
REPORT

Summary of Responses to Summer 2011 SIGIR Survey

James Allan, SIGIR Chair
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
Amherst, Massachusetts, USA
allan@cs.umass.edu

The SIGIR executive committee solicited the opinion of the IR community on several issues this past summer. The survey's questions largely fell into two categories: issues related to the SIGIR conference and questions of how the SIG should manage its responsibilities and funds. The survey was started by 303 people and completed by 228 over the course of July 21 through August 16, 2011. The survey was a bit long, so perhaps it's not surprising that about 25% of the respondents gave up.

This article details the results of the survey, broken down by those two categories. The survey was put together mostly by the SIGIR Chair with some input from the rest of the executive committee. That same SIGIR Chair admits to not being a survey designer and that fact, combined with rushing to get the survey out, meant that some questions did not provide enough information for the respondent to be sure how to answer. For that reason – and because only a few hundred people responded – the executive committee is interpreting these as suggestive rather than true representations of the IR community's feelings.

In many cases, the community is clearly split in its opinions. However, a number of items stand out:

- SIGIR student and member registration fees are perhaps too high
- CIKM student registration fees are regarded as too high
- To lower conference registration fees, people are willing to sacrifice parts of the conference banquet and the quality of coffee breaks and poster receptions.
- Even if dropping it would lower conference registration fees, almost everyone wants wireless internet access.
- Support for student travel to SIGIR and other conferences is high.
- There is interest in SIGIR's supporting data creation and archiving activities.
- There is support for funding the Alan Turing Centenary celebration.
- There is interest but not overwhelming interest in a regional North American SIGIR conference.
- There is strong support for dropping the printed SIGIR conference proceedings.
- Feelings about the SIGIR reviewing process are "good" but not good enough.
- There is clear concern about the use of proprietary data in SIGIR papers, but the concern is more evident among academics than non-academics.
- There is strong support for creating a "test of time" paper award.

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- There are mixed opinions about creating other new awards.

More details on each of those as well as other survey questions are reported below.

1 Issues related to SIG responsibilities and funds

A number of survey questions related to issues facing the SIGIR organization (rather than the SIGIR conference). Although all responses to the questions are interesting, those from members of SIGIR necessarily have more weight. In all, 58% (175 of 303) of the responses came from members of SIGIR, an additional 20% claimed no affiliation with any IR-related professional organization, and the others were members of ASIST, BCS, IEEE, ACL, or other related organizations. The 175 SIGIR members who responded make up roughly 25% of the overall SIGIR membership. For the remainder of this section, percentages are of the SIGIR members responding unless otherwise stated. (By and large, all responses tracked those of the SIGIR membership.)

SIGIR members were 43% faculty, 17% students, 17% other academic, and 22% non-academic. Slightly more than half are from North or South America, a bit more than a third from Europe or Africa, and 13% from Asia or Australia.

A third “almost always” attend the SIGIR conference, with another quarter attending it “often”; 10% never attend SIGIR. By way of contrast, a third have never attended CIKM, and only 17% attend CIKM regularly. WSDM also has about 17% attending regularly, but 62% have never attended the conference. A fourth conference sponsored by SIGIR, JCDL, is never attended by 72% of the SIGIR respondents, with only 4% attending regularly. On the other hand, all three non-SIGIR conferences have high participation from SIGIR members as reviewers, PC members, and authors.

1.1 Use of SIGIR reserve funds

As reported in the business meeting, the SIG has a healthy reserve fund of quite close to a million US dollars. This fund is used in part to back up conferences sponsored by SIGIR, to support student travel, and for occasional IR-related activities (e.g., the SIGIR museum at <http://sigir.org/museum>). However, the SIGIR executive committee (as did past committees) is considering other ways to use the funds. The survey proposed several possibilities:

- Support is strong for student travel to the SIGIR conference, with 53% feeling it was fine and another 43% voting for even more.
- There is also interest in supporting student travel to other SIGIR-sponsored conferences with 30% asking for more and 47% feeling it is fine as it is.¹ A minority of 8% feels funds should not be used this way.
- There is slightly less support for student travel to events related to IR but not sponsored by SIGIR, with 20% saying “no” and another 20% feeling there should be less.

¹ It is unclear what “fine as it is” means, unfortunately. Because of sloppiness in the survey’s creation, respondents probably did not know that SIGIR currently funds student travel *only* for the SIGIR conference. The SIGIR executive’s guess that “fine as it is” is a vote in favor of providing support at a modest level.

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- There is some support (18%) for increasing awards for outstanding research or for contributions to SIGIR (or IR in general), but almost 2/3 of the respondents felt the support should be left as is or lowered.
 - There is little interest in supporting non-student travel, with 45% completely opposed and another 22% feeling even less (than the current “none”) should be provided.
 - Feelings are comparable for making small research grants, with 2/3 opposed to some degree, though 20% were in favor of this idea.
 - There was more interest in funding small projects that might enhance the SIGIR web site, with 29% in favor and another 44% feeling it was fine as it is. (As mentioned above, SIGIR has funded small projects like the SIGIR Museum in the past.)
 - Data archiving and creation activities are of great interest, with 45% wanting more funding and only 20% opposed.
 - There is similar interest in supporting videos or webcasts of conference talks, with 50% in favor, though almost 25% are opposed.

It is important to take these results with a grain of salt. As several respondents noted, the survey did not indicate how much was *currently* being spent on most of those activities. That made it difficult to know if the funding should go up or down. Most people found a way to answer the question, apparently indicating more their support (or lack of support) for the concept rather than the specific amounts.

The SIGIR executive committee is currently exploring ways to increase student travel support for events other than the SIGIR conference. The exec is particularly interested in supporting SIGIR-sponsored conferences that have historically returned surplus revenue to the SIG, but hopes to develop a policy that will apply more broadly.

The only other area that appears to have strong support is data archiving and (to a lesser degree) data creation activities. The exec has not yet explored this issue, but welcomes your thoughts on the topic.

1.2 ACM's Alan Turing Centenary Celebration

SIGIR was asked by the ACM to jointly sponsor a celebration of Alan Turing's 100th birthday, June 2012, in San Francisco. SIGIR's Keith van Rijsbergen has been involved in the planning of this event, along with representatives from ten other SIGs. ACM asked the SIGs to contribute US\$22,800 each to support the event. The ACM feels this is a high-profile event that highlights the importance and future of our discipline, and that SIGIR (and the other SIGs) would want their name associated with it.

The responding membership of SIGIR was supportive of providing funding: 37% were in favor of funding US\$20,000 or more, with another 25% in support of up to US\$10,000. (Support was even higher among all respondents regardless of whether they were SIGIR members.) 18% had no opinion, but some people (15%) were strongly opposed to the idea, with a range of feelings regarding the appropriateness of this event for SIGIR.

Based on the generally strong support of the SIG members, the SIGIR executive approached the ACM to push harder for more “value” from its participation. The ACM agreed that SIGIR would “control” some student scholarships, something that was proposed earlier but left unresolved. In addition, the

ACM agreed that the lectures and other activities occurring at the event would be recorded and made broadly available. Given the large reserves of SIGIR, the executive agreed to provide the funding to the ACM. Please look for announcements about the event as they become available.

2 Issues related to the SIGIR conference

A number of questions on the survey sought opinions about the SIGIR conference, its costs, and its technical program. In this section, the SIGIR executive committee feels that opinions of people who attend the SIGIR conference should have more weight than others and that people who attend regularly provide the most informed comments. For that reason, the statistics reported here focus on that group of 159 people; unless otherwise stated, the numbers reflect people who indicated that they attend SIGIR *occasionally, often, or almost always*.

SIGIR attendees were 42% faculty, 11% students, 23% other academic, and 23% non-academic. Slightly less than half are from North or South America, a bit more than 40% from Europe or Africa, and 12% from Asia or Australia. 80% are also members of SIGIR or the ACM, with another 25% affiliated with ASIST, BCS, or other groups related to IR. 54% of them planned to attend SIGIR 2011. However, 22%, 57%, and 90% never attend CIKM, WSDM, or JCDL, respectively.

Finally, 93% of the attendees have been authors of SIGIR papers, 22% have served as organizers, 29% have sat on the Senior Program Committee (some years called Area Coordinators), and 76% have served on the Program Committee as reviewers. Not surprisingly many people have participated in many ways, so those numbers add up to substantially more than 100%.

2.1 Regional SIGIR conferences

With the SIGIR conference rotating between three regions of the world, it is only in your “home” region a third of the time. Other conferences – including those sponsored by SIGIR – also rotate and make it more likely that an IR conference will be “nearby.” However, some people have proposed that SIGIR explore sponsoring a North American regional IR conference along the lines of ECIR (Europe) and AIRS (Australia/Asia).

The first question asked is whether this is worth exploring at all. 36% like the idea, 25% do not, and 39% have no preference.

The remaining questions explored a small number of logistical questions *on the assumption that such a conference existed*. Not surprisingly, 68% asked that it not conflict with the main SIGIR, 67% requested that it not conflict with ECIR, and 54% didn’t want a conflict with AIRS. Only a small number of people disagreed with avoiding those conflicts. When asked whether a conference like this should be skipped for the years that SIGIR is in the Americas, 50% agreed it should but 25% felt they should both run.

2.2 SIGIR registration costs

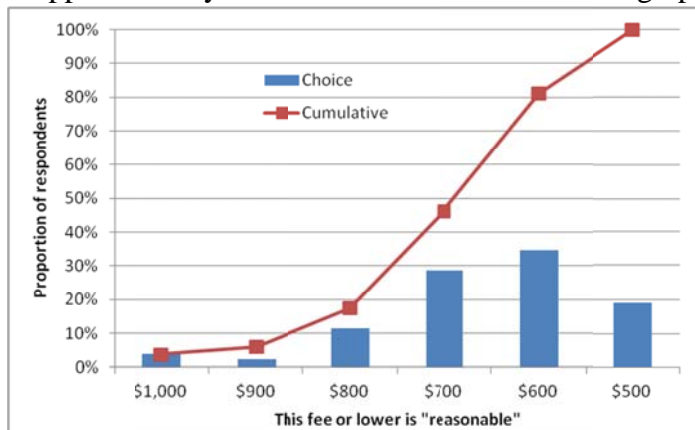
The SIGIR executive committee has heard substantial concern about the rising cost of SIGIR registration fees. A series of questions explored this issue, largely showing that the concern is fairly widespread but not universal.

In response to explicitly asking the question, 52% indicated they felt that SIGIR registration for members of SIGIR was a good value for the cost. On the other hand, 47% felt that the fees were too high. Only 1 person indicated that the SIGIR conference was a bargain.

To get a handle on what people thought was a reasonable registration fee, people were asked to indicate what they thought was an appropriate cost for early conference registration combined with a single one-day workshop. For comparison, these values were approximately US\$800 for SIGIR 2011. The graph on the right shows the distribution of “reasonable” costs in US dollars, both at each point and cumulatively. The cumulative number assumes that someone believing that US\$900 is a reasonable registration fee would feel the same about a fee of US\$800 or even lower.

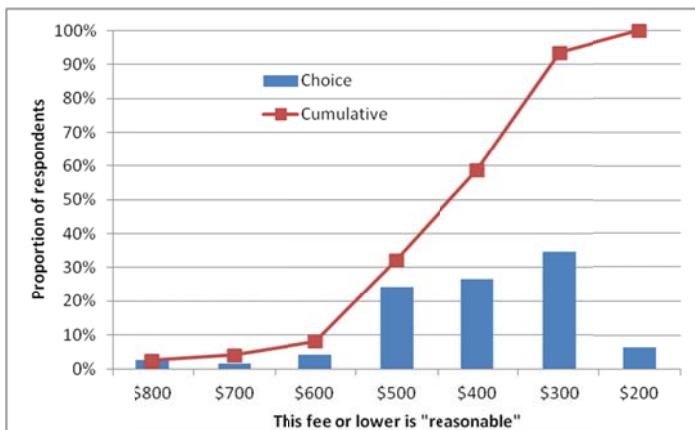
The selections distribute roughly around US\$600, with less than half of the respondents feeling that a fee above US\$700 is reasonable.

Slightly less than 20% believe that the 2011 fee of around US\$800 is reasonable. A substantial percent (19%) feel that the fee for the conference and a workshop shouldn’t even exceed US\$500.



In parallel questions about *student* registration fees, this time for a student attending the conference and a single tutorial, the feeling was almost the same as for non-students: 48% felt it was a good value, 42% felt the fee was too high, but a slightly higher percent (10%) felt it was a bargain. The question about “reasonable” fees for students used a lower range of fees and the distribution was different. For comparison, the amount was approximately US\$475 for SIGIR 2011.

In this case (see the graph on the right), the distribution centers slightly below US\$400, with more than 40% feeling that anything over US\$400 is unreasonable. The current fee of close to US\$500 is not reasonable for nearly 70% of the respondents. Finally, although most people seemed to feel that US\$200 was unexpectedly low, 6% indicated they felt that was a reasonable cap.



2.3 Reducing conference registration fees

The survey proposed several possibilities for reducing registration fees, primarily at the SIGIR conference, though the same options are plausible for the other conferences that SIGIR sponsors. The ideas suggested and the responses (still just by SIGIR attendees) were:

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- *Opening night reception.* Slightly less than half of the respondents (46%) felt that the reception was nice, but 24% felt it could easily be gotten rid of. Only 9% felt it was critical and the rest of the people had no preference.
 - *Poster reception,* typically “heavy hors d’oeuvres” offered throughout. Here, 33% felt the reception was critical, another 46% felt it was nice, and 8% felt it could be gotten rid of.
 - When it was suggested that the quality of the food at this poster reception could be dropped, most people (46%) allowed that as a possibility, another 13% were strongly in favor of doing so, and the balance were against the idea.
 - *Evening banquet.* 25% felt it was critical, 43% of the respondents described it as nice, and 16% felt it could be dropped.
 - When asked about the possibility of making the banquet optional, 39% were strongly in favor of that (“do it”) and another 36% supported the idea “if needed.” The rest were opposed to such a change, though only 9% were strongly opposed.
 - The idea of replacing the banquet with a second reception was less appealing than making the banquet optional: 34% were enthusiastic, 36% supported the idea “if needed”, and the remainder preferred not (18%) or were adamantly opposed (12%).
 - There was little enthusiasm for dropping the banquet entirely, replacing it with a “dinner on your own” evening. 60% of the people were against the idea with only 16% being strongly in favor.
 - One possibility to address *student* registration costs would be to return to an older model where student registrations did not include the banquet. 56% of the respondents thought that was a good or acceptable idea; 20% were strongly opposed.
 - *Provided lunches.* In this case, 27% felt that lunches do not need to be provided, 38% feel they are nice, and 14% felt they are critical. Attitudes toward the boxed lunch provided at SIGIR for the business meeting was slightly less positive, with 15% feeling they are critical, 26% feeling they are nice, and 29% happy to get rid of them.
 - There was support for dropping the provided lunches, with 33% saying “do it”, 37% “if needed”, and the remaining third preferring not or being opposed.
 - *Coffee breaks.* These breaks are, not surprisingly, something that almost everyone agrees are critical. 60% felt so, another 33% felt they are nice and only three people felt they could be gotten rid of.
 - When asked whether the quality of the coffee breaks could be lowered, 42% indicated that they could cope with that, with 12% being strongly in favor of doing so and 25% being strongly opposed.
 - *Wireless internet.* This feature beat out coffee breaks in popularity, with 82% of the respondents feeling it is necessary and 6 people happy to get rid of it.
 - Asked about providing wireless internet but charging for access, 63% thought that was a really bad idea (“no!”) and another 19% preferred not. Only 10 people were enthusiastic about paying (or making others pay).

It is important to highlight that people’s answers related to their attitudes about these options on the assumption that the goal is to reduce registration fees. For example, many people were willing to make

the banquet optional for students *if that resulted in lower registration fees for students*. Similarly, it is most likely that the six people wanting to get rid of coffee breaks felt that was OK if it cut the cost of registration – rather than being opposed to coffee breaks *per se*.

2.4 SIGIR reviewing and related questions

As the SIGIR conferences have grown, the reviewing and publishing process for the conference has undergone minor changes. One part of the survey addressed some of the issues that were raised to the executive committee as possibly detrimental. Since these are questions related to the conference, the summary below focuses on people who typically attend the SIGIR conference.

The following questions were posed:

- *How do you feel about allowing 10 proceedings pages for a full research paper rather than the previous 8?* This option was available in 2011 because the conference switched primarily to electronic proceedings where the page count was not an issue.
- *How do you feel about the trend toward dropping printed proceedings?* Although electronic versions of the proceedings (e.g., CDs) have been available for several years, SIGIR 2011 was the first conference to make the printed proceedings option (and at a cost).
- *How do you feel about having some full research papers presented as posters rather than as oral presentations in sessions?* This possibility existed for SIGIR 2011 for the first time, though it was not used because all accepted full papers could fit as oral presentations.
- *How do you feel about the reviewing process?*
- *How do you feel about having the Program Committee switch to being primarily on-line?* In past years, the (Senior) Program Committee met as a group to make paper decisions. Starting in 2009, the bulk of the work was done on-line and a small group of people met in person to complete the process.
- *How do you feel about allowing author responses to some reviewers' comments?* These responses are typically made after the first round of reviews and can be used to respond to reviewer concerns or questions. SIGIR first used this option in 2011, though only for submissions where such concerns clearly existed.

This table summarizes the attitudes of the respondents for each of those topics.

	Perfect	Excellent	Good	Fair	Bad
10 pages rather than 8	8%	23%	25%	22%	22%
Drop printed proceedings	45%	20%	16%	12%	8%
Poster presentations of full papers	9%	25%	29%	19%	19%
Reviewing process	2%	26%	51%	15%	6%
On-line PC meeting	10%	33%	29%	21%	8%
Author response to reviewers	15%	27%	28%	19%	11%

The Program Chairs for SIGIR 2013 and beyond will keep these responses in mind as they decide on the process and format of the technical program in the future.

2.5 Proprietary test sets in SIGIR papers

Recent papers at the SIGIR conference have reported results on test sets that are proprietary to the authors of the paper and who will not (or cannot) publicly release them. Others use publicly available test sets such as those from evaluation forums. A number of people feel that the user of proprietary data is a problem that the SIGIR community should address. The survey explored the question to get a better sense of community attitude. Because this issue largely arises in the context of companies (with proprietary data) versus academics (without them), the description discusses how the results play out between those two groups.

- 6% of the respondents felt that papers that report results on un-releasable test sets should be rejected automatically. Only one non-academic respondent felt this way.
- 32% supported the idea that experiments must always be conducted on publicly available test sets – with the caveat that one must exist. Most of the support for this option came from academics, with only 5 of the 32 percentage points coming from non-academic respondents.
- The idea of requiring the public release of all test sets used was supported by 16%. Again, this idea was supposed almost entirely by academics.
- 18% were in favor of the idea of creating special tracks or sessions within the conference for papers with proprietary data. About a quarter of that 18% came from non-academic researchers.
- 29% felt that no change should be made, that the current practice is fine. A third of those who felt this way were non-academic respondents.

Not surprisingly, non-academic researchers – who more often work with proprietary data sets – mostly support less restrictive ideas such as requiring public data sets, grouping those papers in their own sessions, or (most popularly) doing nothing different.

2.6 Awards at SIGIR

The SIGIR organization currently funds Best Paper and Best Student Paper awards for the SIGIR conference. (It also provides some support for the Vannevar Bush award at JCDL.) The executive committee has heard from several people that it would be great to have more awards or that the award process should be changed. A series of questions addressed some – but certainly not all – possibilities.

For the most part these are self-explanatory, so the results are summarized here:

	Must Do!	Like	No pref	Don't do	Huh?
Create a “test of time” award	13%	47%	19%	8%	13%
Allow more than one paper per award	5%	34%	19%	40%	2%
Create Best Poster award	9%	43%	22%	26%	1%
Create Best Demo award	5%	23%	28%	41%	3%
Create Best Oral Presentation award	11%	32%	17%	36%	4%
Community input on Best ... awards	9%	19%	26%	44%	2%
Community input on “test of time”	11%	24%	24%	29%	11%

This information will be shared with SIGIR conference Program Chairs and with the SIGIR Awards Chair. Most new awards that are presented by a SIG require formal proposals and approval by the ACM, so there can be delay in their implementation.

3 Issues related to SIGIR-sponsored conferences

In addition to the SIGIR conference, the SIG sponsors three other conferences: CIKM is jointly sponsored with SIGWEB; WSDM is joint with SIGWEB; and JCDL is sponsored along with IEEE Computer Society. To explore attitudes toward other IR conferences, the survey considered CIKM because it is a highly selective IR conference (that includes other fields, too) and has existed for enough years to have a clear track record and attendee expectations.

3.1 CIKM registration fees

The survey presented a graph of conference registration fees over the years. It was clear from the graph that CIKM registration fees are among the highest, though SIGIR is comparable (as is ICML). The trend in *student* registration fees shows CIKM costs trending upwards and SIGIR fees heading down to be consistent with other conferences.

To be fair, only respondents who attend CIKM *occasionally, often, or almost always* were counted here. (The numbers are nearly identical if SIGIR attendees are used instead.)

Given that the presentation of the numbers showed CIKM as typically the highest registration fee, it isn't surprising that 77% of the respondents felt that CIKM registration for non-students is too high. 21% felt it was a good value and one person thought it was a bargain. The student registration fees were viewed as too high by 75% of the respondents, a good value by 20%, and a bargain by 6%.