Early Career Symposium Planning Evaluation Report

University Office of Evaluation and Educational Effectiveness

Arizona State University

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SUMMARY

Brief Description of Evaluated Project and Goals

Planning and Executing the Early Career Symposium

The Early Career Symposium, affiliated with the Urban Resilience to Extremes Sustainability Research Network (UREx SRN), consisted of a series of four sessions of the symposium in 2020. Each session lasted four hours. The purpose of the Early Career Symposium was to facilitate connections and form a network among early career professionals in positions related to green infrastructure who would not otherwise connect. In turn, these connections would facilitate thinking about green infrastructure more broadly and holistically in contrast to the narrower approach that may be used by a sole discipline, professional organization, etc.

The Early Career Symposium was planned and executed by the eight members of the Organizing Team. Attendees at the events included early-career individuals, such as graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and community professionals. Approximately 35 – 45 participants attended the event virtually from around the world.

Project Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes

This report presents the evaluation findings regarding whether and to what extent the Organizing Team members' planning of the Early Career Symposium met the objective to "Increase graduate students' and postdocs' professional networks for scientific collaboration." This objective is one of several that supports the fulfillment of the UREx SRN Goal B: "Advance co-learning and collaboration among urban decision-makers, scientists, and students across the project cities on urban resilience to climate change." The primary outcome associated with the objective for this activity is, "Graduate students and postdocs increase organizational and planning skills." Another outcome for this objective is "Graduate students and postdocs report meaningful connections and networking." It is not specific to this activity but was considered a secondary outcome in evaluating whether the Objective was met. Additional information regarding the goals, objectives, and outcomes and the logic model are presented in Appendix A: Description of Evaluated Project and Objectives.

Summary of Evaluation Activities and Data Source

Data for this evaluation were collected via interviews of the eight Early Career Symposium Organizing Team members. Responses to interview questions were analyzed by UOEEE evaluators using thematic analysis to identify common themes. Quotes included in this report may have been lightly edited for spelling, punctuation, grammar, and clarity. Additional information regarding the evaluation activities, the data source, and the methodology is presented in Appendix B: Evaluation Activities and Data Source. The evaluation plan is also shown in that Appendix B.

Findings

Primary Outcome: Graduate Students and Postdocs Increase Organizational and Planning Skills

- **All 8 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team reported improvement in their organizational and planning skills as a result of planning and executing the Early Career Symposium.** Additional information regarding the lessons learned is provided in Appendix C in the section, Improvement in Organizational and Planning Skills.
- **All 6 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team who were asked about what they learned from the process of incorporating feedback from Symposium attendees identified new understanding and skills related to planning, organizing, and executing a symposium.** Additional information regarding the lessons learned is provided in Appendix C in the section, Lessons Learned from Incorporating Feedback from Symposium Attendees.
- **All 8 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team identified ways they applied their expertise to improve event planning, thus providing them with the opportunity to increase their organization and planning skills by applying their content knowledge and technical, professional, and other skills.** Additional information regarding how their expertise was applied is provided in Appendix C in the section, How the Organizing Team Members' Expertise Benefitted the Event Planning.
- **All 7 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team who were asked identified ways they were challenged and grew while planning and executing the Early Career Symposium. These challenges provided them with the opportunity to increase their organization and planning skills to address the challenges.** Additional information regarding the challenges is provided in Appendix C in the section, How Organizing Team Members Were Challenged.
- **All 7 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team who were asked identified what worked well during the planning process. Their ability to identify what worked well is an indication of their planning and organization skills.** Additional information regarding the lessons learned is provided in Appendix C in the section, Organizing Team Members' Reflections on What Worked Well in Planning the Symposium.
- **All 7 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team who were asked identified areas for improvement in the planning process. Their ability to identify areas for improvement is also an indication of their planning and organization skills.** Additional information regarding the lessons learned is provided in Appendix C in the section, Organizing Team Members' Reflections on What Could be Improved in Planning the Symposium.

Secondary Outcome: Graduate Students and Postdocs Report Meaningful Connections and Networking

- **All 8 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team reported having opportunities to network as a result of planning the symposium; although two reported minimal opportunities directly as a result of the planning process, all were able to participate in networking during the event itself.** Additional information regarding the networking opportunities is provided in Appendix C in the section, How Planning the Symposium Afforded Opportunities for Networking.

Conclusions

Based on the findings reported above, the Organizing Teams' planning of the Early Career Symposium was successful in meeting the primary outcome ("Graduate students and postdocs increase organizational and planning skills") and the secondary outcome ("Graduate students and postdocs report meaningful connections and networking"). In turn, the fulfillment of the outcomes indicates success in meeting the objective, "Increase graduate students' and postdocs' professional networks for scientific collaboration" and support the overall goal, "Advance co-learning and collaboration among urban decision-makers, scientists, and students across the project cities on urban resilience to climate change."

Recommendations

- The Organizing Team should be expanded to include non-academic professionals.
- Organizing team members should ensure they can participate and benefit *as participants* as well as leaders in future Early Career Symposiums.
- The Organizing Team should continue to work towards alignment among team members on the overall goals and objectives of the Early Career Symposium.

APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTION OF EVALUATED PROJECT AND OBJECTIVES

Overview

The Early Career Symposium, affiliated with the Urban Resilience to Extremes Sustainability Research Network (UREx SRN), consisted of a series of four sessions of the symposium in 2020. Each session lasted four hours. The purpose of the Early Career Symposium was to facilitate connections and form a network among early career professionals in positions related to green infrastructure who would not otherwise connect. In turn, these connections would facilitate thinking about green infrastructure more broadly and holistically in contrast to the narrower approach that may be used by a sole discipline, professional organization, etc. The Early Career Symposium was planned and executed by the eight members of the Organizing Team.

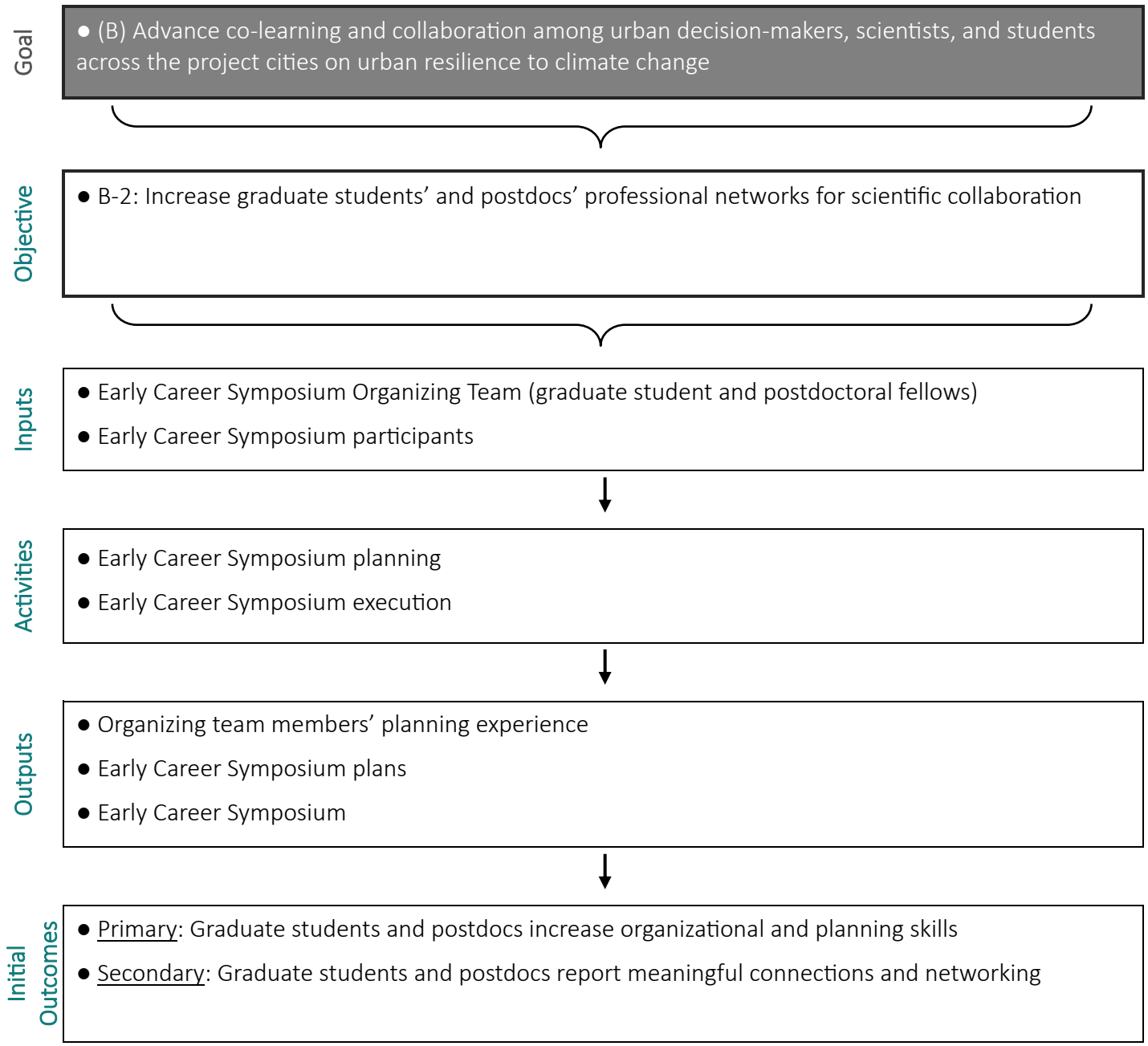
Participants were invited to submit an application to attend. Attendees at the events included early-career individuals, such as graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and community professionals. Approximately 35 – 45 participants attended the event virtually from around the world. Most were from the United States, a few were from Europe, and some attendees hailed from other locations. Sessions were scheduled to accommodate the attendees' time zones, which proved challenging for some locations, such as Singapore, which is 15 hours ahead of Pacific Standard Time.

Logic Model (Partial)

The portion of the overall Education and Diversity Working Group (EDWG) logic model relevant to the Early Career Symposium is presented in Figure 1. Specifically, the Organizing Team members planned the Early Career Symposium in fulfillment of Objective Goal B ("Advance co-learning and collaboration among urban decision-makers, scientists, and students across the project cities on urban resilience to climate change") and Objective B-2 ("Increase graduate students' and postdocs' professional networks for scientific collaboration") as presented on the next page. The primary outcome associated with this activity was, "Graduate students and postdocs increase organizational and planning skills." Another outcome for Objective B-2 is "Graduate students and postdocs report meaningful connections and networking." It was not specific to this activity but was considered a secondary outcome in evaluating whether Objective B-2 was met.

Figure 1.

Portion of the EDWG Logic Model Relevant to the Early Career Symposium



APPENDIX B: EVALUATION ACTIVITIES AND DATA SOURCE

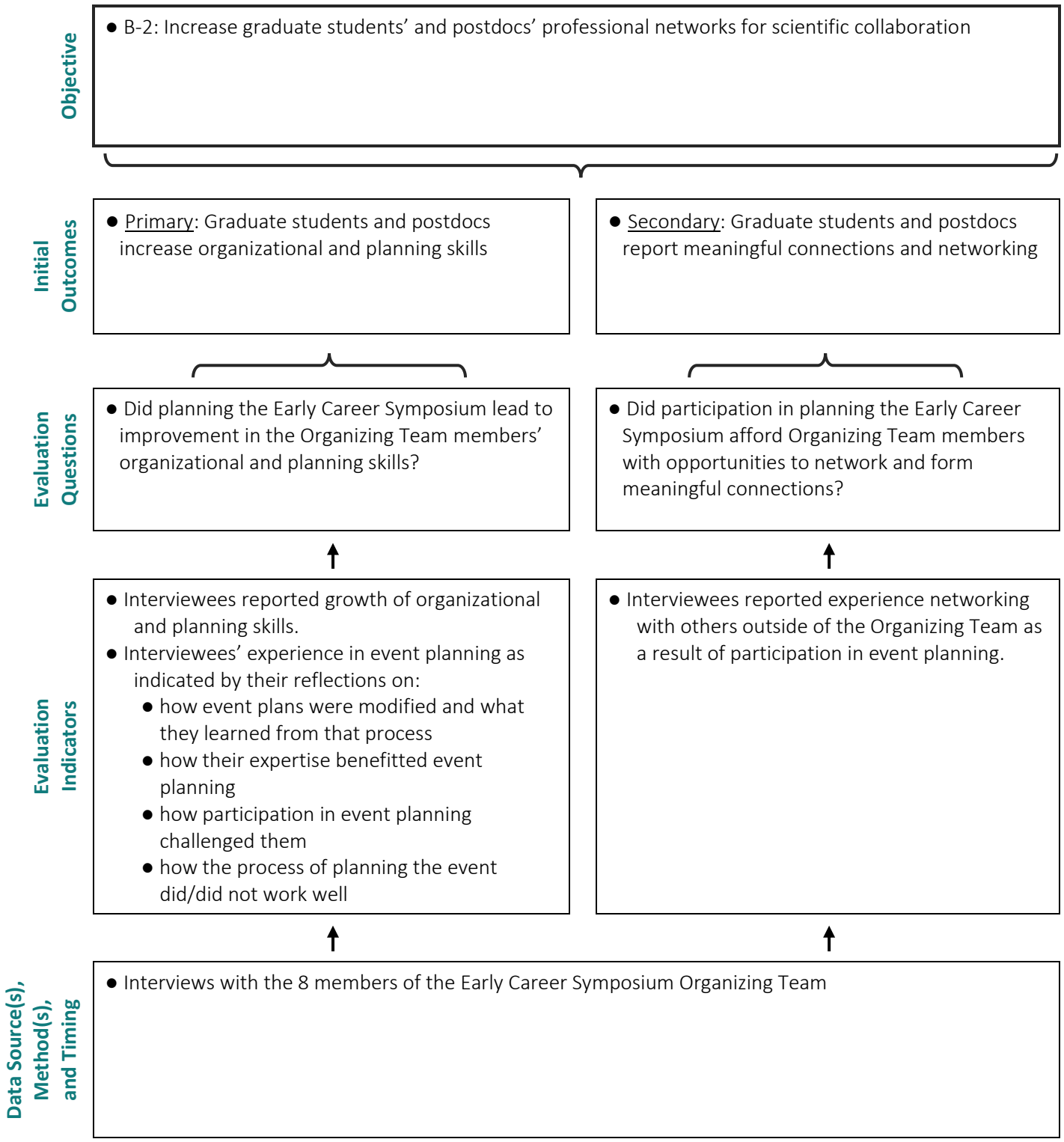
Overview

Data for this evaluation were collected via interviews held between December 2020 and January 2021. The Early Career Symposium Organizing Team members were invited to complete an interview (see the interview protocol below). All the Early Career Symposium Organizing Team members participated in the data collection efforts (response rate: 100.00%), with seven completing an interview and one responding to interview questions by email. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and responses were analyzed by UOEEE evaluators using thematic analysis to identify common themes. Quotes included in this report may have been lightly edited for spelling, punctuation, grammar, and clarity. The evaluation plan for the evaluation of the Early Career Symposium planning process is presented in Figure 2.

Evaluation Plan

Figure 2

Evaluation Plan for the Evaluation of the Early Career Symposium



Interview Protocol

1. Think back to when you and the other Organizing Team members started planning the Early Career Symposium. How, if at all, have your organizational and planning skills changed since then because of your participation in the Organizing Team?
2. Did you have to change any symposium plans, potentially as a result of feedback? If so, what did that experience teach you about planning or organizing a symposium or similar event?
3. How, if at all, has your involvement in the planning of the Early Career Symposium helped you network with others outside of the Organizing Team?
4. Can you describe a time during the symposium planning process when you felt your expertise had a positive influence on the planning of an event? Please provide an example.
5. Can you describe a time during the symposium planning process when you felt challenged to move out of your comfort zone or beyond your expertise? Please provide an example.
6. What, if anything, worked well during the process of planning the events?
7. What, if anything, could have been improved?
8. Do you have any additional thoughts about your experience with planning the Early Career Symposium that you would like to share?

APPENDIX C: DETAILED FINDINGS

Findings Related to the Primary Outcome: Graduate Students and Postdocs Increase Organizational and Planning Skills

Improvement in Organizational and Planning Skills

Key Findings

- All 8 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team reported improvement in their organizational and planning skills as a result of planning and executing the Early Career Symposium.

Summary of Findings

To understand whether and how the Early Career Symposium Organizing Team members' organizational and planning skills improved, the members were asked, "Think back to when you and the other Organizing Team members started planning the Early Career Symposium. How, if at all, have your organizational and planning skills changed since then because of your participation in the Organizing Team?" The Organizing Team reported improvement in the following organizational and planning skills:

- Improved skills in planning a large, virtual event (*n* = 4).
- Learned how to plan an event using a horizontal leadership structure with a large group (*n* = 2).
- Improved teamwork/collaboration skills (*n* = 2).
- Learned organizational and other skills from fellow team members (*n* = 2).
- Learned how different personalities, organizational styles, and skillsets of Organizing Team members could complement one another (*n* = 1).
- Learned how to be flexible in planning (*n* = 1).
- Learned to better use organization and planning tools (*n* = 1).
- Improved skills in planning an event designed to produce a product and foster networking (*n* = 1).
- Learned to do planning more holistically (*n* = 1).
- Learned that planning an event involved incremental progress (*n* = 1).
- Learned to prioritize event goals while planning (*n* = 1).
- Learned about everything that goes into planning an event (*n* = 1).
- Had the opportunity to apply their skills in using problem-based learning approaches (*n* = 1).

Quotes illustrating how the Organizing Team members gained skills through the planning process, as identified through thematic analysis of responses, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Organizing Team Members Improvement in Organizational and Planning Skills (n = 8)

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Improved skills in planning a large, virtual event	4	"This was the first virtual event I have ever planned […]. So, from the technical side, just learning what resources were available, how that would look, what we would be doing, what that would mean for our participants, and how they would engage with this symposium was all new to me. So that was my first time exploring that in an organized manner."
Learned how to plan an event using a horizontal leadership structure with a large group	2	"One of the biggest things that I've learned through this process is sort of how to take a step back and allow the team to do what they're going to do."
		"I think the main change is just getting a lot more comfortable working with a relatively large leadership group. Normally when I've been part of similar efforts in the past, there's been maybe a more formalized leadership structure or more formalized hierarchy. And this one, we had a much flatter kind of hierarchy. And so, it took a little while to kind of get used to that structure and figure out the best way to continue to make progress and move forward in an effective manner, but after a few weeks, I think we really caught our stride."
Improved teamwork/ collaboration skills	2	"Giving each other check-in meetings to keep up to date on our progress while tackling a big project showed me how to organize a big team meeting with a team while never ever being in a room with them!"
		"Just working with this group of eight of us, we pretty much met every week for almost a year. I've worked in large collaborative groups before, but not meeting at such high frequency as this. So, I felt like I improved my ability to work cohesively with a tight-knit group."
Learned organizational and other skills from fellow team members	2	"Some of my colleagues on the planning team are especially efficient organizers and very, very, very organized about their file structure and everything, and as much as that's not necessarily always my style, it's really helpful in a conference like this."
		"Just seeing some of the different skill sets that the team members bring and learning […] how to integrate them into a single early career series of activities was really rewarding."
Learned how different personalities, organizational styles, and skillsets of Organizing Team members could complement one another	1	"It was also interesting to see, on a related point, how people's different sort of personalities and organizational styles and different skill sets complemented each other to help everything be successful in that sort of way."
Learned how to be flexible in planning	1	"We quickly realized that planning a virtual symposium series requires a lot of flexibility, not only on our end as a planning committee but as well as anticipating the potentially difficult conditions that our participants face on their own."
Learned to better use organization and planning tools	1	"I don't think there's one big thing that I learned new, but I kind of picked up a lot of small tricks along the way through new ways to use tools that other people were aware of. We used a lot of the Google suite for sure, and obviously, I've used all those tools before."

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Improved skills in planning an event designed to produce a product and foster networking	1	"And then this was also my first time planning a large event that was aimed at creating a product or really nurturing the research connections amongst the different participants."
Learned to do planning more holistically	1	"The process of looking at the big picture."
Learned that planning an event involved incremental progress	1	"Taking incremental steps toward progress."
Learned to prioritize event goals while planning	1	"Throughout that process of the initial planning stage, we really learned how to identify and prioritize the few or very few key items that we need to get through within each one of those four symposia, and we added on from there. So, it was all about distilling quite a bit of information, and the information we wanted to gather for our participants, into just a few action items."
Learned about everything that goes into planning an event	1	"What did I learn about the process itself? I guess just how much goes on behind the scenes of events that I would normally attend. Initially, you take a lot of things for granted when things go well, and so now doing this has allowed me to see what sort of things are needed to make sure behind the scenes, that things go well for people that are participating."
Had the opportunity to apply their skills in using problem-based learning approaches	1	"I've been able to apply some of the skills I have in problem-based learning to a new case study, to a new situation, which was super fun and involved designing a scenario or a situation in which early-career people involved in green infrastructure might find themselves."

Lessons Learned from Incorporating Feedback from Symposium Attendees

Key Findings

- All 6 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team who were asked about what they learned from the process of incorporating feedback identified new understanding and skills related to planning, organizing, and executing a symposium.

Summary of Findings

Throughout the symposium sessions, the Organizing Team solicited feedback from attendees. As one attendee explained:

> We asked extensively for our participants to share how they were feeling and what they hoped for and what they wanted throughout the symposia series. […] The first two symposia came a lot from the Organizing Team. So, we kind of put those first two together, but then the response from those two nearly completely changed what we did in the second two, so that was really cool. It was really fun to respond to feedback and also to let people know that we were responding to their feedback and kind of telling them through time, "Okay, we tried to do this because you responded this way. How did it work out? Did it go the way you had hoped?"

To identify what Organizing Team members learned from this process, they were asked, "Did you have to change any symposium plans, potentially as a result of feedback? If so, what did that experience teach you about planning or organizing a symposium or similar event?" Due to time constraints, only six members were asked this question.

Organizing Team members reported learning the following lessons:

- Minimize the number of platforms and tools used during sessions to minimize confusion and loss of time due to the learning curve; provide attendees time to learn the platforms and tools used (n = 2).
- Be responsive to feedback and make the feedback process open and inclusive (n = 2).
- Incorporate more small group discussion time because attendees were already interested in interdisciplinary discussions (n = 2).
- There is value in making the symposium more interactive (n = 1).
- Build in more time for activities (n = 1).
- Balance session length, format (i.e., extent of collaboration), deliverables, and level of guidance and support provided to presenters (n = 1).
- Minimize the amount of content presented during the symposium to emphasize quality or over quantity and not overwhelm participants (n = 1).

Quotes illustrating the lessons learned, as identified through thematic analysis of responses, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Lessons Learned from Incorporating Feedback (n = 6)

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Minimize the number of platforms and tools used during sessions to minimize confusion and loss of time due to the learning curve; provide attendees time to learn the platforms and tools used.	2	"I think the feedback we got from participants varied both on the technical front, as well as the actual procedural setup of the symposium for respective days. And we were definitely throwing a lot at them. We provided a sheet of links to the different activities that we'd be doing that had a brief descriptor, but there was oftentimes confusion if you're flipping through a lot of different platforms or learning curve when it was a new platform. So, learning to minimize the amount of resources that we were using and providing clear instructions, and also just allowing more time for the participants to explore if we were introducing something new, or pieces that we integrated as we moved along."
		"I think that was a learning experience where you think you build in enough time and you build in a buffer, but then you have to realize that people aren't just getting to know each other and getting comfortable with the topic, but they're also getting to know the tool too, and so we had to learn to build in time for that and to just sort of build more time in for people to have the discussions they needed to have."
Be responsive to feedback and make the feedback process open and inclusive	2	"I learned how do you respond to feedback and how do you try to get feedback from your participants and try to make it as open and inclusive as possible."
		"I learned […] the importance of being responsive and flexible to the wants and needs of the people that we're planning for."
Incorporate more small group discussion time because attendees were already interested in interdisciplinary discussions.	2	"The feedback was really focused on saying that we need more small group discussion time, as opposed to some of these larger group discussions. Our participants really loved the interdisciplinary talk and chatter amongst themselves and learning from others in different disciplines. So, we were actually quite surprised at that. We thought our participants would come in with a disciplinary hat or lens, and prefer to speak in their own language with like-minded folks. And over time, they would start to understand and to appreciate and value the interdisciplinary working space. But really, from the get-go, they really wanted to learn from each other. They wanted to push their own boundaries of what they knew and what they didn't know. And so, we adjusted our discussion times to smaller groups, more diverse, and or mixed disciplines."
		"Early on, the feedback was that they would have liked to have had a lot more time in the small group breakout sessions. So, we accommodate for that in future symposia, and we got positive feedback from that."
There is value in making the symposium more interactive	1	"The first symposia were a lot more, I'll say one-directional, I guess, in terms of the information flow. So, it was a lot of folks from the Organizing Team giving or conveying information to the attendees, and we tried to make it interactive, but the interactive components definitely were enhanced with the later symposia. […] We really kind of started to understand the importance of having a lot of interactivity, especially in a virtual setting. And then we found ways to enhance that interactivity as we went forward through the different symposia."
Build in more time for activities	1	"I think one of the things was one piece of feedback that sticks in my mind was sometimes moving too fast. […] So that was a lesson that just always came up, was build in more time than you think you need."

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Balance session length, format (i.e., extent of collaboration), deliverables, and level of guidance and support provided to presenters	1	"We also had different feedback on the length of sessions, how collaborative the sessions were, and just how we were navigating that networking component in this deep dive thinking throughout the symposia series, where it was do we have enough time? Are we allowing the right people being able to talk to who they want to talk to? Are we providing the right speakers enough help, enough guidance while still leaving it open-ended? And we found that as one person would want more time, somebody else may want less, or as somebody wanted to have a large group report out, somebody wouldn't. And so, trying to figure out what those optimal times were, were pretty much an ongoing balance throughout the four workshops."
Minimize the amount of content presented during the symposium to emphasize quality or over quantity and not overwhelm participants	1	"I think one of the biggest lessons was like the first symposia from my perspective, looking back, I think we were maybe trying to cramp too much into the allotted time. And so, it ended up feeling maybe even more condensed than it should have, especially from the perspective of the attendees. I think it was a lot of information for them to process in a short amount of time. So, we took note of that. And then for the later symposia, we made sure that we kind of aimed for... Had to be cliché, but kind of quality over quantity. So, we focused on maybe one or two key themes for that particular meeting and just really focused on that and left a lot of time for those concepts to be explored and conveyed and discussed."

How the Organizing Team Members' Expertise Benefitted the Event Planning

Key Findings

- All 8 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team identified ways they applied their expertise to improve event planning, thus providing them with the opportunity to increase their organization and planning skills by applying their content knowledge and technical, professional, and other skills.

Summary of Findings

Members of the Organizing Team had the opportunity to increase their organizational and planning skills by applying their expertise in multiple domains to planning the event. To learn how they did so, respondents were asked, "Can you describe a time during the symposium planning process when you felt your expertise had a positive influence on the planning of an event? Please provide an example." Organizing Team members reported using their expertise to benefit the planning process in the following ways:

- Used domain/content expertise to support the planning and execution of the event (*n* = 4).
- Applied experience in planning events to ensure the details of the symposium were attended to and the materials needed were produced (*n* = 1).
- Used facilitation skills to keep meetings energized (*n* = 1).
- Used understanding of *how participant-driven, interactive activities can be used to produce knowledge* to modify the format of some aspects of the symposium (*n* = 1).
- Used past experience in virtual teaching and familiarity with related resources to identify a virtual tool that facilitated interaction among event attendees and documented the impact of the event (*n* = 1).
- Applied knowledge of science communication to facilitate attendee understanding (*n* = 1).
- Used web design skills to advertise the symposium (*n* = 1).
- Used teamwork skills to contribute to but not drive event planning (*n* = 1).

Quotes illustrating how expertise was used, as identified through thematic analysis of responses, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

How the Organizing Team Members' Expertise Benefitted the Event Planning (n = 8)

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Used domain/content expertise to support the planning and execution of the event	4	"One of the things that worked well was in the first symposium, I was able to introduce the topic of green infrastructure in a really broad way and talk about many different facets of that, primarily because I look at it from a very interdisciplinary angle and try to include all the different definitions. So, I feel like I was able to use my expertise to engage the group in a conversation about what is this thing that we're talking about? What's this focus on green infrastructure? What does that mean? How is that different for different people?"
		"I was able to work with those architects and designers and engineers who put that [workshop] together on a small budget and offer that relatively large amount of information toward participants through this [domain's/field/s] lens."
		"During the planning process, when folks were running through what they were planning, I would see points that I felt were important to bring up about [the topic], and I would emphasize that I thought that whatever those points are that I had in my head were important to highlight in their presentations that eventually made it into the symposium events."
		"So early in the symposia series, I did do a little mini-module, just presenting some of the background information on [my content area]. And I feel like it went well and helped put us in a good position to get everyone on a relatively even starting point since it was an interdisciplinary symposium and our participants were coming from a variety of different backgrounds. I want to have that early conversation about SETS thinking helps get everyone more or less on the same level and understanding that regardless of your discipline, there are these interdependencies that we need to be mindful of it. And then we kind of continue to emphasize SETS thinking throughout the later symposia."
Applied experience in planning events to ensure the details of the symposium were attended to and the materials needed were produced	1	"I have had a decent amount of experience [...] planning outreach events in the past, and I think this made me a bit more adept at making sure we had all the smaller pieces together. [...] We're very good at thinking big picture and asking a lot of good questions and diving into what did we want to come out of the symposia series? But occasionally, we could kind of lose the little details [...]. And so, I think my experience managing those events came through more clearly in making sure that we had the items that we were speaking about, or making sure somebody was assigned to doing and creating that item."
Used facilitation skills to keep meetings energized	1	"I got feedback that I was able to keep the group energized and moving along [...] and got really positive feedback that my style of doing that was very useful for the group to stay engaged and keep moving on to the next thing."
Used understanding of *how participant-driven, interactive activities can be used to produce knowledge* to modify the format of some aspects of the symposium	1	"Part of my expertise is in recognizing the ways that participant knowledge can be heard and some of the ways that participant knowledge can actually get shut down or be limited in certain ways. And so, throughout the planning of the Symposium Series, I was able to suggest changes to the design of our online workshops that I felt were going to help participants share their knowledge, share their experience, and therefore feel more like they are able to have a voice in the Symposia Series, able to contribute to its outcomes. [...] Specifically, I suggested small group breakout sessions for participants on specific questions that they would have a certain amount of time to work on themselves and increase that sort of style of activity over having outside experts invited to deliver keynote addresses."

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Used past experience in virtual teaching and familiarity with related resources to identify a virtual tool that facilitated interaction among event attendees and documented the impact of the event	1	"I had had some experience with virtual teaching and classes prior to this, and through that had gotten some good experience on some tools that are available for enhancing that interactivity within a virtual setting. […] And we ended up using [a specific tool] a few different times throughout the symposia. And so, I was able to kind of help basically create templates for those boards and then the instructions. […]. I think it worked well as a nice way to collect everyone's different thoughts and ideas, and then the participants cannot see what's happening, what the other participants are putting down. And so there can be some kind of like snowballing of ideas or a generation of conversations and discussions from there. And then now we have [the output of the tool] as legacy artifacts. So, in terms of us going back now and trying to understand a little bit more about what the true results and impact of this symposia might be, we have these as kind of potential "evidence" to pull from it. And we can kind of trace the evolution of the participants' thinking."
Applied knowledge of science communication to facilitate attendee understanding	1	"But then I also just recall instances where something we were planning was I felt becoming too overly complicated and so leaning on some of the training I've had in science communication, I've provided input that maybe be better for us to try and scale things back a little bit or simplify to make things easier, both on our end for planning, but also easier for our participants to grasp what it is that we're trying to get across or other times where there was written stuff that we were trying to work on. Again, I'd find instances where something I didn't feel was communicated very clearly, and then I'd provide my feedback on how to communicate something in a more direct way that would resonate more with our participants."
Used web design skills to advertise the symposium	1	"I have web design experience, and that helped bring our symposia planning and advertisement to the masses."
Used teamwork skills to contribute to but not drive event planning	1	"I kind of intentionally tried to sit back on some things and not over dominate the conversation, but then if I felt there was something that needed to be done differently or my opinion needed to be heard on something then I would make sure to jump in on something."

How Organizing Team Members Were Challenged

Key Findings

- All 7 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team who were asked identified ways they were challenged and grew while planning and executing the Early Career Symposium. These challenges provided them with the opportunity to increase their organization and planning skills to address the challenges.

Summary of Findings

To gain insight into whether and how the planning process challenged members of the Organizing Team to move beyond their comfort zone and expertise, respondents were asked, "Can you describe a time during the symposium planning process when you felt challenged to move out of your comfort zone or beyond your expertise?" Due to time constraints, only seven interviewees were asked this question. Respondents identified multiple challenges as listed below. Of note, the first three challenges are related to connecting across disciplines and domains of expertise (e.g., conceptual, technical), which is a key goal of the UREx SRN.

- Bridging the gap between disciplines and between technical and conceptual elements of projects and ideas (*n* = 2).
- Engaging in the symposium despite a background that was less directly related to green infrastructure (*n* = 1).
- Amplifying the voices of a group, social scientists, whose perspective diverged from other attendees and the intended direction of the discussion while also keeping the discussion on track and on schedule (*n* = 1).
- Addressing and integrating into the symposium the social issues of the political environment of 2020 and the national conversation about race, including systemic racism (*n* = 1).
- Using an unfamiliar activity, a problem-based learning approach (*n* = 1).
- Delivering a PowerPoint presentation (*n* = 1).
- Learning the process involved in reviewing a large number of applications (*n* = 1).

Quotes illustrating the challenges, as identified through thematic analysis of responses, are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

How the Organizing Team Members were Challenged to Move Beyond their Comfort Zone While Planning (n = 7)

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Bridging the gap between disciplines and between technical and conceptual elements of projects and ideas	2	"I am not an expert in SETS or GI. Whenever we started diving deep into how to best communicate these concepts to an audience I had little to offer. This was a valuable learning experience for me."
		"I think in general, we were bringing together a really wide range of disciplines in this effort, and so the topic we are working on is this idea of green infrastructure implementation and having a more holistic process to all of that. The concept of green infrastructure fundamentally is something that is technical in nature when you're thinking about implementing it. Someone has to make the designs, and someone has to build them and put them in the ground. […] Some […] are coming from […] other areas that are now starting to think about this topic from their very different perspectives, and that always kind of creates tensions, even in the process of organizing the workshop to talk through these tensions. We, of course, had our own tensions as a planning team about how to talk about these things and how to deal with the tensions during the workshop that would arise between our own participants. And so I think that was a tough thing for me, was to just deal with that and understand that we all need to sort of open our minds and be willing to talk through things that we're not always comfortable with and just kind of making sure that we're cognizant of the participants feeling similarly uncomfortable about some things and making sure that we're dealing with that properly in the course of the workshop."
Engaging in the symposium despite a background that was less directly related to green infrastructure	1	"I think the whole Symposia Series is slightly outside of my comfort zone in that it's about green infrastructure, but because we're talking about it as a holistic implementation problem, it was important to have a lot of different kinds of expertise, not just the sort of professional practice or discipline-specific kinds of expertise that seems most directly connected to green infrastructure. But I think that working out, so what are the different kinds of expertise that are relevant that aren't typically directly associated with green infrastructure, and where do I fit into that? It was a kind of an ongoing challenge that moved me a little out of my comfort zone as well."
Amplifying the voices of a group, social scientists, whose perspective diverged from other attendees and the intended direction of the discussion while also keeping the discussion on track and on schedule	1	"There were times in each one of the four workshops where I had been working with social scientists. […] I felt challenged in the sense of wanting to allow space for those participants to voice their opinions that were sometimes competing with one another during these group discussions. So, I wanted to make sure that they felt heard, that they were able to develop those opinions or perspectives on the fly because that is what this group discussion is all about. And sometimes, that would lead us down a different path than what we originally intended for the group discussion, which is totally fine. And that was part of the idea, that this has to be flexible. And it's a bit of a challenge for me because I tend to be the one within a group that wants to hear from everyone and wants to hear everything that they have to say. So, the challenge was reigning those ideas in, making sure that we were on time, and whatever they had to say from a social perspective if we can relate that back into the fold with this interdisciplinary focus."
Addressing and integrating into the symposium the social issues of the political environment of 2020 and the national conversation about race, including systemic racism	1	"We announced our symposium right at the time of the social unrest of the Black Lives Matters movement. And my training regarding green infrastructure, which was the topic of our symposia ... I have an engineering background, so it's very technical. And I'm aware of some of the more social as well as ecological components, but one thing we wanted to make sure we highlighted was the social aspects, such as equity and gentrification that can come along with the implementation of green infrastructure. And this was an area I was definitely less comfortable in and less familiar with. […] As an Organizing Team, we were trying to decide if we wanted to put out a statement on Black Lives Matter and what that meant, what we stand for if that aligns with the organizations that were sponsoring us. And this was definitely an area where I felt pushed out of my comfort zone, as it was something I was still learning about and didn't know how to represent it from an organizational point of view. And then additionally, we worked to integrate the social concepts more thoroughly throughout our symposia series. And this was just an area where I was learning as I was planning. And so, it was definitely stretching beyond my expertise, but provided a good learning experience."

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Using an unfamiliar activity, a problem-based learning approach	1	"I had never heard of problem-based learning before the symposia. I didn't know what it was and so I was a little nervous about it. […] So, I had to learn from my team members how to present this and facilitate it, and so that was very fun. I'm really glad we did it. Lots of people responded from our participant group that that was something they hadn't done before, and so it was kind of like a new way to look at things. So, I think in general, just this kind of really open-ended kind of symposium planning that we tried to do was a little bit outside my comfort zone, and I had to learn from my team how to facilitate that and move that forward. I think we were pretty successful."
Delivering a PowerPoint presentation	1	"But I am less comfortable delivering a PowerPoint presentation on a particular topic, and I had to do that a couple of times in the Symposia Series, and it was good, I think it went well […]. And so that moved me a little bit out of my comfort zone."
Learning the process involved in reviewing a large number of applications	1	"One of the duties that I took on was helping to review our applications, and there were maybe upwards of 60 people that applied, and I haven't reviewed this sort of application before, let alone at this scale. So that was something that was beyond my expertise, but other teammates on the organizing committee had done that. […] And once we settled on something, it was pretty easy to go from there once they had shared some sort of tips for me."

Reflections of What Worked Well/Could be Improved in Planning the Symposium

Members of the Organizing Team were asked to reflect on what worked well and what could be improved in planning the symposium. These questions were asked, in part, to collect formative feedback about how the process could be improved. At the same time, the team members' *ability* to identify what aspects of the process were successful and what aspects could be improved is another indication of their mastery of the planning and organization skills needed to execute a large, virtual event such as the Early Career Symposium.

Organizing Team Members' Reflections on What Worked Well in Planning the Symposium

Key Findings

- All 7 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team who were asked identified what worked well during the planning process. Their ability to identify what worked well is an indication of their growing planning and organization skills.

Summary of Findings

Interviewees were asked, "What, if anything, worked well during the process of planning the events?" Due to time constraints, only seven interviewees were asked this question. Team members identified multiple aspects that worked well, as listed below:

- Diverse backgrounds of team members (*n* = 3)
- Implementing the virtual component (*n* = 3)
- Being flexible in planning and in response to participant feedback (*n* = 2)
- Keeping the focus on the overall goals of the symposium (*n* = 2)
- Frequency of meetings (*n* = 2)
- How well the team worked together (*n* = 1)
- Team leadership (*n* = 1)
- Good distribution of responsibilities among team members (*n* = 1)
- Having adequate time to plan the event (*n* = 1)
- Use of tools (*n* = 1)
- Everything (*n* = 1)

Quotes illustrating the aspects of the planning process that worked well, as identified through thematic analysis of responses, are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Aspects of the Planning Process That Worked Well as Identified by the Organizing Team Members (n = 7)

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Diverse backgrounds of team members	3	"I think that the diverse perspectives of the team also significantly helped with planning the symposium to make sure […] we were trying […] approach[ing] green infrastructure from the social-ecological and technological viewpoint, and luckily, we had researchers from each of those. So that allowed us as a planning team to really vet out whether or not we were addressing each of these components with enough detail as we moved along throughout the symposia series. And so, it was really nice to have that spread knowledge across our team."
		"I think our diverse set of skills in many sorts, like our topical expertise, but just sort of our different sort of experiences and having done different sorts of workshops, were all helpful to make this happen."
		"We had a lot of different perspectives on our team, which I think was really great. So, we had a couple of engineers, climate scientists, some social scientists, ecologists. It was a really well-rounded team, so people of varying degrees of looseness in their schedule were able to comment on it, and that really was useful. So, having all that time to really hone in on what we wanted to do and how big discussions on, what does it even mean?"
Implementing the virtual component	3	"As far as the virtual component itself, at the point that we started planning, we really hadn't been to too many virtual conferences individually yet at that time. And so, it was a lot of trial and error among our team, but I think we handled it pretty well."
		"When we initially planned this, we meant for it to be virtual because we didn't want people to have to travel as they do for every conference and leave their families and their other sort of engagements behind, but also to not have the carbon footprint associated with travel, and then, of course, the pandemic happened and basically made that mandatory whether or not we had planned that or not, and so we had the advantage of having sort of thought ahead a little bit more about that, and I think that helped us in executing a virtual workshop well at little bit less short notice than other people."
		"From the get-go when we first started meeting back in August of 2019, or September of 2019, whenever it was, we had planned for the symposium to be online from the get-go. This was well before we knew that virtually everything would be online because COVID hadn't even been discovered at that point."
Being flexible in planning and in response to participant feedback	2	"Like I said earlier, I think one of the things that worked well was just our ability to be flexible and responsive, and part of that was […] just being flexible to what exactly we had going on in each symposium allowed us to respond to participants and figure out what worked well and what didn't work well and adapt from there."
		"What worked well in planning the events? I think responding to participant feedback was really important to one of them was like, "Hey, we need a solid break in the middle of this four-hour block." So, the first one, we had two 10-minute breaks, I think, in that four hours. People were like, "Oh my gosh, I need more time. It's COVID now. I'm at home. My kids are here," and things like that. So, we, for example, put in a half-an-hour break in the middle of the fourth one. That's kind of how it emerged. What else went well?"

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Keeping the focus on the overall goals of the symposium	2	"I think [Organizing Team member] is really the person who kept bringing this discussion point up. Everyone sort of asked why we are doing this. But I think [Organizing Team member] was the one who did it most strongly throughout the whole symposium series planning, was like, "Why are we even doing this? Why do we want to bring these people together? What are some of our goals?" So, having us examine that rather than just coming together to plan something and be like, "Okay, we have to do this. Let's move forward." We had enough time to really talk about the why, and I think that was a really important part of planning the symposia series."
		"Process of planning the events. One thing that our participants valued the most was just having a clear set of objectives and expected deliverables. […] And then also having these objectives for the larger series. So, what we eventually started doing is we created a roadmap of where we'd been, where we are. And where we're going. And so, in each one of the workshops, really from symposium two to four, we continually showed them where we are in the process of generating this information. And we are developing these deliverables, but once again, it's up to us as a group to determine what those are."
Frequency of meetings	2	"We were meeting on a weekly basis for about an hour, which is my personal management style**,"**
		"I think another thing that was super useful is that the Organizing Team, we've been meeting regularly weekly since the beginning. So that's a year and a half we've been meeting weekly to talk about this, and that has been fabulous because we've had a lot of time to really think about it and hone it."
How well the team worked together	1	"I'm very pleased with the Organizing Team, how we worked together. I like about a weekly to every other week check-in, so this worked really well for me. "
Team leadership	1	"So, I mean, definitely [Organizing Team member's] leadership and energy and consistency worked really well.[…] And so, so there was something about, I think [Organizing Team member's] leadership and coordination and just consistency that allowed the team to evolve in its thinking and its work to a kind of an optimal point for what we could do in that time span that felt really good, it felt about right."
Good distribution of responsibilities among team members	1	"And then we had an Organizing Team of eight, which meant that our responsibilities were usually pretty well dispersed to keep it manageable throughout the week."
Having adequate time to plan the event	1	"We were able to spend what to me felt like about the right amount of time designing and planning this Symposia Series. And that's often not the case, often something comes up, and you're kind of scrambling to get something ready in time, or there are just too many things on your plate. Whatever the situation is, it doesn't usually feel quite so smooth and ideal. And this Symposia Series seemed like we got started about thinking about it about a year in advance, we met regularly, we progressed, there were definitely some points along the way where I was a little stressed out thinking that we weren't going to deliver something provocative enough or different enough, and then we did."
Use of tools	1	"The use of Google docs worked very well."
Everything	1	"What, if anything, worked well in the process? I mean, I would say everything works pretty well in general. I think we were pretty successful in that we brought together a pretty sizable group of people during crazy times. "

Organizing Team Members' Reflections on What Could be Improved in Planning the Symposium

Key Findings

- All 7 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team who were asked identified areas for improvement in the planning process. Their ability to identify areas for improvement is an indication of their growing planning and organization skills.

Summary of Findings

Respondents were asked, "What, if anything, could have been improved [in the process of planning the event]?" Due to time constraints, only seven interviewees were asked this question. Team members identified multiple areas of improvement as listed below:

- Greater alignment among team members regarding the overall objectives (*n* = 2)
- Better identify objectives that are applicable to participants not on the academic track (*n* = 1)
- Better time management during meetings (*n* = 1)
- Hold planning meetings and event sessions in-person (*n* = 1)
- Better integration of Organizing Team members in the event itself as participants (*n* = 1)
- Less experimentation with platforms/tools during the symposium (*n* = 1)
- Better retention of attendees (*n* = 1)
- Improving interactions among attendees outside of symposium sessions (*n* = 1)

Quotes illustrating the aspects of the planning process that could be improved, as identified through thematic analysis of responses, are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Aspects of the Planning Process That Could be Improved as Identified by the Organizing Team Members (n = 7)

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Greater alignment among team members regarding the overall objectives	2	"Well, I think that having a vision of what the overall outcome is and what the overall objective is takes work and time in terms of hearing everybody out. And I think that our group always has tension there or mixed feelings there."
		"One thing that our participants valued the most was just having a clear set of objectives and expected deliverables. So, this is something that I still think we could have improved, and we will improve in a future symposium. But they love to have a clear set of guidelines and objectives for each of the days that we met."
Better identify objectives that are applicable to participants not on the academic track	1	"And we naturally, I guess, struggle a little bit with the fact that all of us are really in academic places, and yet we're trying to design a workshop series that isn't only relevant to other academic early career scholars, but also people in professional practice and people who may not be thinking that their only career trajectory is academic. And so just overcoming the tendency to constantly sort of frame and reframe our work as if the outcome and end objective is a scientific paper or something that fits very unproblematically within an academic career trajectory was, I think, a challenge, an ongoing challenge that we'd still have to keep coming back to in different ways. So, I don't know what we could do differently exactly, but I think definitely, well, one thing it would be, have the composition of the team include non-academic people. And I think that we could also try to think about maybe other funding sources or other. [...] Yeah, other grants or other funding sources that would have less of an already included bias toward academic career performance and trajectory."
Better time management during meetings	1	"We could have improved on time management during our weekly meetings. Sometimes our meetings felt a bit circular in terms of conversation. We also needed better accountability structures for when folks were behind on deliverables. "
Hold planning meetings and event sessions in-person	1	"I don't know if I have a very good answer for that. I think, in general, I prefer doing things in person and having face-to-face conversations with people, so if that was at all possible, it would have been nice, even just for the planning, to be in the same room with people. Of course, that was never going to be an option, at least all the time, since not everyone in the organizing committee is at ASU, so we wouldn't have all been together all the time anyway."
Better integration of Organizing Team members in the event itself as participants	1	"The integration of our organizational team into the symposia workshops. [… During] the first workshop, we pretty much remained separate from the participants while we had them discuss definitions of GI, or we sat back and stood as note-takers frequently during the early symposia's workshops. And as we moved along we got better at voicing our thoughts and our own knowledge to the group, but it would have been nice to maybe find a way to integrate ourselves as more participants so that we weren't always looked to for necessarily an answer. And so that it was more of a collaborative process. And, then, related to that, having the technical aspect of just working Zoom and these various different platforms oftentimes meant that somebody had to be on the backside, making sure that was all still functioning. And I think we could have done a better job at dispersing who that individual was so that they had more of an opportunity to participate throughout the series."
Less experimentation with platforms/tools during the symposium	1	"We introduced a lot of different platforms to try to work on virtually, and I think it may have been more beneficial had we picked one and used it, assuming it functioned the first time. If it didn't work at all the first time, I still think we should have changed it, but being more consistent so that we could reduce that learning curve among our participants when they're working together."

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Better retention of attendees	1	"I would say one of the biggest things I was disappointed about was just losing participants over the course of the workshop. And again, this was sort of an unprecedented time when some people, like myself, had extra childcare responsibilities and more strains on their time, and we acknowledged that and tried to build in flexibility, but inherently there was some time when we had to hold the workshop. And we started this in the summer and went into the semester and a lot of people associated with the workshop are affiliated with academic institutions, so that became during the semester for them and we basically lost... I don't remember what the exact amount is, but we decreased in our participants a fair amount from the beginning to the end. It went from being a really nicely sized workshop to starting to get to a less than ideal number, less than we had hoped, and so just thinking in the future, how you can find ways to build in better strategies for retention throughout the whole workshop because we really wanted to have people's opinion and participation throughout every single one, not just some of them."
Improving interactions among attendees outside of symposium sessions	1	"We weren't very successful at getting outside of symposium interactions happening. We have a Slack channel and we wanted folks to engage on Slack and say, 'Hey, here's a new paper,' and, 'Oh, what do you think about this?' And have discussions about things outside of the symposia series and that just kind of fell apart. Honestly, a big part of it was just the Organizing Team, we just didn't have time and nobody had time, I think. We wished that could get going so that networking could continue kind of more informally. So, we're attempting now to follow up with some smaller groups that are going to do mini-projects."

Findings Related to the Secondary Outcome: Graduate Students and Postdocs Report Meaningful Connections and Networking

How Planning the Symposium Afforded Opportunities for Networking

Key Findings

- All 8 (100.0%) members of the Organizing Team reported having opportunities to network as a result of planning the symposium; although two reported minimal opportunities directly as a result of the planning process, all were able to participate in networking during the event itself.

Summary of Findings

To understand whether and how planning the symposium provided Organizing Team Members with opportunities to network, respondents were asked, "How, if at all, has your involvement in the planning of the Early Career Symposium helped you network with others outside of the Organizing Team?" Organizing Team members identified the networking opportunities they had as a result of participating in the planning and facilitating the event; of note, two interviewees reported that the planning process itself provided limited networking opportunities, but the symposium itself provided opportunities:

- Connecting with guest speakers and attendees at the symposium (*n* = 6).
- Connecting with individuals/companies that provided technical support and resources (*n* = 3).
- Networking with Organizing Team members and attendees facilitated work with those individuals on other projects (*n* = 1).
- Networking occurred through email exchanges and the Slack channel, providing an informal venue for interaction (*n* = 1).
- Opportunities to network during the symposium were reduced due to the responsibilities of facilitating the event; however, the Organizing Team learned the importance of making time for leadership to participate and network during the event (*n* = 1).
- Networking outside of the Organizing Team during the planning of the symposium itself was minimal (*n* = 2).

In addition, one Organizing Team member reflected on how they as leaders tried to facilitate networking during the event:

> Ultimately, I think kind of having four [events] spread out over the course of several months actually really helps with that networking component as well. Just having multiple opportunities to see and interact with different folks, I think also further help strengthen those networking activities.

Quotes illustrating how networking occurred, as identified through thematic analysis of responses, are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

How Planning the Symposium Afforded Opportunities for Networking (n = 8)

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Connecting with guest speakers and attendees at the symposium	6	"Other folks brought in guest speakers, and I was able to learn about their work and engage with them in ways I wouldn't otherwise be able to do without being part of the planning committee."
		"There are people that I connected with or that I sort of myself recruited to participate in the workshop because I knew they were doing some interesting work. I think that in the future there will be opportunities to collaborate with some of these folks more, and just having participated in the workshop with them, it'll make it really easy in the future to reach out and say, 'Hey, remember that workshop we did together? I'd love to have you participate in so-and-so thing.'"
		"It was really great because we got to meet with, again, these 35 participants that joined our group."
		"So, meeting all of the participants in the workshop, we had a really strong turnout and showing from people, like I said, across the US and internationally, who bring themselves a whole bunch of different experiences and skillsets. […] We had a number of Ph.D. students […], and those are names and faces that I know now that expand the actual number of people that I can collaborate with or contact and ask questions to. But they also expand just the awareness that I have as an individual of people working in different fields generally, and how they bring a lot of different insights, but also how a lot of the themes that we were talking about in the series were relevant to the different fields and professional affiliations that these people were in. […] So, I mean, part of the design of this was to kind of facilitate ongoing collaborations, and it seems that we've been successful so far in making that happen."
		"One of the efforts that we made to kind of increase the level of interaction was we hosted a couple of what we called virtual happy hours, which are kind of outside of the normally scheduled core symposia events. And so, I found that to be a really nice environment to get to know the participants a little bit more in kind of a more informal unstructured setting. So even within that, we would kind of move into breakout rooms within Zoom, and we would rotate through almost like you were hopping around to different tables to talk to folks. And so, I found that to be a really great way to get to know people with a little more time and space to have a conversation as opposed to in the kind of the core symposia events."
Connecting with individuals/ companies that provided technical support and resources	3	"This process helped me [connect] with a visual facilitator […] and he offered valuable zoom meeting experience and gave us beautiful illustrations of our meeting thought process."
Networking with Organizing Team members and attendees facilitated work with those individuals on other projects	1	"This group of researchers, we've all worked together in the past on different projects. […] And I would say that through this process, we really learned the ways that each other works and how they work in a team setting. So, the few individuals that I was working on [projects] with, it really fast-tracked some of that progress. That was actually really nice to see, just because we knew how each other worked and how we could leverage each one of our own resources to get that done. And then, also I work on other projects within the UREX SRN, of course, with some of these folks."

Theme	*n*	Illustrative Responses
Networking occurred through email exchanges and the Slack channel, providing an informal venue for interaction	1	"And then also just kind of through email exchanges with the attendees, and we set up a Slack channel, so there's kind of another more informal venue for interaction there."
Opportunities to network during the symposium were reduced due to the responsibilities of facilitating the event; however, the Organizing Team learned the importance of making time for leadership to participate and network during the event	1	"I think that I, less networking than I had hoped outside the Organizing Team. I think mostly because when you're running an event, you don't really get to participate in the event as much as you had hoped, just with timing and jumping in and out of Zoom rooms and making sure everything is moving along. So, by the last symposium, we, as an Organizing Team had said, "Hey, we really want to participate more in this and get to know these people." So, we had more time where I was able to network with some of the folks and we did try to run happy hours and things like that."
Networking outside of the Organizing Team during the planning of the symposium itself was minimal	2	"Outside of the Organizing Team, for the planning process, I would say is fairly minimal from my side."
		"So, the planning itself was pretty insulated. It was really just the core Organizing Team with the exception of a few meetings, where folks that we were collaborating with […] participated, and they would give us some feedback about the things that we were planning."