Order of the Coif

There are well over 200 law schools in the United States. Of these, 181 are approved by the American Bar Association. In turn, 162 of those are members of the Association of American Law Schools. And of those, only 76 have chapters of the Order of the Coif, legal education's national honorary society.

So what is the Order of the Coif, anyway?

The usual shorthand description is that Coif is the law school equivalent of Phi Beta Kappa. Its stated purpose is "to encourage excellence in legal education by fostering a spirit of careful study." The most visible aspect of having a Coif chapter is that the top 10 percent of the graduating class are elected to membership in the Order. They receive a certificate, a handbook, a handshake, and, not least, an important line on their resume.

The Order does more than just honor top students, however. It is also well known in legal academic circles because of its triennial book award. This is arguably the single most prestigious award given for legal scholarship. Recent winners have included Gerald

Gunther for his biography of Judge Learned Hand, G. Edward White for his biography of Justice Holmes, Mary Ann Glendon, Ronald Dworkin, Guido Calabresi, John Hart Ely, and Jesse Choper. The Order also supports a national lecture series, allowing member schools the opportunity to bring outstanding scholars to their campuses.

As for the "coif" itself, that was a round piece of white cloth, a sort of a doily, that medieval English serjeants-at-law wore atop their wig. Five centuries ago, serjeants were the top dogs of English lawyers. Appointment as a serjeant was a significant honor and a great professional benefit, not least because judges were drawn exclusively from among serjeants. This exclusivity arrangement lasted until abolished by Parliament in 1837. Originally, serjeants-at-law wore a particular sort of hood; when lawyers started wearing wigs, the serjeants abandoned the hood and adopted the coif. The English "Order of the Coif" was the corporate society of the serjeants. To be a serjeant-at-law was to be a member of the Order of the Coif. Fortunately, modern-day members of the American Order are not obliged to don an actual coif, but in earlier centuries the coif was worn with pride. According to one contemporary account, during the ceremony creating a new serjeant, "[t]he white coif of the order was placed on the head of the serjeant-elect with the same solemnity as the helmet was formerly placed on the head of the knight."

The English Order of the Coif came to an end in the late 1800s after many centuries of decline. The contemporary American version began at Northwestern in 1907 and does not actually have any connection with the historical English order other than the name and, at an abstract level, an aspiration toward quality. Apparently it was the influence of John Henry Wigmore, author of the famous treatise on evidence, an enthusiastic Anglophile, and dean at Northwestern, that led to the adoption of "Order of the Coif" as the name for the new honorary society. The Order adopted its first constitution in 1912 and has grown steadily. But for a couple of conspicuous absences, the list of schools with Coif chapters is the honor roll of law schools. (Oddly, neither Columbia nor Harvard has a Coif chapter. It seems safe to say that they qualify; for reasons best known to themselves, they have not

sought to join.)

Notes

1 *Although it looks French, the word is pronounced "koyf," not "quaff." As with a certain much-mispronounced street about half a mile south of Cardozo, those in the know sound like they are saying it wrong.*

2 *Frank R. Strong, Order of the Coif: English Antecedents and American Adaptation, 63 ABA J. 1725, 1726 (1977), quoting Alexander Pulling, The Order of the Coif.*

3 *Strong, supra note 2, at 1727. For those really interested in the history of the organization and its English namesake, this article is the best place to start.*

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