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**ANNUAL SURVEY RESULTS**  
**PREFERENCES & EXPECTATIONS**  
**FOR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT**





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The Law School Survey of Student Engagement is part of Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research, a research center in the School of Education devoted to studying the student experience. In addition to LSSSE, CPR houses the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the NSSE Institute, the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), and the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE).

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# FOREWORD

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There has been nearly obsessive reporting on law school graduate employment and salary outcomes by NALP, the ABA, and the press, among others — particularly since the onset of the recession in 2008. But there has been far less attention paid to measuring the gap between student expectations and actual outcomes. The 2017 LSSSE Annual Report provides a good reminder that “the premise of law school is to prepare students for legal careers and other professional pursuits,” and therefore the academy must concern itself with student expectations, and the disparities between those expectations and actual employment and salary outcomes.

This new LSSSE Annual Report helpfully measures and reports on the gaps between student employment preferences and student employment expectations, documenting gaps that already exist between the two — most notably perhaps, the fact that before graduation relatively large numbers of students expect to be disappointed in their employment outcomes, or at least expect to end up working somewhere other than where they would prefer to work.

The good news is that comparing law student preferences and expectations with actual employment outcomes as measured by NALP and the ABA, there are not a lot of stark disparities — that is, in general student preferences and expectations about their employment outcomes largely match with actual measured outcomes ten months after graduation. For instance, in the LSSSE data, overall sixty-four percent of respondents indicate a preference for working in one of the private settings, and thirty-six percent prefer public service; while the NALP employment categories do not exactly align with the LSSSE employment categories, for the Class of 2017 NALP figures show that roughly sixty-eight percent of those members of the class who found work by the ten-month mark were working in a private setting, a gap of only four percentage points based on the preferences measured by LSSSE.

We know from a variety of studies, including the landmark After the JD project from the American Bar Foundation and NALP Foundation, and from the ongoing Study of Law School Alumni Employment and Satisfaction series from NALP and the NALP Foundation, that by and large law school graduates express very high levels of satisfaction with their careers — and that this remains largely true whether students graduate in times of economic boom or economic bust, suggesting that despite some misalignment between preferences, expectations, and actual outcomes, the investment in a legal education continues to be rewarding for most law school graduates.

The bad news is that sometimes stark disparities continue to exist between groups of students and graduates by race, ethnicity, and gender. The report’s authors highlight for us that law students’ “professional preferences and expectations seemed to be influenced by factors pertaining to privilege and disadvantage.” It should not surprise any of us that work preferences and work expectations were most closely aligned for white men, and that “work in law firms was most strongly associated with white respondents, male respondents, and respondents expecting no debt.” Similarly, “Black respondents were least likely to prefer and expect to work in the same individual setting, with less than half doing so.” Black students expect to be disappointed in their job market outcomes at a higher rate than any other group. This is a finding that, while not surprising, should give us all pause.

The 2017 LSSSE Annual Report provides rich findings about law student employment preferences and expectations, and the disparities between the two — particularly the differences in those gaps by race, ethnicity, and gender — and highlights the fact that there is much work to be done in helping to shape student preferences and expectations early in law school. These data suggest, for instance, that early work with Black and Latinx students about the rewards of judicial clerkships is one place to start.



**James G. Leipold**

*Executive Director  
National Association  
for Law Placement*

# DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

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## Welcome

I am delighted to contribute to this Report as the new Director of the Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE). Over the past fifteen years, LSSSE has surveyed more than 350,000 law students across the U.S., Canada, and Australia. Our data reveal national and international trends on legal education, as well as school-specific patterns that faculty, staff, administrators, and others can use to improve the quality of the law student experience.

LSSSE's primary purpose is to provide law schools with actionable data—empirical evidence revealing not only what works well but also where we can do better. As Director, my priorities are two-fold: to assist participating schools maximize their data in order to create meaningful programmatic improvements, and to increase scholarly engagement with LSSSE. Together these serve the larger purpose of utilizing LSSSE data to improve legal education.

## Current Report

Research suggests that most attorneys are satisfied with their decision to pursue a legal career. This Report considers the more nuanced question of whether students expect to work in their preferred job setting after graduation. The data from this Report draw from the responses of more than 18,000 students at 69 U.S. law schools who participated in the LSSSE Survey in 2017.

Examining consistencies and disparities between professional preferences and expectations illuminate myriad issues relating to motivation, debt, background, and overall satisfaction. Because LSSSE respondents range from first-year law students to graduating 3Ls, the vast majority do not yet know what positions they will hold upon graduation, let alone potential future career trajectories. With that in mind, we might expect their preferences and expectations to be closely aligned.

Yet LSSSE data reveal that the types of jobs many students expect to hold upon graduation do not match their preferences. Analyzing particular patterns in the data by race, class, and gender yield significant and troubling findings regarding these disparities. Whites are most likely to expect to work in their preferred fields and positions, while African Americans are more likely than any other racial group to expect that their future jobs will not be the ones that they prefer. The data also suggest that students with the highest debt loads prefer and expect to work in the lowest-paying sectors (e.g., public interest), while those with the lowest debt loads prefer and expect to work in the highest-paying sectors (e.g., large private firms). More women than men who prefer to work in the private sector expect they will work in public settings.

These disparities raise important questions worthy of further attention. What will decrease disparities between student aspirations and expectations? How can schools directly support students who carry a heavy debt load realize the rewards of public interest work? Do graduates actually work in the jobs they expect to hold? This Report represents a necessary first step; once we understand the issues, we can work to implement solutions for the advancement of legal education overall.



**Meera E. Deo**

*LSSSE Director  
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# INTRODUCTION

Career goals can influence how students navigate and perceive their law school experiences. Everything from courses taken to co-curricular and other activities are often influenced by post-law school goals. After all, the premise of law school is to prepare students for legal careers and other professional pursuits.

This year's LSSSE Annual Report explores law student employment preferences and expectations. The LSSSE Survey asks respondents to identify the setting in which they would most prefer to work after graduation and the setting in which they most expect to work. Preferences can be seen as representing a respondent's ideal outcome; expectations can be seen as representing perceptions of a realistic outcome. For both questions, respondents are asked to choose between sixteen answer options.

For purposes of much of the analyses in this report, the answer options are divided into two broad groups:

public service settings and private settings. The public service and private settings groupings include the following answer options:

## Public Service Settings

- Academic
- Government agency
- Judicial clerkship
- Legislative office
- Military
- Prosecutor's office
- Public defender's office
- Public interest group

## Private Settings

- Accounting firm
- Business and industry
- Nonlegal organization
- Private firm - small (fewer than 10 attorneys)
- Private firm - medium (10-50 attorneys)
- Private firm - large (more than 50 attorneys)
- Solo practice

The "Other, specify" answer choice was omitted from the analysis. The primary factor underlying the assignment of an answer option to one of the two groupings was whether a person working in that setting would likely qualify for Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF).<sup>1</sup> If so, that answer option was considered a public service setting. If not, it was considered a private setting. There is naturally some imprecision in the assignments.

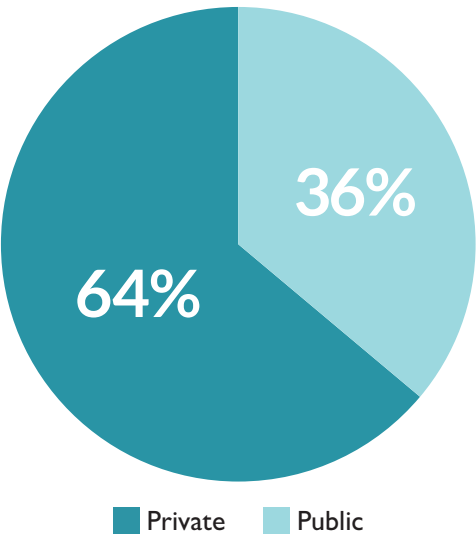
Because each of the included answer options belongs to one of the two groupings, proportional splits always equal 100%. For example, if 59% of female respondents prefer to work in private settings, it can be concluded that 41% of female respondents prefer a public service setting.

<sup>1</sup> Generally, in order to qualify for PSLF, one must be employed in the government or non-profit sector.

# OVERALL TRENDS

Sixty-four percent of respondents indicate a preference for working in one of the private settings, with the remaining 36% preferring public service (Figure 1). This proportion is unchanged from five survey administrations ago (2012) and higher than the 30% proportion ten administrations ago (2008) (Figure 2).

Figure 1  
Proportion preferring private setting



Seventeen percent of respondents prefer work in medium-sized law firms, making this category the most popular private setting and the most popular setting overall. Government agencies are the most popular

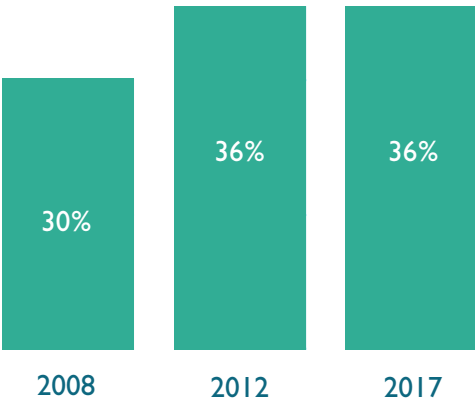
public setting, with 11% of respondents indicating that preference (Figures 3 & 4). Medium-sized law firms are also the most commonly expected private work setting and setting overall, with a proportion of 20% of respondents. Small law firms are the fourth most preferred private setting yet the second most expected setting. Government agencies are the most commonly expected public service setting (Figures 3 & 4).

Work setting preferences vary across demographic groups. Seventy percent of male respondents prefer to work in private settings, the highest proportion among all groups analyzed. At 41%, Black respondents are most likely to prefer a public service setting. Latinx respondents and respondents who are first-generation college graduates also indicate relatively high levels of interest in public service.

Forty-four percent of respondents indicate a different expected work setting than their preferred setting. Respondents who prefer to work in an academic setting are least likely to expect to work in that setting, with only about one-in-5 matching preference with expectation. Respondents who prefer to work in large

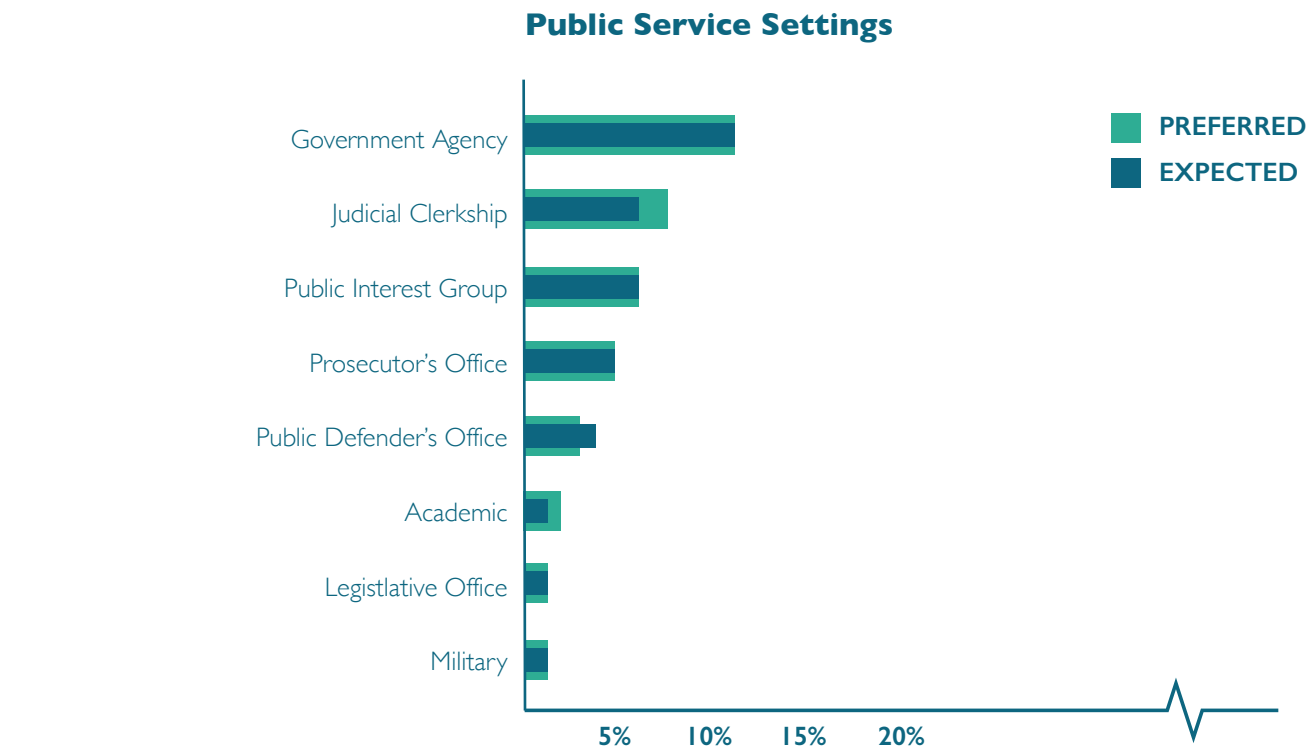
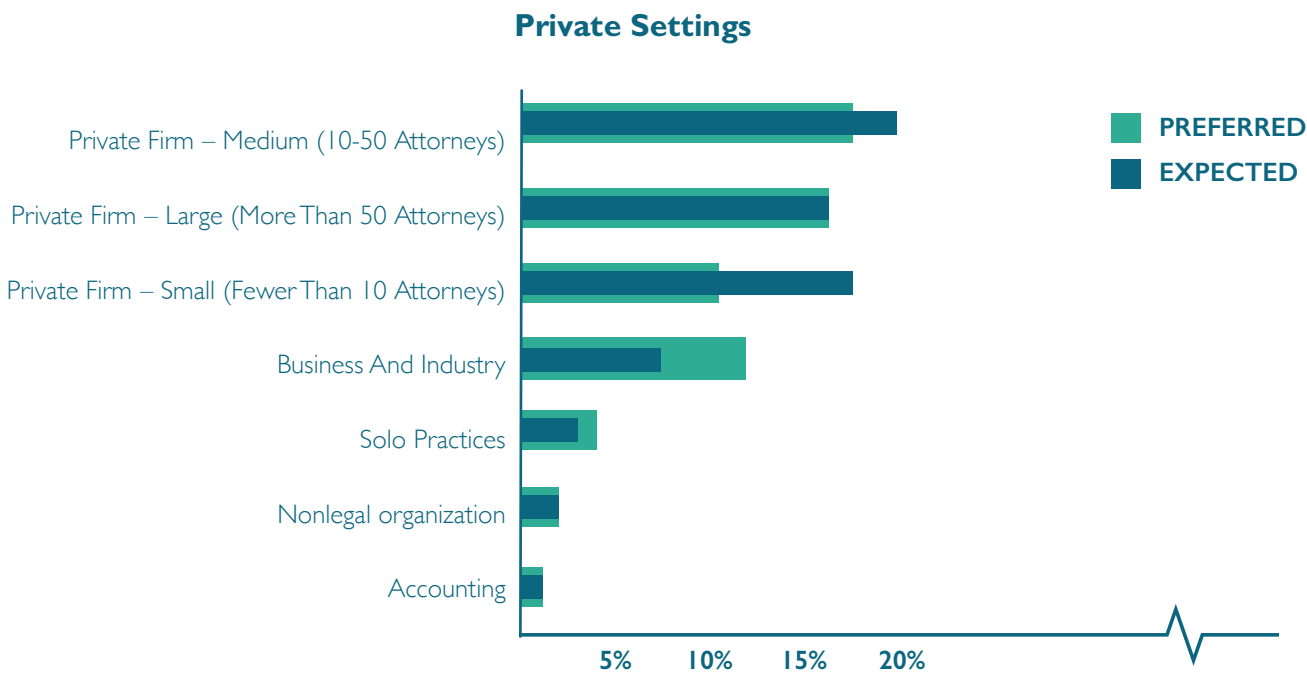
law firms or as prosecutors are most likely to also expect to work in those settings. Forty-six percent of respondents who prefer one of the public service settings expect to work in a different setting. One-quarter expect to work in private settings. Forty-one percent of respondents who prefer one of the private settings expect to work in a different setting; but only 12% expect to work in public service.

Figure 2  
Proportion preferring public service setting



Figures 3 & 4

Proportion of respondents preferring & expecting each work setting

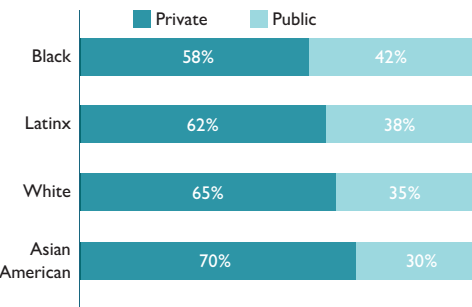




# RACE AND ETHNICITY

Almost 70% of Asian American respondents state a preference for working in a private setting, the largest proportion among the four racial and ethnic groups analyzed. Black respondents are most likely to prefer public service settings (Figure 5).

Figure 5  
Proportion preferring public service and private setting



Medium-sized law firms are the most commonly preferred private setting for Latinx and White respondents. Among private work settings, Black respondents most prefer business and industry. Almost one-quarter of Asian American respondents prefer large law firms, which is the largest proportion preferring any individual work setting (Figure 6).

Government agencies are the most preferred public service setting among all groups, though there are notable variations in the extent of the preference.

Black respondents are almost twice as likely as Asian American and White respondents to prefer this setting. Judicial clerkships are relatively popular preferences among Asian American and White respondents. Working in the prosecutor’s office is popular among Black and Latinx respondents (Figure 6).

Black respondents are least likely to prefer and expect to work in the same individual setting, with less than half doing so, whereas White respondents (at 60%) are most likely (Figure 7). The proportion of respondents expecting to work in private settings increases among Asian American and White respondents, when compared to their preferences. Seventy-three percent of Asian American respondents expect to work in private settings, compared to 70% preferring to do so. Among White respondents, the proportion who expect to work in private settings is 68% compared to the 65% who prefer it. These two sets of proportions remain largely the same among Black and Latinx respondents.

Medium-sized law firms are the most commonly expected private setting for Black and White respondents. Large law firms are the most common expectation among Asian American

respondents. Small firms are most common among Latinxs. For Black and Latinx respondents, the most common expected settings are different from their most preferred settings of business and industry and medium-sized firms, respectively (Figure 6).

Government agencies are the most commonly expected public service setting among all groups; but again, there are notable variations in the extent of the preference. Black respondents have the highest expectation of working in these settings, more than twice as high as Asian American respondents. Once again, judicial clerkships are relatively popular expected settings among Asian American and White respondents, while working in the prosecutor’s office is popular among Black and Latinx respondents (Figure 6).

Almost one-third of Asian American respondents who prefer public service settings expect to work in private settings, the highest proportion among all the racial and ethnic groups. Black respondents are most likely to prefer private settings but expect to work in public service (Figure 7).

Figure 6

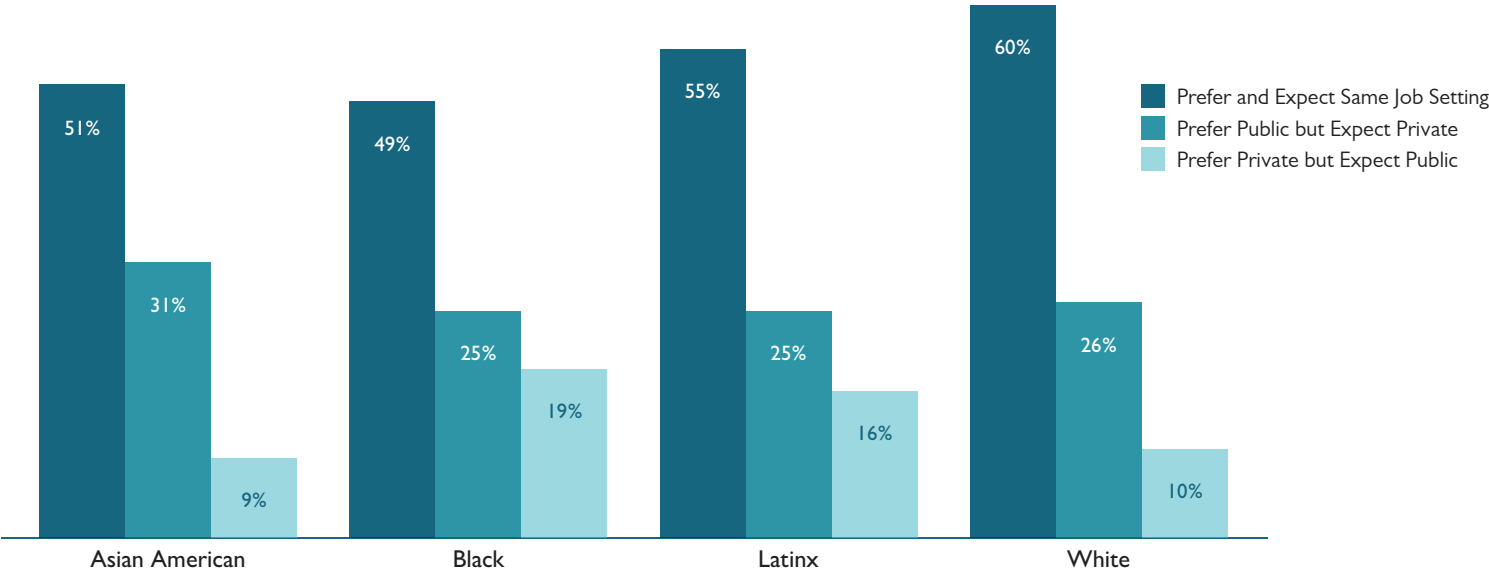
Top 3 categories for private setting by race/ethnicity

	Preferred	Expected
<b>Asian American</b>		
Large Firms	24%	Large Firms 22%
Medium-sized Firms	20%	Medium-sized Firms 21%
Business and Industry	16%	Small-sized Firms 15%
<b>Black</b>		
Business and Industry	15%	Medium-sized Firms 13%
Medium-sized Firms	14%	Small-sized Firms 12%
Large Firms	13%	Large Firms 12%
<b>Latinx</b>		
Medium-sized Firms	16%	Small-sized Firms 22%
Small-sized Firms	15%	Medium-sized Firms 17%
Business and Industry/Large Firms	11%	Large Firms 10%
<b>White</b>		
Medium-sized Firms	19%	Medium-sized Firms 21%
Large Firms	16%	Small-sized Firms 18%
Small-sized Firms	13%	Large Firms 16%



Figure 7

Employment preferences vs. expectations, by race/ethnicity





# GENDER

Seventy percent of male respondents indicate a preference for working in one of the private settings, compared to 59% of female respondents (Figure 8). Large firms are the most preferred among males. Medium-sized law firms are the most preferred private setting for female respondents. Government agencies are the most preferred public service setting for both groups, with female respondents more likely to indicate this preference (Figure 9).

Sixty-one percent of female respondents expect to work in the same type of setting they prefer; fifty-eight percent of males did so. Medium-sized law firms are the most commonly expected work setting for both groups, which for males was a shift from their preference for large firms. Government agencies are the most commonly expected public service setting for both groups (Figure 10).

Male respondents are more likely than females to prefer to work in public service but expect to work in a private setting. Female respondents are more likely than males to prefer to work in a private setting but expect to work in public service (Figure 11).

Figure 8

PREFERRED work setting, by gender.

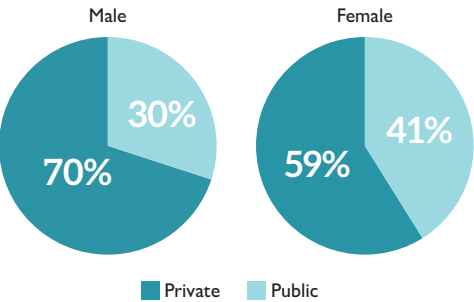


Figure 9

Top three PREFERRED settings, by gender

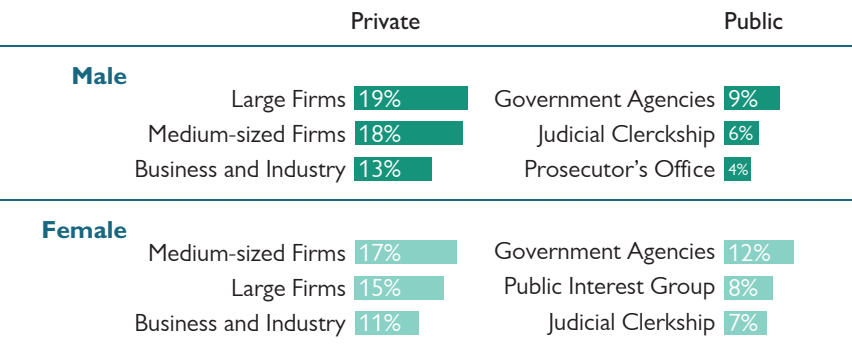


Figure 10

Top three EXPECTED settings, by gender

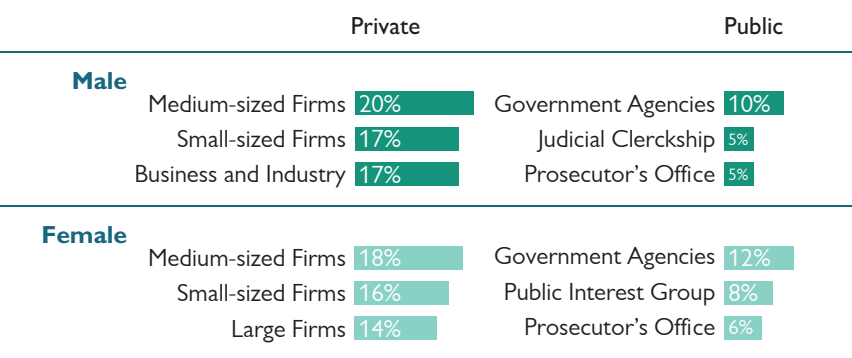


Figure 11

Employment preferences vs. expectations, by gender



# SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND

The LSSSE Survey asks respondents to describe the education levels of their parents as a proxy for socioeconomic background. Lower parental education levels are generally associated with lower socioeconomic standing among students. Respondents were divided into two groups based on parental education:

- First-generation (FG): respondents for whom neither parent possesses a bachelor's degree
- Non-first-generation (NFG): respondents for whom at least one parent possesses a bachelor's degree or higher

Thirty-nine percent of FG respondents indicate a preference for working in one of the public service settings, compared to 35% of NFG respondents (Figure 12). Medium-sized law firms are the most preferred private setting for FG respondents. Large firms are the most preferred among NFG respondents. Government agencies are the most preferred public service setting for both groups (Figure 13).

For both groups, expectations for private work setting are different from their preferences. Small firms are the most commonly expected setting for FG respondents; mid-sized firms are most preferred. For NFG respondents, medium-sized firms are most commonly expected, a departure from their preference for large firms. For both groups, public service setting expectations align closely with preferences (Figure 14).

NFG respondents are slightly more likely than FG respondents to prefer to work in public service but expect to work in a private setting. FG respondents are more likely to prefer to work in a private setting but expect to work in public service (Figure 15).

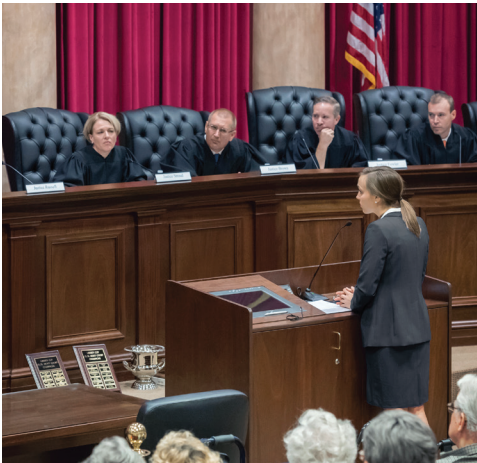


Figure 12

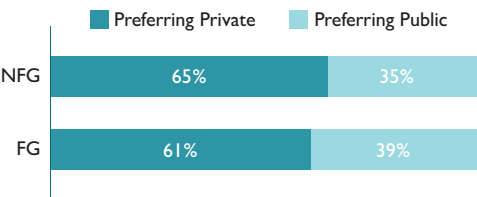


Figure 13

Top three **PREFERRED** settings, by parental education

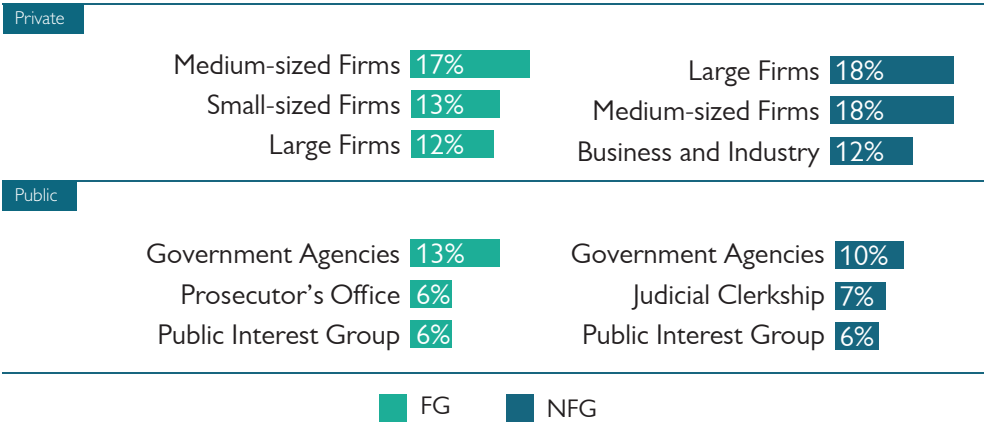




Figure 14

Top three EXPECTED settings, by parental education

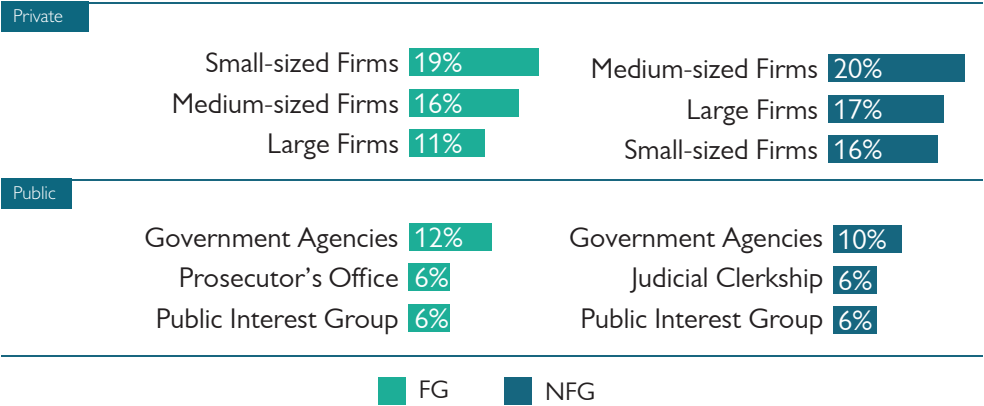
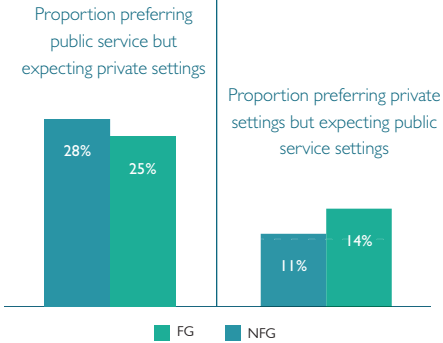


Figure 15



# EXPECTED LAW SCHOOL DEBT

The role of student loan debt is important to consider in the context of student career preferences and expectations. LSSSE asks respondents to estimate the amount of law school debt they expect to incur by graduation. Forty percent of respondents who expect to owe more than \$200,000 prefer to work in a public service setting, the highest proportion of all student debt groupings. At 31%, respondents who expect no debt are least likely to prefer working in public service (Figure 16).

Expectations of working in public service decrease slightly relative to preferences for each of the student debt groups; but expectations of working in public service increase with expected debt (Figure 16). There is no evidence of high levels of expected debt prompting respondents who prefer public service settings to nonetheless expect to work in private settings (due to the prospect of higher pay). In fact, respondents who expect to owe more than \$200,000 are most likely to prefer and expect to work in public service settings. Respondents expecting to owe more than \$100,000 are mostly likely to prefer to work in private settings but expect to work public service (Figure 17).

Figure 16  
Public service preferences vs expectations, by debt

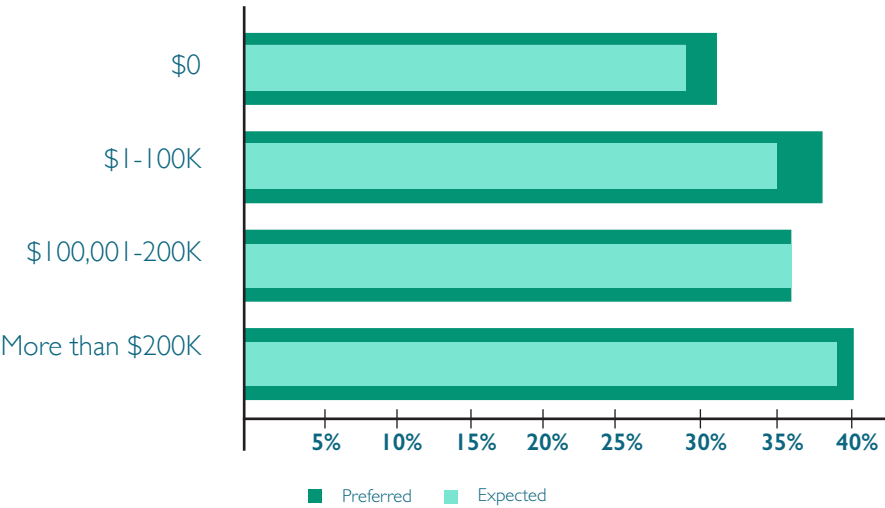
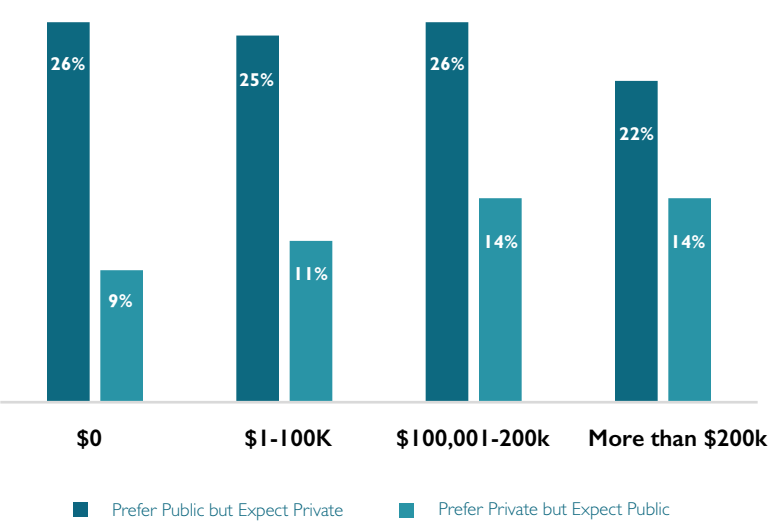


Figure 17  
Employment preferences vs. expectations, by debt





# CONCLUSION

Perceptions of one's place in the professional world are influenced by various factors, including professional goals, financial concerns, and the sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious signals that students receive from their surrounding world.

Some of the trends among LSSSE respondents pertaining to professional preferences and expectations seem to be influenced by factors pertaining to privilege and disadvantage. Respondents who come from underrepresented racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds and those expecting the most debt are more likely than other students to both prefer and expect to work in public service settings. The trends support the view that lawyers from underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to work in underserved communities<sup>2</sup> and, therefore, law school diversity promotes vital access to justice.<sup>3</sup>

These trends intensify as under-represented characteristics are compounded. For example, almost half of Black female respondents who are first-generation college graduates prefer and expect to work in public service settings,<sup>4</sup> compared to 32% overall. Similar proportions of Black female respondents who expect to owe more

than \$200,000 prefer and expect to work in public service.<sup>5</sup>

For all groups, government agencies are the most commonly preferred and expected public service setting. This trend makes sense given the broad scope of the answer choice. But the extent of preference and expectation in government service vary. At the extremes, Black respondents who are first-generation college graduates are almost twice as likely as White non-first-generation respondents to prefer or expect to work in government agencies.<sup>6</sup>

Conversely, interest in working in private settings, particularly in law firms, is greater among respondents most likely to come from relatively privileged backgrounds. Work in law firms is most strongly associated with White respondents, male respondents, and respondents expecting no debt.

There are also interesting trends pertaining to law firm size. Asian American and White respondents are most likely to prefer and expect to work in large law firms. Latinxs are least likely to prefer and expect to work in large law firms and most likely to prefer and expect to work in small law firms.

Law firm size is often seen as a proxy for prestige, with opportunities in larger firms generally considered more attractive due, in large part, to higher pay compared to smaller firms. Lower levels of interest in these jobs by Latinx and Black respondents may be as much the result of the well-publicized lack of diversity and inclusivity in large firms as it is interest in other types of work.

At the extremes, higher expected law school debt is associated with higher interest in working in public service settings, and lower levels of debt is associated with higher interest in private settings. The “snapshot” nature of the survey, however, does not capture how a respondent's preferences and expectations may have evolved over time, and how debt may have influenced that evolution.

The employment setting questions on the LSSSE Survey provide a fascinating glimpse into how respondents see the professional world and their place within it. For law schools, information about law student career preferences and expectations can be useful at every stage of the matriculation process – from admission to post-graduation.

<sup>2</sup> Evensen, D. H., & Pratt, C. D. (2012). *The end of the pipeline: A journey of recognition for African Americans entering the legal profession*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

<sup>3</sup> Deo, M. E. (2014). Empirically derived compelling state interests in affirmative action jurisprudence. *Hastings Law Journal* 65(3), 661-712.

<sup>4</sup> Forty-six percent (139/302) prefer to work in public service settings. Forty-seven percent (142/302) expect to work in these settings.

<sup>5</sup> Fifty-one percent (39/77) prefer to work in public service settings. Forty-seven percent (36/77) expect to work in these settings.

<sup>6</sup> Sixteen percent (74/461) of Black first-generation respondents prefer or expect to work in government agencies, compared to 9 percent (595/6694) of white non-first generation respondents.



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