

WASHINGTON STATE BAR ASSOCIATION

NEW LAWYER SURVEY REPORT



This report summarizes key findings from an analysis of data gathered by the WSBA through a survey of new attorneys. There were 696 responses to the survey, which was sent to 6,746 new and young lawyers, for a return rate of 10.3%. According to WSBA bylaws, an active member is considered a young or new lawyer if at least one of two criteria are met: 1) the member has been admitted to practice for fewer than five years (in any state), or 2) the member is under 36 years of age.

This report presents average ratings and frequencies for close-ended questions and identifies key themes in narrative responses to open-ended questions. There were a very large number of comments offered in response to the survey and they are notable for their richness and detail. Survey findings are presented in five different categories: (1) experience in applying for the bar; (2) post-application experience with the WSBA; (3) WSBA resources, (4) the WSBA community, and (5) the New Lawyer Education (NLE) and Trial Advocacy (TAP) programs.

BAR APPLICATION EXPERIENCE

Survey takers were asked about their experience applying for admission to the Washington State Bar Association and, overall, the respondents have a generally positive view of the WSBA during the admission process. Table 1 presents average ratings for a series of questions on the topic, and it shows that the highest rating was for the responsiveness and helpfulness of WSBA staff members.

Table 1. Bar Application Ratings

Scale equates 1.0 with "Strongly Disagree" and 5.0 with "Strongly Agree"

Statement	Average
WSBA Staff were responsive and helpful	3.8
I received sufficient amount of helpful and informative communications	3.6
PREP was useful and worth my time	3.1
WSBA bar card met my expectations	2.7
Overall Average	3.3

The generally positive view of the **bar association's staff** reflected in Table 1 is also apparent in the open-ended comments. The following responses are typical of this positive view:

I found the WSBA staff very friendly and helpful.

The individuals at the front desk have always been very professional, pleasant, and helpful.

WSBA is courteous and helpful.

I've been very impressed with the WSBA's customer service...whenever I have had to contact the office, the individuals who I spoke with have been incredibly helpful.

Another key rating in Table 1 concerns the WSBA bar card, which, in contrast to the rating for responsiveness, was the lowest rating in all of the survey data.¹ Emphasizing this very low rating, are a large number of negative comments about the **bar card**. Respondents variously stated that the “bar card seems a little cheap” and that “the self-laminating kit was disappointing.” New members wrote of their disappointment and irritation with the bar card in response to nearly every open-ended question in the survey. The negative view of the card is the single strongest theme to emerge from all of the survey findings. The following quotes represent the general tone of the comments:

....after all that hard work, time and money. It would be nice to receive a card made out of something more substantial than paper!

The bar card is a joke. I have a plastic, nice card from California. I thought the WA paper one was a temporary.

The bar card is cheap and flimsy. For as much money as we pay, a better card should be made.

The bar card is ridiculous. It is a BIG deal to become an attorney and to have a little piece of cardboard that isn't as legitimate as my student ID card is sad.

Bar Card could be solid, like a credit card, instead of a cheap laminated piece of paper.

I am shocked that after all the months of preparation, hours of intense testing, and hundreds of dollars spent to join the WSBA that the membership card is just a flimsy piece of waxed paper. Even my FREE Seattle Public Library card (which only took 2 minutes to acquire) is of superior quality...Whenever I have to show my WSBA card to someone in the general public, I am embarrassed...

POST-APPLICATION EXPERIENCE

Survey takers were also asked about their experience with the WSBA after they became members of the association. Table 2 displays average ratings pertaining to the post-admission experience and it indicates that respondents generally have high regard for the WSBA **member website** (mywsba). In fact, the 4.1 rating for the website is the highest rating among all of the survey responses.

Table 2. Bar Membership Ratings

Scale equates 1.0 with “Strongly Disagree” and 5.0 with “Strongly Agree”

Statement	Average
Member website (mywsba) is useful	4.1
Information on WSBA website is helpful and easy-to-find	3.6
I receive the right amount of information from WSBA	3.6
Information I receive from WSBA is valuable and relevant	3.5
The New Lawyer List Serve is a helpful tool	3.2
WA Young Lawyers Committee helped me connect to WSBA resources	3.0
Overall Average	3.5

There were a number of comments about both the **WSBA website** and the member site (**mywsba**), and in alignment with the high rating in Table 2, the comments are generally positive. Overall, respondents praised the depth of information on the two sites and their helpfulness to new practitioners. The following quotes are typical of the positive comments:

¹ The rating for the LOMAP program in Table 3 also received a 2.7 rating, but it is on a four-point scale.

I am in the process of starting my own solo practice and I have found the tools on the WSBA website to be very helpful throughout this process.

The WSBA site is outstanding...

Great website and highly informative.

Yet, despite their value and service as a repository of helpful information, survey respondents also made clear that members have **difficulty navigating** the sites and that they do not find the sites intuitive to use. Comments reflecting this finding include the following:

Overall, the website is a bit cluttered and tricky to navigate but there is a lot of helpful, relevant information if you take the time to look.

The website is not user friendly even [for] someone in WSBA leadership.

The WSBA website, particularly mywsba.org is clunky and not at all intuitive.

A number of respondents also indicated that they struggled with **tracking** their contact information and CLEs on the websites:

It seems like it takes multiple logins to get to the myWSBA and CLE tracker.

I think the mywsba website does not function very well when it comes to reporting, tracking and managing member information...There are much more intuitive website set ups that would improve this.

It is sometimes hard to find the MCLE page to track my CLEs.

WSBA RESOURCES

Respondents were asked to rate several WSBA services and resources that are provided to members. Table 3 lists the average ratings for these member benefits. The table indicates that CLE opportunities, including the legal lunchbox, received the highest average ratings while the two assistance programs for lawyers received the lowest ratings. Table 3 also indicates which services WSBA members are most and least aware of. The ratings indicate that while lawyers appear to have wide awareness of CLE, the ethics line and NW Lawyer, nearly one-third lack awareness of the WSBA Connects and Lawyer Assistance programs.

Table 3. WSBA Resource Ratings

Scale equates 1.0 with "Not Relevant to Me" and 4.0 with "Valuable"

Statement	Didn't Know	Average
Affordable Continuing Legal Education opportunities	10%	3.7
Legal Lunchbox series	8%	3.7
The Ethics line	9%	3.5
NW Lawyer	2%	3.3
New Lawyer list serve	26%	3.1
Casemaker	21%	3.1
NWSidebar	16%	3.0
Free 24/7 support (WSBA Connects)	31%	2.9

Lawyers Assistance Program (LAP)	29%	2.8
Law Office Management Assistance Program (LOMAP)	16%	2.7
Overall Average	--	3.2

As Table 3 indicates, the highest rated resource is **affordable CLE courses** and the **legal lunchbox** series. Survey comments suggest why these resources are so well regarded. Specifically, many respondents explained that they face financial difficulties and, consequently, they place a great deal of value on free and low-cost CLEs. The following are typical comments reflecting this view:

I love all the CLEs and networking opportunities, but when you have no income, it's really hard to take advantage of all of them.

I would love to take more CLEs as a new and young attorney, to continue to develop as a lawyer, but the cost of many of them is prohibitive (as I am in a job that does not pay for most CLEs so it ends up private pay).

[It] has been a rough first year since I have been unable to find a job as an attorney and have been working retail to pay my bills.

A lot of new graduates have not had a job immediately and it would have been helpful to have some free CLE opportunities to new lawyers that are unemployed.

I'm not sure how I'm going to meet my CLE requirement and keep my license active because of the costs of CLEs. If you have work, these costs are usually paid for by your employer, but if you don't have work, the cost is prohibitive.

Along with CLE courses, the **New Lawyer List Serve**, also generated a number of notable qualitative comments. Many of these comments focused on survey takers' lack of awareness of it with members asking how they could access. As one individual put it, "There is a new lawyer list serve? I had no idea." Among those who did know about it, some indicated that while they found the List Serve helpful, they were also concerned about the frequency of emails and disagreements among its members:

There are way too many people who get offended easily over some requests and turned juvenile, then they create an immature war of emails between attorneys.

I unsubscribed from the list serve because there were too many emails and threads that were not relevant to me.

More evidence of the importance of affordable CLE courses are responses to two questions. The first asked what respondents were **most surprised** to learn that the WSBA provided. The second asked members what they were **most disappointed** to learn that the WSBA did not provide. The top responses are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Most Surprised to Learn that the WSBA Provided

There were 362 total responses.

Response	Number of Comments
Free or discounted CLEs	75
Casemaker	38
Free section membership	15

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Table 5. Most Disappointed to Learn the WSBA Did Not Provide*There were 350 total responses.*

Response	Number of Comments
More free or discounted CLEs	42
Mentoring with an experienced attorney	42
More job search resources and assistance	42
Discounts on WSBA membership	18
Networking opportunities for new lawyers	14

WSBA COMMUNITY

A series of survey questions asked new members about their experiences as part of a community of new and young lawyers, and, in general, survey comments indicated a desire to grow and sustain this group. At the same time, as Table 6 reveals, new attorneys most strongly agreed with a statement about the potentially prohibitive cost of joining a formal group of new lawyers. This rating reflects a consistent theme in the survey results concerning new attorneys' financial challenges. As one individual stated: "After graduating from law school, I was unemployed and did not have the funds to join different divisions, communities and groups."

Table 6. New and Young Lawyer Community Ratings*Scale equates 1.0 with "Strongly Disagree" and 5.0 with "Strongly Agree"*

Statement	Average
Membership dues would prevent me from joining	3.9
I prefer a community centered around my practice area	3.7
It is important to me to be part of a community of new and young lawyers	3.4
I prefer automatic inclusion into this community	3.3
I prefer to voluntarily opt-in to this community	3.1
I prefer a community centered around my experience level	3.0
I miss the community afforded by the dissolved WA Young Lawyers Division	3.0
Overall Average	3.3

New members were also asked to rate the value of membership in WSBA sections. The average ratings for different membership benefits are presented in Table 7. In keeping with previous findings, the table indicates that new members most value CLE courses along with professional networking.

Table 7. Section Benefit Ratings*Scale equates 1.0 with "Not Relevant to Me" and 4.0 with "Valuable"*

Statement	Average
CLE seminars and conferences	3.7
Professional networking with experienced practitioners	3.7
Being part of a community	3.5
List Serve	3.5
Legislative updates	3.5
Professional networking with other new lawyers	3.5
Newsletter	3.3

Leadership opportunities	3.2
Online communities	3.2
Overall Average	3.5

Several themes emerged from qualitative comments pertaining to the community of new lawyers. The theme is the **awkwardness of joining “new” and “young” attorneys** together in the same community. The following illustrate this finding:

YLD is a ghastly term...

The “diverse” group of new WA attorneys who had previous careers and experiences (i.e., those over 40) were never adequately involved in WYLC.

I’m new but not young, so I feel excluded. New is grouped into young but new (older) does not feel welcome and the group is heavily oriented to young/new/no prior work experience.

...Does a 25 year old new lawyer have different professional needs than a 50 year old new lawyer?

The second theme pertains to a perceived lack of WSBA resources and attention to new lawyers outside the **Seattle region**:

Most networking events were in Seattle when many live far away so emails seemed more like spam.

The WSBA seems most focused on Seattle attorneys at large firms and “access to justice” issues as defined by these Seattle attorneys and the Supreme Court. As a new attorney in a small firm in a rural county, with huge student loans from law school, seeing the WSBA cave to the LLLT’s and cut services to young lawyers has been greatly disappointing to say the least.

[We need] job finding assistance or CLE opportunities outside of Seattle.

Living in central/eastern Washington, there are very few, if any WSBA young lawyer events I can make it to, especially in the winter time in Seattle. I personally feel like the WYLC is mainly for those in Western WA.

The bar association seems to care very little about anyone who practices outside of the Seattle metro area. Services are generally only accessible and beneficial to Seattle attorneys. It would be fair for attorneys in Eastern Washington to have lower bar dues in accordance with the reduced value they receive from the bar association.

And, the third theme pertains to a desire among new members for help in navigating their challenging economic prospects. Members view the WSBA as unaware or unconcerned with the large amounts of **student loan debt** new lawyers must contend with. In fact, student loan debt – and the negative implications it has for starting a legal practice – was a very strong theme in the qualitative comments.

A lot of us are desperate for work and the support of more experienced attorneys. It’s apocalyptic out there and it sometimes seems like older attorneys are hoarding resources.

Collectively my wife and I earn ~120,000/yr. Student loan debt is a millstone around our necks. We are barely past paycheck to paycheck living and loans are actively preventing

our entry into the middle class. To the extent that the WSBA can do something/anything about this burden it would be great.

There is little recognition of how unfeasible solo practice is under the kinds of debt loads that law grads have.

[We need] financial advice and resources. I think this is a valuable asset to new attorneys who are just entering the legal field with large debt.

We are broke, buried in debt, and struggling to find entry level opportunities. These opportunities eventually come, but the period between when you take the bar exam and that first real job can be extremely difficult.

We generally have a TON of debt, and do not make much during the first few years to leave much extra time or money.

The cost of law school is crushing, and debt repayment options have me paying up to 70 years of age. This is unacceptable, particularly when the Federal Government is charging such high interest rates on student debt. Having to pay more for memberships, CLEs, practice area groups, etc., etc. is very difficult.

NEW LAWYER EDUCATION AND TRIAL ADVOCACY PROGRAM

The survey included two questions about services specifically designed for new lawyers – New Lawyer Education (NLE) and the Trial Advocacy Program (TAP). Tables 8 and 9 provide the results of close-ended questions pertaining to these programs. The tables indicate that the majority of new members were unaware of these services.

Table 8. Attendance at an NLE and/or TAP Seminar

Have you attended an NLE seminar or TAP?	Percent of Responses
I was unaware of these opportunities.	42%
No	41%
Yes	17%
Total	100%

Table 9. Awareness and Participation in NLE and/or TAP

Select the statement that best describes your experience...	Percent of Responses
I was unaware of these opportunities.	42%
I would be interested in participating.	23%
I do not have time.	14%
I have participated and found the experience valuable.	10%
I don't find value in this type of experience.	6%
I would rather help develop standard CLE seminars.	3%
I participated but found the experience less than valuable.	2%
Total	100%

Only a limited number of qualitative comments were offered about NLE and TAP and the most common themes focused on a lack of awareness of these services or lack of ability to afford them:

How is any of this advertised? I have been in practice for 6 years and have never heard about NLE seminars or TAP.

I would like to do this, but was unaware of the opportunity.

I have a 9 to 5 job. I cannot take off Fridays for a non-job related course. Not to mention, in addition to school loans, I could never afford these seminars.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey of new lawyers provides rich and sobering information about the experience of new attorneys and their entry into the field. Overall, attorneys have a favorable view of the WSBA but they look to the bar association for more help and assistance in navigating their challenging entry into practice. The following suggestions flow directly from the survey data. The WSBA should:

1. More fully recognize the achievement of new lawyers by issuing a well designed and durable bar card.
2. Continue to improve and streamline the WSBA website and mywsba navigation.
3. Rename the community of “young lawyers” and “new lawyers.”
4. Consider offering scholarships or discounts to CLEs and section membership for new attorneys as a response to and in acknowledgement of the unique and challenging circumstances that new and young lawyers face in the early years of practice, including employment/unemployment and large student loan debt.