

Executive Summary: Oregon State Bar New Lawyer Survey May 2006

In April 2006, the Oregon State Bar (OSB) launched a longitudinal survey to collect information about the attitudes and experiences of Oregon lawyers during their first five years of practice. While some national studies have considered these issues, the bar believed that state-specific data would both show how Oregon fits into national trends and provide focus for efforts to improve the legal profession in our state. The survey included such topics as law school experiences (including student debt), the OSB admissions process, OSB services, and employment and practice issues.

Methodology

Data will be collected from the same respondent pool over five years in order to track changes in attitude and experience. The first survey was conducted online in April 2006. An introductory letter was sent to all bar members who were admitted to practice in 2005; the letter informed them about the upcoming survey and requested that they provide their e-mail addresses to OSB if they had not already done so. Several weeks later, an e-mail was sent to all “Class of 2005” members who had registered e-mail addresses with the bar. The e-mail directed them to an online survey, hosted by a survey provider site. About a week later, a reminder e-mail was sent to the same list of recipients, except those whose e-mail addresses had been determined invalid after the initial e-mail message.

After the responses were compiled, OSB staff decided to analyze only those responses with a positive answer to the question “Was Oregon’s your first bar exam?” The intent of the survey was to collect information from lawyers who are just entering the field, and there was some concern that people who had taken previous bar exams may have been lawyers in other states for any number of years, thus skewing the data.

Response Rate

Of the 504 bar members who were admitted in 2005 and had valid e-mail addresses registered with OSB, 243 responded to the survey (48.2% response rate). Of these respondents, 177 (72.8%) indicated that Oregon’s was their first bar exam. *Please note that only these respondents—who indicated that they had not taken any bar exam before Oregon’s—are included in the following analysis.* (See Methodology section for more information.)

Demographics

A large majority of participants (86.8%) were white. More than half (57.5%) were female, and nearly half (49.1%) were married or had a domestic partner. Ages ranged from 25 to 58, with about half of respondents (54.2%) under the age of 30. (For more detail on demographics, see “Survey Responses: Oregon State Bar Survey of New Lawyers, 2006.”)

Discussion of Survey Responses

Please note that the figures reported below represent only those respondents who answered whichever particular question is under discussion. Not all participants answered every question on the survey.

Law School and Other Education

Survey respondents reported a wide range of undergraduate degrees, the most popular being Liberal Arts (23.7%) and Political Science (19.8%). About half of participants (50.8%) enrolled in law school within two years after earning a bachelor's degree, and most (70.6%) attended law school in Oregon.

Participants reported an average outstanding debt of about \$7,185 from undergraduate studies and about \$67,960 from law school. Reported debt ranged from none to \$68,000 for undergraduate work, and from none to \$160,000 for law school. More than half of respondents (57.7%) reported no remaining debt from their undergraduate studies, and 15.1% reported no debt from law school. Among those respondents who had undergraduate debt, the average undergraduate debt amount was about \$17,000. For those participants with debt from law school, law school debt averaged about \$80,060.

Respondents generally gave positive ratings for their law school experiences. "Good" was the most popular response to questions regarding quality of instruction, course content, background in ethics and professionalism, preparation for the bar exam, and preparation for law practice. (Participants chose from options on a 5-point scale: 1-Poor; 2-Fair; 3-Neutral; 4-Good; and 5-Excellent.) Quality of instruction was rated highest (4.20 on the 5-point scale), followed closely by course content (4.05). The only aspect of law school whose average rating was below the scale's midpoint was preparation for law practice, at 2.94.

A large majority of respondents engaged in some form of practical legal experience during law school, with 92% participating in a law firm clerkship, a public sector clerkship, a law school clinical program and/or a law school extern program. About 55% of respondents participated in more than one of these activities.

The Oregon Bar Exam

As mentioned previously, responses were analyzed only for those participants who reported that Oregon's bar exam was their first. Nearly all of these respondents (94.9%) took a bar exam review course. More than 90% of survey participants passed the Oregon State Bar exam on their first attempt. (It should be noted that this percentage is substantially higher than in the general population of people who take the Oregon bar exam; for example, in February and July of 2005 the overall passage rate for first-time exam takers was 65% and 76%, respectively.)

When asked to assess the difficulty of the OSB admissions process and bar exam, participants rated the Multistate Bar Examination (MBE) section most difficult, at 3.94 on a scale of 1 to 5. The character and fitness review portion of the exam was rated the least difficult, at 2.54.

Most participants (81.4%) believed that passing the bar exam should remain a requirement to practice law in Oregon. However, many respondents suggested that the exam could be made more relevant to law practice. Others commented on issues like reciprocity, exam and admissions costs, and the relationship between law school and the bar exam. (See more details and sample comments in “Survey Responses: Oregon State Bar Survey of New Lawyers, 2006.”)

Employment

Many respondents (33%) were offered a position as a lawyer before they graduated from law school. An additional 46% later found employment as a lawyer, most in less than 8 months after graduation. However, more than 7% were unable to secure employment as a lawyer, and 4% did not seek such employment. Another 10% of respondents indicated that their situations did not apply to any of the options presented; they explained that they were instead involved in clerkships, contract work, further education and other endeavors.

Assessments of job-search resources were varied. Personal contacts were rated the most helpful (3.06 on a 4-point scale). Next were contacts from clerkships or other employment (2.68) and law school career centers (2.47). Employment agencies and the OSB Affirmative Action Program (AAP) were rated the least helpful, at 1.29. (It should be noted that most participants were not eligible for AAP services.)

After passing the bar, those respondents who began practicing law worked at all sizes of firms, as sole practitioners, and in other capacities (in-house counsel, judicial clerkships, public sector, nonprofit/legal services, etc.). Over half (53%) worked as an associate at a firm, with the largest number at firms that employ 15 or more lawyers.

Starting salaries varied widely, from less than \$30,000 to more than \$80,000. A majority of starting salaries (63.8%) were below \$50,000. Nearly 32% of lawyers reported starting salaries in the \$40,000-\$49,999 range. The next most popular response was \$80,000 or more (18.5%), followed by \$30,000-\$39,999 (16.3%) and less than \$30,000 (15.6%).

Participants reported a broad range of primary practice emphases. Most specialized in a particular area of law, but almost 18% said that no one area made up more than half of their practice. The most commonly cited reason to accept a first position was the employer (34.1%), followed by the field of law (25.2%). More than half of respondents (52.6%) planned to stay in their first position for five years or less. About 27% did not know how long they would stay.

Most respondents reported a positive level of job satisfaction, with about 81% saying they were either “highly satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with their first position as a lawyer. The most challenging issues for new lawyers appeared to be billable hour requirements and understanding legal procedures; on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “very difficult” and 5 being “very easy,” these issues rated 2.64 and 2.62, respectively. In contrast, respondents reported that it was relatively easy to receive challenging work (3.89) and maintain their civility and professionalism (4.19).

Attitudes Toward OSB and the Legal Profession

Participants reported a fairly high degree of satisfaction with matters related to practicing law. They were most satisfied with lawyers who work at their firms (4.32 on a 5-point scale), but also gave high ratings to other lawyers (3.71) and to being a lawyer (3.89).

OSB services were given generally favorable ratings as well, with all programs rated above 3.0 on a 5.0 scale. The most popular aspects were the OSB website (4.16) and bar admissions staff (4.03).