The Three Major Legal Fraternities and Why You May Want to Join One

If you are reading this article, you are probably a member or aspiring member of the legal profession. But what about becoming a member of a legal fraternity as well? Legal fraternities are social and professional organizations centered on ideals related to the law. They have hundreds of thousands of members, including United States presidents and United States Supreme Court justices.

There are many benefits to joining a legal fraternity. Membership in a legal fraternity can provide camaraderie, connections, a sense of tradition, and a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself. Membership can be especially helpful for students and young lawyers who need help securing jobs, selecting practice areas, and generally finding their way in the profession. Later in one’s career, membership can facilitate professional advancement opportunities. In addition to law-related activities, legal fraternities engage in charitable and community work and provide a platform for members to get involved in a host of interesting and worthy activities.

Please refer to the following BCG Attorney Search articles to help understand the importance of networking in your career as an attorney:

- Why Networking is Essential to Your Success as an Attorney
- Get a Job Through Networking
- I Want to Find a Job but I Am Not Comfortable with Networking

This article provides background on the three primary legal fraternities in the United States and abroad – Phi Alpha Delta, Phi Delta Phi, and Delta Theta Phi. No legal fraternity is “better” or “worse” than any other. Each one has different noteworthy characteristics and the important thing is to figure out which one (if any) is best for you.

If you are interested in joining a legal fraternity, the best thing to do is explore the organization’s website, attend some functions and talk to members. Where do you feel most comfortable? Which fraternity inspires you and aligns with your vision of the law and the legal profession?

Phi Alpha Delta

Phi Alpha Delta is the largest legal fraternity in the world, with over 270,000 initiated members at accredited schools. Phi Alpha Delta was the first legal fraternity to admit people of all races, creeds, religions, national origins and genders. Phi Alpha Delta ("P.A.D.") also is known for its emphasis on helping pre-law and law students in their transition into the legal profession. The name Phi Alpha Delta comes from the Latin phrase meaning “love of humanity and justice for all.”

A group of law students founded P.A.D. in 1902 in response to a ruling by the Supreme Court of Illinois that threatened to adversely impact students preparing for admission to the bar. In order to maintain their rights, the group of students organized the Law Student League, which secured passage of an act by the state legislature that exempted students who were then studying for the bar. The Illinois Supreme Court refused to acknowledge all of the exemptions, so the league took a test case to the Supreme Court of Illinois and was partially successful.

In 1898, members of the league formed the Lambda Epsilon fraternity after realizing that they could accomplish more as a unified group. Lambda Epsilon initially instituted restrictions to membership but decided to expand when members saw the demand for legal fraternities on other campuses. On July 26, 1902, the delegates of a convention held at the Colonial Tavern in South Haven, MI, decided to dissolve Lambda Epsilon. The next day, they signed the South Haven Articles, which would serve as the foundation for Phi Alpha Delta. In November of that same year, a meeting was held in Chicago, during which the articles, a constitution, rituals and rules were formally adopted together under the name of “Phi Alpha Delta.”

Within a month, five chapters had been installed, and by 1910 more than 23 chapters were in existence. In 1950, P.A.D. voted to open the fraternity to all races. In 1970, the fraternity became the first to admit women, when it merged with Phi Delta Delta, one of the largest law fraternities for women. The first P.A.D.
pre-law chapter for college students was established in 1981 at Southwest Missouri State University.

Today, there are 196 chapters chartered at law schools in the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico and Mexico. There are also 97 alumni chapters and 270 pre-law chapters. P.A.D. is headquartered in Towson, Maryland.

According to the Phi Alpha Delta website, the mission, vision and core values of P.A.D. are as follows:

Mission: Phi Alpha Delta Law Fraternity, International is a professional law fraternity advancing integrity, compassion and courage through service to the student, the school, the profession and the community.

Vision: We are the preeminent law fraternity promoting the bonds of fraternalism and we are the leader in the development and advancement of professional ideals.

Core Values: Bound together by tradition and our common interest in the law, we share these core values: Integrity, Compassion, Courage, Professionalism, Service, Diversity, and Innovation.

P.A.D. sponsors numerous annual events and programs, including the annual Phi Alpha Delta Mock Trial Competition (for law school chapters) and the P.A.D. Day at the Supreme Court, when P.A.D. members move to admit younger P.A.D.’s before the high court in an exclusive ceremony for members only. P.A.D. also has a “Senior Transition Program” to help college students make a smooth transition to law school.

It is estimated that at least 20% of all attorneys are members of Phi Alpha Delta, including presidents, United States Supreme Court justices, and other prominent jurists. Famous members of the fraternity include Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Samuel Alito, Elena Kagan, Hillary Clinton, Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, William Taft, Warren Harding, Harry Truman, Joseph Biden, Lisa Murkowski, Charles Rangel, James Sensenbrenner, Sam Brownback, and Johnnie Cochran.

You can view the informational video Phi Alpha Delta: A Walk Through the Decades for more information on P.A.D.’s history.

Phi Delta Phi

Founded in 1869 at the University of Michigan, Phi Delta Phi is the oldest of the three international law fraternities. In 2012, Phi Delta Phi became a “legal honor society” as opposed to a legal fraternity. The goal of the organization is to “promote a higher standard of professional ethics.”

While P.A.D. is organized with “chapters,” Phi Delta Phi is structured with “inns.” There are student inns at universities, barrister inns in local communities (for attorneys) and, since 2012, pre-law halls for college students. Phi Delta Phi has over 200 student inns in the United States, Canada, Guatemala, Mexico, Poland and Germany, including at top universities such as Harvard and Yale. The society has more than 200,000 initiated members and each year approximately 3,000 additional students commit themselves to Phi Delta Phi. Phi Delta Phi is headquartered in Washington, D.C.

Annual Phi Delta Phi events include Legal Ethics Week, when inns sponsor programs addressing professional responsibility topics; Community Service Week, when inns help local communities on various projects; the Balfour Scholarship Awards, which provide scholarship award money; and the International Exchange Program, which helps fund study at law schools in the United States and Latin America. Phi Delta Phi has held a Biennial Convention every other year since its First General Convention in 1882. This year, the 61st such convention was held in Savannah, Georgia.

The society emphasizes the professional as well as the social benefits of membership. According to the Phi Delta Phi website, the society makes an effort to counsel student and lawyer members on job placement opportunities and “Friendships cultivated in law school continue after graduation. Phi Delta Phis maintain contact on a social level as well as a professional level through Barrister Inns, Bar Associations and other professional organizations.”

Phi Delta Phi has accumulated an impressive list of members and by the society’s 100th anniversary members had appeared on the cover of TIME magazine more than 100 times. Members include Sandra Day O’Connor, William Rehnquist, Antonin Scalia, Anthony Kennedy, William Brennan, Thurgood Marshall, Earl Warren, Hugo Black, Benjamin Cardozo, Gerald Ford, William Taft, Franklin Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt, Robert Bork, Pamela Carter, Archibald Cox, Daniel Inouye, Robert Kennedy, Patrick Leahy, Karl Llewellyn, Walter Mondale, William Prosser, Kenneth Starr, and Adlai Stevenson.
Delta Theta Phi

Delta Theta Phi is the third major legal fraternity, with approximately 136,000 members and its very own law journal. The fraternity’s law school chapters are referred to as “senates.” Delta Theta Phi is headquartered at Campbell University Wiggins School of Law in Raleigh, North Carolina.

According to the Delta Theta Phi website, the history of the fraternity began with four other law fraternities: Delta Phi Delta, Alpha Kappa Phi, Theta Lambda Phi, and Sigma Nu Phi. In 1913, members of three of the four fraternities met at a joint convention in Chicago and consolidated into Delta Theta Phi. In 1989 Delta Theta Phi merged with Sigma Nu Phi. Today, there are over 200 senates in the Delta Theta Phi system.

Like most fraternities founded during the time preceding the civil rights movement, Delta Theta Phi was founded by white, Christian males. At a convention held in 1959, some of the members suggested that the fraternity remove its clause that limited initiation to white Christians. At the time, they were unsuccessful. Two years later, however, when the same members were alumni, the fight was renewed and they were successful. All restrictions based on race, religion, and creed were lifted.

By 1969, the fraternity was international, with two new senates in Puerto Rico. Soon, there were senates in Australia, Canada, and Iceland. At another convention in 1971, those in attendance voted to remove all restrictions based on gender from their charter and the first female was elected and initiated immediately after the decision.

According to the Delta Theta Phi website:

The Object of this organization shall be to unite fraternally congenial students of the law, to lead them and their fellow students to high scholarship and legal learning, to surround them with an environment such that the traditions of the law and of the profession may descend upon them, to promote justice, to inspire respect for the noblest qualities of mankind and to advance the interests of every college of law with which this Fraternity shall be associated.

While it may not be the oldest or largest legal fraternity, Delta Theta Phi is distinguished in that it is the only legal fraternity with an “authoritatively recognized law review,” the Adelphia Law Journal. The Sigma Nu Phi fraternity founded the journal in 1981, and thus became Delta Theta Phi’s journal during the 1989 merger. Each year, the journal’s National Editorial Board meets to choose a senate to edit the journal. The chosen senate then edits and publishes that year’s journal, committing itself to the editorial process, which includes reviewing, proofreading, and cite-checking all articles. In 2014, the Percy J. Power Senate at Western Michigan University Cooley Law School was awarded the honor of editing the 19th edition of The Adelphia Law Journal in celebration of the fraternity’s 100th anniversary.

The fraternity holds a Biennial Convention and Leadership Conference, which is filled with activities and competitions. Law students from the Hon. Marshall Francis McComb Delta Theta Phi Senate at Southwestern law School won three out of four awards during the weeklong 2013 Convention held in Minnesota, including an award for oral advocacy, a scholarship award for exhibiting professional qualities such as dress, speech and conduct, and an award for academic achievement based on class rank, GPA, special coursework taken and other activities.

Prominent members of Delta Theta Phi (or one of the fraternities that merged into it) include Harry Blackmun, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sandra Day O’Connor, John Paul Stevens, Calvin Coolidge, Lyndon Johnson, Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, Anthony Celebrezze, Lloyd Bentson, Alex Kozinski, F. Lee Bailey, John Grisham, and Joel Lemke.

Conclusions

Legal fraternities provide pre-law and law students, as well as practicing attorneys, a variety of benefits including connections to other attorneys and a platform to forge deeper connections with the law itself. From networking events to mock trial competitions to ethics workshops to community service events, legal fraternities offer a myriad of social and professional opportunities for members.

Please see the following articles for more information about life as an associate:

- What's Next after Finishing Law School
- The Real World: Life after Law School
- The Five Stages of Every Legal Career
The Choices of Practice in Law
Choosing a Law Specialty: Who Are You and What Do You Want
The 10-Step, "No-Fail" Guide to Distinguishing Yourself as a First-Year Associate
5 Tips for First Year Law Firm Associates
The Art of Drafting a Proper Legal Memo
Top 39 Tips for New Litigation Associates and Trial Lawyers: How to Be a Good Litigation Attorney
The Real Reason There Are Fewer Law Firm Jobs (What No Attorney Wants You to Know)
Avoid the Dangers of Getting Jobs Through Friends and Family
2015 LawCrossing Salary Survey of Lawyer Salaries in Best Law Firms
2015 8th Year Salaries and Bonuses of the Top Law Firms
2015 1st Year Salaries and Bonuses of the Top Law Firms
Getting along with colleagues and co-workers in a new firm
LawCrossing Salary Survey of Lawyer Salaries in Best Law Firms
The Pros and Cons of Working in a Law Firm
The Impact Law Firm Economics Can Have on Your Legal Career
How to Avoid a Bad Reputation at Work
Must You be a "Type-A" Personality to Succeed in a Law Firm?

Please see the following articles for more information about law school, the bar exam and succeeding in your first year of practice:

Acing Law School Exams: Grade-A Advice
What's Next after Finishing Law School
First Year of Law School Survival Tips
Does Law School Rank Determine Success?
Late Bloomers: Going to Law School Later in Life
Coping with Law School Dismissal
Graduated From a Tier 3 Law School: There's much you can do with your degree
The Real World: Life after Law School
Why You Should Think Twice About Remaining in Law (or Going to Law School)
After Law School, B-School: The Rise of M.B.A.'s Among Attorneys
Law Schools at Historically Black Colleges and Universities
Non-ABA-Accredited Schools May Offer Good Alternative
Top Law Schools Analyzed and Ranked By America's Top Legal Recruiter Harrison Barnes
The Five Stages of Every Legal Career
"Guidelines on Reciprocity or "Admission on Motion" among the States as per American Bar Association"
Pass the Bar in One State, Work in Another
Taking the Bar in Multiple States
10 Ways to Bounce Back After Failing the Bar and Pass on Your Next Attempt
Don't Panic! Ten Tips for Surviving the Bar Exam
New York's Exam: The Biggest Baddest Bar
If You Have Failed the Bar Exam It Is Not the End of the World
Barriers Fall for Out-of-State Attorneys
The 10-Step, "No-Fail" Guide to Distinguishing Yourself as a First-Year Associate
The Art of Drafting a Proper Legal Memo
5 Tips for First Year Law Firm Associates
Top 39 Tips for New Litigation Associates and Trial Lawyers: How to Be a Good Litigation Attorney
2015 1st Year Salaries and Bonuses of the Top Law Firms