Chair's Letter

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Dear SIGIR community,

This is my last letter as Chair of the SIGIR Executive Committee. I want to start off by thanking the committee, Tetsuya Sakai (Vice Chair), Min Zhang (Treasurer), Claudia Hauff (Secretary), and Diane Kelly (Past Chair). It has been an honor to work with them to serve the community. We have accomplished a lot—see below—and I look forward to working with the next committee of Vanessa Murdock (Chair), Ryen White (Vice Chair), Carsten Eickhoff (Treasurer), and Laura Dietz (Secretary) to accomplish even more.

First, as usual, I want to thank all of our recent and upcoming conference organizers. WSDM 2022 experienced turmoil due to a surge of COVID cases caused by the Omicron variant, and unexpectedly had to transition from in-person to virtual very rapidly. Thanks to the General Chairs, K. Selcuk Candan and Huan Liu at Arizona State University, for their effort to ensure that the conference happened safely. CHIIR 2022 decided to switch to virtual early on; thanks to General Chairs David Elsweiler, Udo Kruschwitz, and Bernd Ludwig for their effort. JCDL 2022 has just closed in Cologne as I write this; thanks to General Chairs Akiko Aizawa, Thomas Mandl, and Zeljko Carevic for making the first hybrid SIGIR-sponsored conference a success.

SIGIR 2022 is coming up in just a few weeks! I will be attending in person in Madrid, my first international travel and first in-person conference since January 2020. The General Chairs Pablo Castells, Julio Gonzalo, and Enrique Amigó, and Program Chairs Shane Culpepper, Gabriella Kazai, and myself, have been working hard to ensure that SIGIR is successful as a hybrid event.

I want to use the rest of this final letter to report on the accomplishments of this committee. We've been very active; as evidence, I'll point to the new email account I established when elected Chair in 2019. Three years later it has reached 10,000 threads (no, I don't delete or archive anything), and I've sent 1,500 messages from it.

A lot of that activity has been related to COVID. It goes without saying that the pandemic was a huge disruption to the way we interact. The committee spent a lot of time working with steering committees and conference organizers, as well as the ACM and other SIG chairs, to give guidance, help make decisions, support events financially, and generally be a "steady hand" in uncertain times. We pursued a strategy aimed at inclusivity and keeping communities vibrant, by encouraging low registration rates, supporting virtual platforms, absorbing financial losses, and pushing for timezone-inclusive session scheduling. The success of the strategy is apparent, with submission and attendance numbers at all-time highs, and the overall financial and membership

status of the SIG remaining as strong as ever. Hopefully it will continue to pay off as we continue to think about hybrid events and inclusive virtual participation.

I'm very excited about our expanded awards program. At the beginning of our term we brought on three new Awards Chairs: Ryen White, Hannah Bast, and Gianluca Demartini. One of their first initiatives, led by Ryen, was the establishment of the SIGIR Academy to recognize mid- and late-career achievement in the field of IR. In addition, we will soon announce three new awards for early-career researchers, led by Johanne Trippas, that have just been approved by the ACM. All of these awards, plus the Salton Award, SIGIR's Best Paper Awards, the Test of Time Award, and the Vannevar Bush Award, are officially recognized and tracked by the ACM. I also want to recognize the work of Nicola Ferro and Johanne Trippas in running SIGIR's reproducibility badging process and committee, through which we award papers that have been demonstrated to present work that is reproducible or replicable.

I'm also proud of our efforts on diversity, equity, and inclusion. As mentioned above, we strove to make virtual conferences inclusive by encouraging low registration fees, covering registrations, and offering timezone-inclusive events. Our DEI chairs Bárbara Poblete (former), Hussein Suleman, and Suzan Verberne have been actively working with our conferences as well. They produced a checklist of requirements for inclusive and equitable events, which we recommend that all conferences use in their organization. We also brought Women in IR into the SIGIR fold, with its organizers Hannah Bast and Nazli Goharian becoming SIGIR volunteers and having the full financial and organization support of SIGIR and the ACM, and continued our high level of sponsorship for the CRA-WP workshop for women in computer science. I would like to note two milestones achieved as well: the first time that all bids to host SIGIR have included a woman as General co-Chair (bids for SIGIR 2024), and the first time that two SIGIR conference Program co-Chairs have been women (SIGIR 2023).

On conferences and events, much of our effort went into steering them through COVID. We did decide to permanently co-locate ICTIR with SIGIR, which we believe is beneficial to the ICTIR community and a win for sustainability. We will be starting a new conference series in 2023, a regional Asia-Pacific conference called SIGIR-AP, which will absorb many of the existing events in the region—more information to be announced soon. We also became an in-cooperation sponsor of the Web Conference, now an ACM conference. Unfortunately, our AFIRM school on machine learning for search and data mining hosted in Africa, has not been held since 2020 shortly before the advent of COVID, due to low interest in hosting it virtually. I very much hope that the next committee will find a way to continue and grow it. Finally, our SIGIR Friends program has continued to provide support for smaller events even as they went virtual; though overall requests have been much reduced, we have helped support about 25 different events during our three-year term.

We have initiated greater transparency and openness of access to the Executive Committee. We announced our scheduled meetings, gave the community the chance to add items to our agenda for discussion, and made an effort to post meeting minutes publicly (though admittedly it proved hard to sustain the latter). We also kept the practice of open discussion at our business meetings held yearly at the SIGIR conference, and additionally encouraged greater participation by enabling submission of anonymous comments and questions live during the meeting. This led to lively and important discussions of contentious topics, and in some cases concrete actions, and I'm grateful to community members that raised them and for the discussion we had.

Our volunteer team has continued to grow. I mentioned above our three new Awards Chairs, expanding from one Awards Chair previously, and the Women in IR Chairs. We also have three new SIGIR Forum editors (expanding from two previously), Josiane Mothe, Julián Urbano, and Tirthankar Ghosal. They have overseen more growth in the Forum while making it easier for members to submit articles and also archiving them in the ACM Digital Library. I also want to recognize Jaap Kamps for his work as Elections Official and general Volunteer-At-Large role that he plays by having so much knowledge about our community and the generosity to take time to share it. We have also written descriptions for a few new roles that we hope to see the next committee take up.

Finally, we have continued all the great programs that previous committees established. Events co-located with the SIGIR conference such as the DEI event and the student luncheon have continued in virtual form. Our Student Travel Awards program was able to continue even when there was no travel by working with the ACM to allow us to cover conference registrations. CHIIR has continued to grow as a community and conference. We have continued to document our roles and policies, and support conference organizers with the Conference Leaders workshop. We upped our support of Slack as a communication and collaboration tool for the community by upgrading our Slack space at acmsigir.slack.com to the Pro tier. We continued to establish deeper connections to the RecSys community and the Web Conference community.

I'm proud of all that this committee accomplished, and pleased to support the next committee as Past Chair.

I personally see some clear directions to continue to grow and strengthen our community. One is open access: there are currently too many possible points of failure and too much opaqueness in the ACM's processes for SIGIR's conference publications to be available open access. This has to change if SIGIR is to truly be an inclusive and diverse community. Another is sustainability: with in-person international event attendance increasing again, and conferences seemingly growing without bound, we are unquestionably impacting the global climate. What can we do to limit the harm we're causing? And to segue from one form of energy waste to another, conference reviewing may be reaching a breaking point. Submissions to our conferences continue to increase, with more and more submissions having tenuous connections to IR. Papers get reviewed multiple times with no context from previous review cycles, even while they have already been posted as a preprint and started accumulating citations, and the risk grows that IR conferences become second-rate NLP or ML conferences. Finally, I believe that SIGIR now needs to reach out to and establish deeper ties to the search engineering community, by including engineers in our organizing committees and program committees. Engaging more with this community can only give us more insights into the problems that engineers face, the needs of the users of the systems they build, and how search can grow as a discipline and community in the future.

I am truly grateful to have had the opportunity to serve as Chair of SIGIR. Thank you everyone for your support, participation, arguments, feedback, ideas, and all your other contributions over the years. I can't wait to see you in Madrid or somewhere else soon.

Best regards,
Ben Carterette
Chair, ACM SIGIR Executive Committee