

Report of the Director



This is a time of enormous challenge for the legal profession and the system of justice. The American Bar Foundation is conducting research that directly addresses many of these challenges.

The global financial crisis that began in 2008 had dramatic short-term effects on several sectors of the legal profession, from law schools to law firms to the fiscal strength of our courts. Scholars of the legal profession are debating what the long-term effects of the economic shock will be. Does it portend a radical restructuring of law partnerships or the careers of lawyers? Do these changes have greater effects on some groups than others, such as minority lawyers or women? Will the changes in the legal marketplace force a rethinking of legal education or how it is financed?

As the leading source of research on the legal profession, the ABF is informing the debates around these important questions. The ABF's After the JD Project is tracking the professional lives of a large national sample of lawyers who passed the bar in the year 2000. After conducting interviews with this group in 2003 and 2007, the project has secured funding for a third wave of interviews in 2012. The next set of interviews will reveal the effects of changes in the profession on this cohort of lawyers, and will allow unprecedented comparisons across race and ethnicity, gender, law school, and geographic location.

ABF projects are examining the changing shape of public interest law practice, a sector which faces increasing financial pressures due to changes in fee-shifting rules, limitations on supported activities, and problems of attorney frustration and burnout. A new research initiative on access to justice promises to offer insights into both the supply of and demand for legal services for Americans across the income spectrum.

ABF research continues to shape debates about the future of legal education. From in-depth studies of how law school shapes the thinking of law students, to research on what law graduates found valuable in legal education after they began practice, to studies of whether women and minority law professors felt fairly treated in the law school tenure process, ABF research is making a unique contribution to the dialogue about changes in the legal academy.

In these and other areas of the ABF research program, the hallmark of ABF research is independence, rigor, and relevance. Work of such quality would not be possible without the longstanding support of the American Bar Endowment and the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation. Their support has allowed us to recruit and retain the world's leading faculty conducting advanced research on law. Our fellowship programs for undergraduate and graduate students is passing on the heritage of innovative research to new generations of scholars.

I hope the pages that follow capture some of the excitement and significance of the research being conducted at the American Bar Foundation. We feel privileged to be conducting research that offers new understandings of law and how it might be shaped to better serve the interests of justice.

Robert L. Nelson