solve the problems that really matter. We are neither about pure research nor pure execution, but about applied rationality—the middle ground where the rubber hits the road, where one’s models meet reality, and where one’s ideas and plans either pay off (or they don’t).

By looking in-depth at individual case studies, advances in cogsci research, and the data and insights from our thousand-plus workshop alumni, we’re slowly building a robust set of tools for truth-seeking, introspection, self-improvement, and navigating intellectual disagreement—and we’re turning that toolkit on itself with each iteration, to try to catch our own flawed assumptions and uncover our own blindspots and mistakes. In short, actually trying to figure things out, such that we can achieve the good and avoid the bad—especially in arenas where we have to get it right on the first try.

Most of our day-to-day work consists of finding or making cognitive tools, finding or developing high-promise individuals, delivering those tools to those individuals, and connecting those individuals with one another and with important projects. We’ve also developed a number of smaller, more targeted programs for things like developing the skill of doing pre-paradigmatic research; wrestling with grief and other deep, powerful emotions; solving coordination problems within companies and

social groups; and bringing together both emotional and practical tools to tackle large, daunting, open-ended problems.

Many of our alumni and staff have come to believe that existential risks (x-risks), such as AI safety, present one of the greatest opportunities for clearer thinking to make an important difference on humanity's future. As such, understanding the strategic landscape and making progress in this domain have become priorities for the organization. Many of our coaching hours are now geared toward finding and integrating promising mathematicians and programmers into existing organizations working to address x-risk, and much of our spare effort goes into developing longer, targeted workshops.

That said, our tools, techniques, and mainline workshops are open to everyone—our alumni include students, academics, professionals, and industry experts alike, Americans and internationals, liberals and conservatives, men and women, “arts” people and “STEM” people, and adults of all ages. Our introductory workshops continue to serve a broad population, and to receive high approval ratings largely independent of demographics.

When we're not doing curricular research or running workshops, our instructors might be found providing applied rationality lectures to student groups at universities such as Stanford, Harvard, Yale, MIT, Cambridge, and U.C. Berkeley, or running training sessions for other organizations and for gatherings such as the annual Effective Altruism Global conferences in San Francisco and Oxford. Finally, we run coaching and mentorship programs for our alumni network, helping individuals improve themselves and find their way toward fulfilling, high-impact work.

Key Personnel



Timothy Telleen-Lawton

Executive Director

Timothy spent 4 years in research, operations, and management at GiveWell. Previously, he lobbied for Environment America, wrote policy reports for Frontier Group, and ran political campaign offices. He holds a B.S. and M.S. in Earth Systems from Stanford.



Anna Salamon

President, Chair of the Board, and Cofounder

Anna has previously done machine learning research for NASA and applied mathematics research on the statistics of phage metagenomics. She holds a degree in mathematics from UC Santa Barbara.



Michael Smith

Senior Instructor and Cofounder

Michael “Valentine” Smith develops CFAR training modules, and is responsible for pushing our research agenda forward. He taught Aikido as a black belt for many years, and he holds a joint PhD in math and science education from UC San Diego and San Diego State.



Duncan Sabien

Curriculum Director and C.O.O.

Duncan is a writer, filmmaker, and educator, whose previous work included developing and teaching a special projects class for building rationality and agency in middle schoolers.



Dan Keys

Research Associate

Dan has conducted research on the psychology of judgment and decision making and published a paper on the science of human rationality. He holds a master's degree in social psychology from Cornell University and a BA in mathematics and statistics from Swarthmore College.



Lauren Lee

Research & Instructor

Before CFAR, Lauren worked as an iOS Developer, organized the Seattle rationality community, studied biology at Caltech, and competed on the Magic: The Gathering Pro Tour.



Jack Carroll

Director of Operations

Jack studied psychology and gender and has previously worked as an event planner, data researcher, and legal assistant. They enjoy gaming, spreadsheets, and deep discussions on the intersection of culture and identity.

Overview of Media Coverage

FAST COMPANY

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SkepticityTM

The Official Podcast of Skeptic Magazine and the Skeptics Society -

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

TheHumanist.com

The New York Times



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www.rationality.org