

A Decade of SIG-sponsored Community Events at SIGIR

Laura Dietz

University of New Hampshire

USA

dietz@cs.unh.edu

When I attended the NeurIPS conference during my graduate student years, the parties of the Gatsby Neuroscience Unit weren't just social gatherings but pivotal points in my academic and professional journey. It was there where I connected with future collaborators, securing internship and post-doc opportunities that shaped my career. This experience underscored the value of helping students to build their network, a realization I carried with me to my first SIGIR conference in 2014. Observing a gap in such networking opportunities, I proposed the idea of organizing a similar event to foster connections, particularly for students and other newcomers to the research community.

In 2015, with collective efforts and the support of key individuals like Jaap Kamps from the Executive Committee and Ricardo Baeza-Yates, the conference General Chair, we turned this idea into reality. We navigated through budget allocations, program adjustments, and local logistics to launch the first student party at SIGIR. This initiative quickly evolved from a single event to an anticipated annual gathering, growing in size and significance. By 2019, its organization had become a seamless part of the conference planning by General Chairs and the SIGIR Student Affairs Chair.

Parallel to the student parties, in 2014 then SIG IR Chair Diane Kelly started the SIGIR Student Luncheon which replaced the former "Newcomers Breakfast". The goals are similar to the student party: fostering discussions among students under the guidance of established community members; but the event was more formal and limited to students and senior members. When Jaap Kamps asked the students whether they wanted a luncheon or a party, they wanted both.

In 2015, another significant community initiative took shape—Women in IR. What started as an impromptu coffee break conversation with just ten attendees soon evolved into a formal event that simultaneously celebrated and supported the women in our field. Under the leadership of Shiri Dori-Hacohen and subsequent chairs, Women in IR has become a cornerstone event, offering a platform for sharing experiences, hearing from successful women in the field, and building a supportive network.

Establishing "Queer in IR" and the Diversity-Equity-and-Inclusion (DEI) events further illustrated our commitment to inclusivity. These initiatives, spearheaded by individuals like Luca Soldaini, Suzan Verberne, and Husein Suleman, addressed the needs of underrepresented groups within our community, breaking down barriers to participation, connecting members with shared experiences, and fostering a welcoming environment for all. These initiatives were particularly

helpful to maintain a sense of community during the COVID years, when conferences were held online. Recognizing the need for a more structured approach to supporting these community events, in 2023, the SIG Executive Committee introduced the role of Community Relations Coordinator. This position, currently held by Bhaskar Mitra, serves as a central point of contact for anyone looking to organize events for sub-communities in SIGIR. This move underscored our acknowledgment that while these events are crucial for community well-being, they also require formal support to thrive.

Given their importance to the social fabric of the SIGIR community, the ACM Special Interest Group in Information Retrieval is committed to funding these initiatives, ensuring they thrive without compromising the conference's financial health.

As I reflect on these developments, I'm reminded of the power of community in advancing our field from the ground up. From the inception of the student party to the formal recognition of diversity and inclusion initiatives, our collective efforts have not only enriched the SIGIR experience but have also set a precedent for how academic communities can foster inclusivity, support, and engagement.

Acknowledgments

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