More than 2,000 bar associations serve the needs of lawyers and communities throughout the United States. Our bar community includes:

- Geographically-based bars
  - The American Bar Association (voluntary)
  - 37 unified state and territory bars to which lawyers must belong in order to practice
  - 22 voluntary state bars*
  - More than 500 voluntary local (metropolitan and county) bars
  - Approximately 45 mandatory judicial district bars to which lawyers must belong in order to practice (in North Carolina only)
- Practice specialty bars at the national, state and local levels (voluntary)
- Racial and ethnic bars at the national, state and local levels (voluntary)
- Women’s bars at the national, state and local levels (voluntary)
- LGBT bars at the national, state and local levels (voluntary)

The vast majority of voluntary bar associations are IRS designated 501(c)(6) organizations, though a few are 501(c)(3) organizations. Just under half of unified state bars are 501(c)(6) organizations. The remaining unified state bars identify themselves as government agencies, executive state agencies, judicial agencies, public corporations, instruments of the Supreme Court, a public body corporate, or a political subdivision of the Supreme Court.

*Three states (North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia) and the District of Columbia have both a unified state bar and a voluntary state bar.

THE BAR’S MISSION

The missions of the vast majority of bar organizations address concerns that can be grouped into four broad categories:

- Serving the professional needs of members
- Supporting and, in some cases, regulating the legal profession
- Supporting the justice system
- Improving access to legal services and/or playing a philanthropic role in the community-at-large

While all bars share many of the same values, each bar has its own unique responsibilities, priorities and culture that are shaped by the type of organization it is, its purpose as stated in the organization’s bylaws, its governance, its historical role in the community, and many other factors. So, while every bar serves the professional needs of its members, we see more variation in the other areas. Some bars are deeply involved in efforts to improve the administration of justice. Some bars have a heavy community service orientation.

All bars share common ground, but every bar carries out its mission in a unique way. Bar leaders can and should learn from the experiences of other bars while recognizing that solutions that work for one may or may not work for another.

The secret to success is constancy to purpose.
—Benjamin Disraeli

Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.
—Thomas Edison