

## Letter from the Chair

Vanessa Murdock

AWS AI/ML

USA

vmurdock@acm.org

Greetings SIGIR Members! Preparations for SIGIR 2024 and ICTIR 2024 in Washington DC are nearing completion, as preparations for SIGIR-AP in Tokyo in December are underway, and CHIIR, ICTIR and SIGIR conferences in 2025 are starting up. The SIGIR Academy Class of 2024 has been announced. The award recognizes individuals who have made significant, cumulative contributions to the development of the field of information retrieval. Inductees are principal leaders in IR, whose efforts have shaped the discipline through significant research, innovation, and service. We would like to congratulate the newest members: **Fernando Diaz, Donna Harman, Mounia Lalmas, Mark Sanderson, and Yiqun Liu.**

This year many people have had questions about the SIGIR 2024 planning. I thought it would be helpful to explain the basics of how conferences are organized, to help answer some of the questions. I would like to especially thank my co-members of the Exec Committee (**Ben Carterette, Laura Dietz, Carsten Eikhoff, and Ryen White**) for their support and contributions in this extremely challenging year. I cannot say how other Execs have operated, but this is an extremely collaborative group and it makes a world of difference.

**Definitions.** In the following, “The ACM” is the parent organization that manages thousands of conferences and publications and other programs. Their website is [acm.org](https://www.acm.org) and you can find a lot of interesting documentation there including a guide for organizing conferences<sup>1</sup>. A “SIG” is an ACM Special Interest Group and “SIGIR” is the Special Interest Group on Information Retrieval. This is our community, and our website is [sigir.org](https://www.sigir.org). “SIGIR”, “The SIG” and “Our SIG” in this letter refer to SIGIR the organization. We run four conferences (SIGIR, ICTIR, CHIIR, and SIGIR-AP). We co-sponsor additional conferences with other SIGs (such as JCDL, CIKM, and WSDM) meaning we share financial responsibility with other SIGs for the conference. We have “in-cooperation” status with other conferences (such as RecSys) for which we are not financially responsible. The “Exec Committee” are the leaders of the SIG, elected by the SIGIR community (you!). You can contact the Exec Committee at [exec.SIGIR@acm.org](mailto:exec.SIGIR@acm.org). That email will forward to the Chair, Vice Chair, Treasurer, Secretary and Past Chair. You can run for those positions; they serve a three year term, and the next elections will happen in the Spring of 2025. “SIGIR 2024” is the specific conference being held this year in Washington DC. The Exec Committee selects General Chairs (GCs) to work with the Exec and the ACM to organize the specific conference.

**SIGIR conference locations and GCs are chosen by the Exec Committee three years in advance.** The conference locations rotate yearly between the Americas, the EU/Middle

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.acm.org/special-interest-groups/volunteer-resources/conference-planning/table-of-contents>

---

East/Africa, and Asia/Oceania. This year we are accepting bids for SIGIR 2027 to be held in the Americas. People wishing to organize a conference submit a bid to the Exec Committee. If we don't receive at least two bids, we will solicit additional bids from members of the community with previous experience organizing conferences. When selecting the conference location, the committee considers the cost of attending, sustainability plans, the availability of suitable venues, the experience of the organizers, and other considerations.

**SIGIR conference venues are selected by the ACM.** Typically a year or more before the conference, the ACM solicits bids from a long list of venues they regularly work with in a given locale. Because the ACM holds so many conferences, they have considerable leverage in the venue negotiations. At a minimum, any venue hosting an ACM conference must be able to sign a legal contract for the space being rented, be able and willing to sign a liability waiver, and it must have sufficient space for the events, given the expected number of attendees. Neither the Exec Committee nor the GCs are permitted to select venues, or negotiate contracts, or to make their own arrangements. The conference organizers can suggest venues, and the ACM will take those preferences into consideration when possible.

In the case of SIGIR 2024, no venue in the Washington DC area would submit a bid for the conference because we are a small event, in a city that is a center of government that hosts many large events, in an election year. To avoid moving SIGIR 2024 to a different city or changing the dates, we asked the ACM to investigate whether Georgetown University would be possible. The ACM worked with the University for several months, but they were not able to contract the University for legal, liability, and space reasons. Ultimately they convinced the Capital Hilton to submit a bid, and negotiated the contract over Thanksgiving weekend. SIGIR 2024 did not have a venue until the ACM signed the contract with the Capital Hilton.

**The ACM negotiates the Food and Beverage minimum, and the hotel room block.** Different countries handle large event bookings differently, but in the U.S. it is most common for the venue itself to be "free" subject to a minimum food and beverage (F&B) charge, and a guaranteed room block. (In other countries, it is more common for the venue rental, the F&B, and the room blocks to be negotiated separately.) F&B costs are relatively high because they include the cost of labor as well as the overhead of the space (linens, lights, heating, staff, etc.) The ACM negotiates the minimum F&B charge, but the cost per meal is non-negotiable. The typical cost for a simple breakfast buffet of pastries, coffee and juice is \$30 - \$40 per person. Lunch for 100 people is typically \$7000 - \$10,000, with the lower end being a boxed lunch with a sandwich, chips and a cookie (\$70/person). This year, the cost of coffee for 700 people was \$17,000 per day, or \$12 per coffee. If the F&B minimum is negotiated at 300 attendees, and the conference has 100 attendees, it will pay the F&B for 300 attendees.

F&B accounts for by far the largest portion of the total budget (roughly half - typically \$350,000 - \$450,000), and the easiest way to reduce the cost of attending the conference is to eliminate F&B above the minimum. This year if we had decided not to serve coffee at the coffee breaks, it would have saved \$52,000. This is an unpopular choice, but it will become more attractive, and more necessary, as costs rise.

In addition to negotiating the F&B minimum, the ACM negotiates the room rate for a guaranteed room block. Guaranteeing a room block is a financial risk for our SIG because our SIG will pay for all of the rooms in the block, even if nobody stays in them. Depending on the room rate and the negotiated block, it can be \$200,000 - \$300,000. Part of the ACM negotiation is to

---

secure a relatively attractive room rate compared to surrounding hotels, so that attendees have a reason to stay there. Note that comparable hotels in the neighborhood of the SIGIR 2024 venue for the dates of the conference range from \$230 to \$667 per night. The negotiated rate for the Capital Hilton was \$237.

**The GCs submit an initial budget estimate to the ACM roughly one year before the conference, and a revision roughly six months later.** The initial estimate must be approved by the ACM and the Exec Committee before any other planning activities (including contract negotiation for the venue) can start. When the contracts have been negotiated and the big expenses have been finalized, the GCs submit a revised budget, before publishing registration rates, and opening registration. SIGIR 2024 decided to open registration early in October to allow people extra time for their visa applications to be processed, in response to visa issues preventing people from attending SIGIR 2023. The registration fee at that time was a best guess before the venue was contracted. Thirteen people registered in the fall.

**When a budget is submitted to the ACM, the ACM reviews it. If it passes their checks, they forward it to the Exec Committee for review and approval.** If the budget is more than \$1 million, the ACM reviews the budget in a committee and the committee decides whether to approve it, prior to forwarding it to the Exec Committee. It is important to keep the budget under \$1 million, because over \$1 million entails extra auditing and overhead and a more complex approval process by the ACM. The initial budget proposed by the GCs was more than \$1 million. Before initiating the approval process, the ACM kindly flagged this for the Exec Committee because in addition to being the highest budget ever for a SIGIR conference, the proposed registration fees were significantly higher than any previous year. The Exec Committee would like to keep the cost of attending the conference at around \$700 (early bird, main conference, member rate), as in recent years. We asked the GCs to reduce the F&B and to eliminate extras (such as conference souvenirs, and additional celebrations), to lower the registration fees and bring the budget under \$1 million.

At the business meeting you will see the financial report for SIGIR. The operating budget for SIGIR is around \$1 million, so a loss for a single conference of \$100,000 - \$200,000 (if, say, the room blocks don't sell, or sponsorship doesn't come through) is a significant portion of the total money in the bank for SIGIR. The fee schedule for conference registration is set based on an estimate of in-person attendees (600 - 800 for SIGIR conferences), aiming to break even. SIGIR cannot absorb significant losses year on year, or it will not survive.

Organizing a conference is a heavy lift for the General Chairs, and only a small number of people in the community are willing to volunteer for the role (even fewer do it more than once). The work of being a General Chair is not compensated in any meaningful way professionally. People take it on because they care about the community. We all have the same goal of making the conference fun, enriching, and inclusive. We are all natural experimenters, and sometimes experiments (like opening registration early to help people needing visas) are not successful. Sometimes (such as special programming for LLM Day) they are great. It's important to continue trying new things.

We would like to thank **Sam Han**, **Hongning Wang** and **Grace Hui Yang** for the enormous amount of time and effort they have given over the year to organize SIGIR 2024. We are also extremely grateful to **John Otero** and **Donna Cappel** at the ACM for working overtime, over a holiday weekend, to secure the venue, making it possible for SIGIR 2024 to happen at all.

---

As always SIGIR sits on the shoulders of its volunteers. We would like to thank SIGIR Academy Chair **Alistair Moffat**, Awards Chairs **Hannah Bast** and **Gianluca Demartini**, and Early Career Awards Chair **James Allan**. A thank you also to Sustainability Chairs **Tetsuya Sakai** and **Paul Thomas**, Student Affairs Chairs **Maria Maistro**, **Qingyao Ai** and **Jiaxin Mao**, Student Travel Chair **Sole Pera** and Community Relations Coordinator **Bhaskar Mitra**. The Community Relations Coordinator is the point of contact for folks who want to set up a meeting or gathering at one of the conferences. We would also like to thank DEI Chairs **Hussein Suleman** and **Suzan Verberne**, Women in IR Chair **Nazli Goharian**, Information Director **Guido Zuccon**, SIGIR Historian **Donna Harman** and SIGIR Forum Editors **Tirthankar Ghosal**, **Josiane Mothe**, and **Julián Urbano**. If you are interested in volunteering, please let the Executive Committee know.

As always, thank you all for your ideas, input and enthusiasm!

Vanessa Murdock  
Chair, ACM SIGIR Executive Committee