Let's strengthen the HCI community by taking a gap year

We, the editors in chief of ACM Interactions, stand with the millions of people in the U.S. and across the globe protesting anti-Black violence and white supremacy. We owe it to our community as a whole to do more and to work harder to protect people's right to live free from racism and injustice. Click here to see our Statement of Solidarity.

If we could have just one wish for the HCI/IxD/UX community, what would it be? My wish is that we all could take a deep breath, spend a year working or studying outside HCI in a related field, and then come back and apply what we learned to understanding HCI challenges. The most interesting research and development questions are at the intersection of two (or more) fields or disciplines. Our primary field is HCI, yet we really need a deep understanding in a related field or fields. It's not enough to read a book or an article. We need to take a deep dive into another field.

As this article goes to print, I am an LLM student at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. After 18 years as a professor of computer and information sciences at Towson University and 14 years as director of the undergraduate program, I took a yearlong leave of absence from my professorship, and for this academic year, I am a law student. Why? Because my research, teaching, and advocacy work on interface accessibility for people with disabilities had increasingly been taking me into legal topics. And, like nearly all members of the HCI community, I'm educated in a multidisciplinary set of skills—computer science, psychology, sociology, and design—but law was not one of those skills. I was starting to have interesting new research ideas and was encountering great opportunities for projects that I didn't feel I had the necessary skills for. I had also started receiving speaking invitations that I simply couldn't say yes to (e.g., ones related to interface accessibility in the context of Canadian human rights, and U.S. constitutional law) because I did not have the required background.

There comes a certain point when you realize that you just need to go back to school and learn more. As researchers, this seems at first like a foreign concept—if you want to learn more, you read books, read articles, and attend conferences. You assume that if you have a Ph.D., you know how to learn, right? Those strategies are not sufficient. Just reading books and articles isn't enough if you are trying to understand a field that has very different approaches to learning, different methods of analysis, different terminology, and even different standards for writing. You need to "go native" and immerse yourself deeply in the other discipline.

Some people may hear that I took a break for a year to study something else and think, It's because you don't like HCI anymore. The opposite is true. I love HCI so much, I think it's so important, that I'm willing to take a break for a year, and a major financial hit, to study what I need to learn to truly make a difference. The most interesting and challenging problems are at the intersection of HCI and other fields. Ask anyone who works on HCI issues related to healthcare, or journalistic integrity, or education, or anything else.

My journey into law started when I was asked to serve as an expert consultant in the landmark National Federation of the Blind v. Target case in 2007 [1]. Along the way, I've learned one key thing. If you are an accessibility researcher and you want your research to have any real impact outside the research community, you need to understand law. If you care about making the world of technology more inclusive for people with disabilities, you need to understand law. Many countries have statutory laws or codes related to providing equal access to technology for people with disabilities, but the need to understand law is especially important in common-law countries—such as the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Canada, and New Zealand—where court precedents are binding law. To understand legal requirements, you can't just read the statutes, regulations, or codes. You must be able to parse through and understand court cases.
On this journey, I have had so many interesting opportunities to interact with lawyers and policymakers. I regularly provided testimony to the Maryland State House of Delegates and Maryland State Senate on bills related to Web accessibility and other technology issues, as well as to the U.S. Access Board and the U.S. Department of Justice (both at the federal level). In 2009 and 2010, I served as a pro bono accessibility advisor to the U.S. Federal Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board, led by Vice President Biden, which was supervising the implementation of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Since 2010, I have presented at unexpected places for an HCI researcher—the White House, Harvard Law School, the Jacobus TenBroek Disability Law Symposium, and the Korean Disability Law Association in Seoul. I have published two books at the intersection of HCI and law, *Ensuring Digital Accessibility Through Process and Policy* (coauthored with disability rights lawyer Dan Goldstein and Microsoft accessibility researcher Anne Taylor) [2] and *Disability, Human Rights, and Information Technology* (coedited with Harvard Law School professor Michael Stein) [3]. I have even had the opportunity to serve as a contractor for ICF International, working inside the Civil Rights Division at the U.S. Department of Justice, on the regulatory process for websites under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are considered one of our great success stories in the accessibility community [4]. It’s the set of technical standards that we apply to all technologies, not only Web technologies. The WCAG make up the most well-documented set of accessibility standards in the world; most governments have adopted it. Yet a U.S. district court recently held that the “... Plaintiff seeks to impose on all regulated persons and entities a requirement that they ‘comply’ with the WCAG 2.0 Guidelines’ ... This request flies in the face of due process” [5]. As an accessibility researcher, I can’t just say, “WCAG is a violation of due process? That’s weird.” I need to understand it, and understand why a court ruled this way. I need to understand how this case affects the continued use of the WCAG. As HCI professionals around the world, we need to understand the legal requirements in our own country, as well as international treaties that have an impact on our work. While studying treaties may be a foreign concept to computer scientists, understand that treaties, ratified by many of our home countries, do affect our work in HCI. For instance, Articles 9 and 21 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* [6] both focus on equal access to digital information and technologies for people with disabilities. The *Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired or Otherwise Print Disabled* also focuses on the accessibility of digital content [7]. Do you know whether your home country has signed or ratified those treaties? You should know.

In my 2016 SIGCHI Social Impact Award speech, I challenged members of the community to go outside their comfort zone [8]. And I still mean it. I’m not implying that you should go somewhere on sabbatical and become a visiting professor or a fellow. I mean that you should do something really uncomfortable: Go back and be a student. Get another degree. If you are working on applications for healthcare, go back and study healthcare policy. If you are working on research related to fake news, go back and study journalism. If you are working on interface design, go back and truly study graphic design. Or if you don’t want another degree, go work in a company or a nonprofit or in government. Get hands-on experience doing something that feels foreign, that feels a bit scary. One of my mentors once taught me that there’s no growth in the comfort zone, and no comfort in the growth zone (attributed to many different sources). So my wish for the HCI community is that we should all go study or work outside the community. Leave for a year—go do something different, something uncomfortable, and grow. Then we should use those new skills, partnerships, and knowledge to do groundbreaking HCI work, addressing grand societal challenges and breaking down barriers to enable every person to achieve his or her goals.

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**References**


7. WIPO. Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired or Otherwise Print Disabled. 2017; http://www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/marrakesh/


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