



Executive Director
American Bar Foundation
Chicago, Illinois

THE SEARCH

The American Bar Foundation (ABF), a cornerstone and wellspring of the global socio-legal research community, seeks a committed, curious, and strategic leader to propel this historic institution forward as its next Executive Director (ED). As the nation's premier independent, non-partisan research institute operating at the intersection of law and society, the ABF produces deeply resourced, inquiry-driven scholarship of the highest quality to inform and guide the legal profession, the academy, and the public conversation on matters of law and its influence in the United States and internationally. The ABF's next ED will eagerly invest in the ABF's dedicated community of researchers, staff, and partners and will champion the institution's commitment to expanding knowledge and advancing justice.

The ABF's commitment to academic freedom and staunchly independent and interdisciplinary approach yields scholarly and actionable research that individuals and institutions use to shape laws, inform policy, and influence society. The ABF's intellectual community is robust and comprises full- and part-time research professors, visiting scholars, and affiliated researchers who explore legal education, access to justice, legal practice, and the design, implementation, and impact of laws. The institution also benefits from a 16,000-plus-member honors society of licensed attorneys – the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation – who gain valuable insights from the ABF's scholarly findings, provide material support to the ABF, and generously donate their time and expertise as renowned practitioners and scholars.

The ABF is governed by a 25-member board of directors. Its FY2025 operating budget totaled \$9.1 million, most of which was derived from support from the American Bar Endowment (ABE) and the ABF Fellows. It also benefits from an institutional endowment of \$35.5 million. The ABF maintains a faculty of 19 full-time and jointly appointed researchers and 39 full-time and part-time staff members.

Reporting to the board, the Executive Director ensures that the ABF's research, operations, communications, and development strategies work harmoniously to sustain and grow its impact and visibility. The next ED will embrace their role as an intellectual leader, facilitating research and mentoring junior research faculty, and will be an effective external representative, enriching the ABF's scholarly

community, expanding its resources, and bolstering its operations and capacities. They will uphold the highest standards of integrity, independence, and scholarly rigor while articulating and championing the practical applications and outcomes of the ABF's research with the ABE, the ABF Fellows, donors, and others. The ED will be an attentive administrative leader and an effective liaison among ABF faculty, staff, and the board, and will promote a culture of inclusivity, teamwork, and respect.

ABOUT THE AMERICAN BAR FOUNDATION

History

The [American Bar Foundation](#) was founded in 1952 by the American Bar Association (ABA), filling the need for an independent center for interdisciplinary research into the law. With a generous gift from the American Bar Endowment (ABE), an ABA affiliate charity offering insurance products to ABA members, the ABF was built as “a research center for the organized bar of America.” Although the ABF was founded by the ABA and receives significant funding from the ABE, it remains an independent organization maintaining full academic freedom, which allows its researchers to carry out the most rigorous and innovative work. Throughout the ABF’s nearly 75-year history, its research and strategic approaches have evolved alongside and engaged with many of society’s most fundamental issues and questions, including the legalization of American medical interventions abroad, the study of the international variations in jury systems, the structure and role of the legal profession, and the implementation and effects of exclusionary law and public policy in the slave economy of the United States, among many others.

Research

Today, the ABF’s research continues to span the broadest reaches at the intersection of law and society, exploring the areas of inquiry outlined below. Each research proposal at the ABF undergoes a rigorous, multi-step vetting process, which includes a thorough review by an internal committee of peer ABF faculty members, an external review by non-ABF scholars who sit on what is called the Wheeler Committee, and final approval from the ABF board of directors. Over the years, ABF researchers have also benefited from external grant support from various sources.

Learning and Practicing Law: ABF researchers examine all aspects of legal education and practice, investigating how the law is learned, taught, and practiced in legal and non-legal settings, as well as the evolving paths of legal professionals. One of the ABF’s hallmark projects in this area is After the JD (AJD), the first national study of legal careers. Designed as a longitudinal study of practicing lawyers, AJD has been tracking the professional lives of more than 5,000 practitioners during their first 20 years after passing the bar.

Protecting Rights and Accessing Justice: The ABF has long maintained a special focus on protecting vital rights and identifying the key factors that create, exacerbate, and alleviate the access-to-justice gap. The ABF’s [Access to Justice Research Initiative](#) is a dynamic hub for innovative research and programs that

supports empirical scholars through the ABF/Freedom Together Foundation Access to Justice Scholars Program and identifies and develops research and data on people-centered justice through the Justice Data Observatory. The Initiative has produced significant original research and scholarship and serves as a resource for civil justice researchers, policy makers, and service providers.

Making and Implementing Law: The ABF analyzes the diverse ways laws are created and practiced in the U.S. and worldwide, not just by legal professionals but also by those who enforce and implement them. ABF researchers have pursued numerous lines of inquiry, from analyses of workplace discrimination law to studies of comparative constitutionalism to groundbreaking work on international commercial lawmaking.

In addition to the scholarship it produces, the ABF puts out the journal *Law & Social Inquiry (LSI)*, a multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed quarterly publication of original research articles and review essays published by Cambridge University Press. *LSI* contributors examine law and society issues across multiple disciplines, including anthropology, criminology, economics, history, philosophy, political science, social psychology, and sociology.

Structure

Researchers

The ABF employs a research faculty of 19, including five full-time research professors and 14 research professors who maintain a joint appointment at a university. The ABF's interdisciplinary faculty are among the nation's foremost scholars within law and social science and hold advanced degrees across anthropology, criminology, economics, history, law, political science, psychology, and sociology, and most hold both JD and PhD degrees. To cultivate the next generation of preeminent socio-legal scholars, the ABF has for more than 30 years supported research fellowships for faculty, postdoctoral scholars, doctoral candidates, and undergraduate students.

Staff

The ABF currently has 21 staff members who steward and maintain the core administrative, fundraising, and external relations functions necessary for the ABF to thrive. Additionally, the ABF employs seven full-time research-focused special projects staff and 11 part-time research and administrative staff. Staff are deeply committed to the mission of the ABF and are involved in nearly every aspect of the institution's work. Staff reporting directly to the ED are the Deputy Director, Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Senior Director of the Fellows, Director of Major Gifts and Grants, and Executive Assistant.

Board of Directors

The ABF is governed by a 25-member board of directors that meets twice a year. The board comprises distinguished leaders in the legal community, including practicing lawyers and academics. The board also

includes ex officio directors from the ABA, ABE, Northwestern University, and the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation.

Fellows of the American Bar Foundation

The [ABF Fellows](#) are an international honorary society of attorneys, judges, law faculty, and legal scholars whose public and private careers have demonstrated outstanding dedication to the highest principles of the legal profession and the welfare of their communities. Fellows membership is by invitation only and is limited to the top one percent of licensed attorneys. Fellows contribute financial support for the ABF's research, engage with and disseminate findings of note, and enjoy access to exclusive social and educational events.

Organizational Details

The ABF is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization headquartered on the campus of Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law in Chicago, Illinois. In FY2025, the ABF's budget totaled \$9.1 million. The ABF receives 40 percent of its annual funding from the American Bar Endowment, which supports research activities, and 25 percent from dues and contributions from the ABF Fellows. The ABF also receives private donor support and generous grants for individual research projects from the National Science Foundation, the Freedom Together Foundation (formerly the JPB Foundation), and the AccessLex Institute, among others. The ABF also maintains an institutional endowment, which totaled \$35.5 million in FY2025.

Strategic Plan

The next Executive Director will lead the continued execution of the ABF's [2024-2029 strategic plan](#), whose multi-pronged approach seeks to reinforce the ABF as the premier institution for leading-edge, interdisciplinary, empirical research across the global socio-legal ecosystem. The plan outlines the ABF's objective to pioneer transformative research by exploring new initiatives, strategic hiring, active collaboration and co-investigation, and dedicated investment in emerging scholars. This research will reach and resonate with the academy, the bar, the bench, and beyond and will deepen the ABF's impact on policy, practice, and public discourse. Under the next ED, the ABF will fortify its ties to the ABA, ABE, and ABA Fund for Justice and Education, cultivate new relationships, grow the Fellows program, and broaden institutional funding sources. In order to sustain the ABF as an agile organization where innovation and tradition can thrive in tandem, it is the job of the ED to make sure that internal processes and expectations are clear, robust metrics are used to evaluate performance, and the institution anticipates and responds to evolving challenges and opportunities within the ABF and the field at large.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

By enriching its intellectual climate, bolstering operational capabilities, and expanding resources, the ED emphasizes the ABF's ability to sustain a thriving core of strong interdisciplinary scholars with the external

reach to foster dialogue, inspire scholarly passion, and guide policy and practice worldwide. In partnership with the board, faculty, staff, and other relevant constituents, the ED will:

Enhance the ABF's organizational impact through proactive strategic visioning and deft implementation.

The ED will review, update if appropriate, and implement the strategic plan, setting goals and ensuring alignment with the ABF's mission and capacities. The strategy provides the ABF with a roadmap while allowing the organizational flexibility to evolve in response to external trends and pursue emerging intellectual developments, financial goals, and mission priorities. Through academic and administrative stewardship, the ED ensures the ABF remains a trailblazer in its field, addresses systemic barriers that prevent access to justice, and explores paths to optimize access.

Uphold the ABF as the preeminent developer of empirical research dedicated to the study of law, legal institutions, and legal processes.

The ED maintains the scholarly integrity, quality, and expansiveness of the ABF's research and works closely with faculty to identify additional research areas and projects aligned with its institutional mission. The ED recruits and retains an excellent faculty, appoints review committee members and editors, oversees academic publications, including LSI, and advises on programming and communications regarding research projects. The ED is expected to bring their unique scholarly point of view to the ABF while encouraging independent creative activities and entrepreneurship among the faculty, consistent with academic freedom.

Broaden appreciation and visibility of the ABF, its research, and the impact it produces.

The ED acts as the ABF's primary external spokesperson, representing the institution at events and external meetings with alums, affiliates, and media. The ED communicates and disseminates what the ABF is and does, including its research, to key partners such as the ABA, the ABE, university partners (primarily Northwestern University and the University of Chicago), and the Law & Society Association, as well as bar associations, law firms, and others within and outside of the academy and around the world. Working in concert with the Fellows officers, the ED's job is also to strengthen relations with the Fellows to better develop the cohort as an integral, informed, and supportive part of the ABF.

Ensure the health and sustainability of the ABF through skilled fundraising, thoughtful fiscal management, and strong operational oversight.

It is a primary responsibility of the ED to establish stable funding for research and other ABF activities, utilizing current funding sources and identifying new targets. This includes maintaining a close, mutually beneficial relationship with the ABE, investing in targeted engagement and fundraising activities among the Fellows, overseeing and participating in proposals and applications for foundation and government grants, and personally soliciting private philanthropic support—including major gifts. The ED will explore funding for additional Research Fellow Chairs, Research Funds, and specific research projects, and will

seek to broaden support beyond the ABE and Fellows cohort. In partnership with the CFO, the ED oversees the ABF's budget, engages in strategic financial planning, and ensures accurate and timely financial reporting. The ED also oversees the ABF's operations, ensuring efficiency, accountability, and compliance.

Invest in the ABF's passionate and hardworking group of researchers and staff, engage its committed board of directors, and expand mutual understanding, belonging, and community.

The ED works closely with research faculty, providing intellectual leadership and support, fostering a positive, productive, and collegial work environment, supervising performance, and mentoring and cultivating researchers at various stages of their careers. The ED is responsible for managing a dedicated community of administrative and research assistance staff, investing in their development, advancement, and well-being, and ensuring they have the resources, support, and agency necessary to flourish. The ED reports to and collaborates with the board of directors, engages them as thought partners, provides them with information and support, and ensures effective fiduciary and strategic governance.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

While no individual will possess every quality, the successful candidate will bring many of the following qualifications, professional experiences, and personal attributes:

- Experience as a distinguished scholarly expert in socio-legal research and a commitment to the principle that a deep understanding of the law is vital to a more just, equitable world.
- Expertise in designing and conducting empirical interdisciplinary research on law, legal behavior, and legal institutions. Familiarity with the organized bar and legal profession.
- Demonstrated success in an organizational leadership position, preferably in higher education or a nonprofit, that approaches the magnitude and complexity of the intellectual and administrative responsibilities of the ABF ED role.
- Experience with strategic planning and successfully orienting an organization to thrive in continuously evolving social, economic, and policy environments. Expertise in translating a vision and strategy into a practical plan with concrete implementation methods and measures of anticipated outcomes.
- Exceptional organizational skills and a track record of proficient financial oversight, including budgeting, planning, and reporting.
- Demonstrated ability to thrive in a collaborative environment with a shared sense of leadership. Excellent coalition-building and negotiating skills, and the ability to work effectively with various constituents and achieve consensus among differing opinions.
- Experience with and commitment to recruiting, inspiring, and nurturing the development of dedicated, diverse researchers and staff, and success in fostering a healthy, dynamic, inclusive, and equitable work environment.
- Evidence of building and sustaining fruitful partnerships and networks with various external constituencies.

- Knowledge of and experience with fundraising strategies and long-term relationship-building with foundations and individual donors. Familiarity with government funding mechanisms.
- Exceptional communication skills, including public speaking and interpersonal skills, to persuasively convey the urgency and value of the ABF's mission to various audiences. Ability to clearly communicate results of scholarly research to the bar, the bench, and the general public.
- Experience working with a governing board or analogous expertise.
- Integrity, curiosity, collegiality, emotional intelligence, and a collaborative yet decisive approach to leadership.
- A JD or equivalent international degree, with a strong preference for a PhD in the social sciences or humanities.

EMPLOYMENT DETAILS

Salary and Benefits

The anticipated salary range for this position is \$290,000-\$320,000. Full-time benefits currently include medical, dental, and vision insurance; paid sick leave; paid vacation; paid holidays (including a week-long winter holiday recess); paid family/medical leave after one year of employment; FSA or HSA; 403(b) retirement plan with employer match and nonelective contribution; transit and parking benefits, including discounted parking; employee assistance program; and more.

Location and Commitment

The ED must reside within a daily commutable distance of the ABF's offices in Chicago, IL. This role requires a consistent presence in the office, as well as regular travel.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

All applications, inquiries, and nominations should be submitted electronically and in confidence to the search team at: (<https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/american-bar-foundation/executive-director>). Screening of applications will begin immediately and continue until the search process is completed.

Vijay Saraswat, Partner

Gale Merseth, Partner

Tatiana Oberkoetter, Managing Associate

Elizabeth Arvanitis, Senior Search Coordinator

Isaacson, Miller

The ABF is firmly committed to providing equal employment opportunities to all qualified persons. All decisions regarding the terms, privileges, and/or conditions of employment, including but not limited to hiring, classification, grading, recruitment, discharge, discipline, compensation, selection for training or apprenticeship, placement, promotion, transfer, renewal of employment, tenure or terms, and benefits, will be made without unlawful

discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, citizenship, ancestry, age, order of protection status, marital status, disability, military status, unfavorable discharge from the military, sexual orientation, pregnancy, gender, gender identity, housing status, parental status, source of income, certain arrest or criminal history records, genetic information, protected activity (such as opposition to or reporting of prohibited discrimination or harassment), or any other status or classification protected by applicable federal, state, and/or local laws. The ABF prohibits discrimination, retaliation, and harassment of individuals on any of the bases listed above and any other basis protected by applicable federal, state, and/or local law.

This document has been prepared based on the information provided by the American Bar Foundation. The material presented in this leadership profile should be relied on for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this information, the original source documents and information provided by the American Bar Foundation would supersede any conflicting information in this document.