Over the past several decades, no subject has received more attention at bar association meetings at all levels than "professionalism." Teaching and mentoring law students and young lawyers in the highest values and customs of the legal profession is one of the prime challenges posed to law schools and the organized bar. Over the last two decades, one of the greatest contributions to meeting this challenge has been made by the American Inns of Court movement.

In 1977, then Chief Justice Warren Burger went to England with a delegation of American lawyers and judges as part of an exchange program. There they observed the English Inns of Court system. English lawyers are either barristers (basically trial lawyers) or solicitors (basically office lawyers). An English barrister must belong to one of the four Inns of Court in London: Inner Temple, Middle Temple, Gray's Inn, or Lincoln's Inn. The Inns of Court, and not the English judiciary, admit people to become practicing barristers. The Inns of Court have educational requirements, including vocational courses, apprenticeship programs, and the requirement of a set number of formal dinners with fellow members in the hall of the Inn. Indeed, there are additional dining requirements for barristers in the Inn for members akin to American continuing legal education requirements.

Chief Justice Burger was very impressed with the civility and high professional standards he observed on his two-week exchange in England. Upon his return to the United States, he initiated a pilot program which resulted in the establishment of the first American Inn of Court in 1980 at the law school of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. By 1985, a dozen Inns of Court had been formed around the country and their leaders felt the need for a national umbrella organization. That year, the American Inns of Court Foundation was chartered at Washington, D.C., as a non-profit, tax exempt corporation. This foundation serves as the hub for communications among the nation's Inns, aids the establishment of new Inns, and provides support for services and programs for Inns in a way that would be beyond the resources of autonomous small local groups. Today, there are 325 active Inns of Court with over 24,000 active members and twice as many alumni members. About two-thirds of America's law schools have some association with a local Inn of Court.

I first became involved in the American Inns of Court movement in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1988. I was a litigator in a law firm there, having previously served as dean of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock School of Law. I had been president of the county bar association four years previously. The then current president of this bar was another partner in our firm. Under the auspices of the county bar and the law school, we founded the 43rd Inn of Court in the United States, the Judge William R. Overton Inn.

When I came to North Carolina to be dean at Wake Forest in 1989, there were no chapters of the American Inns of Court in the state. I immediately went to work with five great Wake Forest lawyers (Judge Carlton Tilley, Grady Bannhill, Bill Davis, Dan Fouts, and Fred Crumppler) to establish a chapter at the Wake Forest School of Law. The Chief Justice Joseph Branch Inn of Court began operation the next year.
1990, the same year that the Chief Justice William H. Bobbitt Inn of Court began operation in Charlotte. The Branch and Bobbitt Inns were the first Inns in North Carolina. The Branch Inn was Inn number 117 and the first associated with a law school in the state.

Initially, our Inn had 60 members, consisting of about 24 masters of the bench, 24 barristers, and 16 Pupils. The masters of the bench are judges and experienced trial lawyers who have demonstrated superior litigation ability and professionalism, and are really the faculty of the Inn. The barristers are younger attorneys with a few years of litigation experience. In our Inn, we initially graduated barristers after three years of being an Inn member and now we turn over our barrister classes every two years to allow for more young lawyers to participate in our Inn. The pupil members of the Inn are Wake Forest law students.

The popularity of our Inn of Court has grown greatly in the 13 years since 1990. We have expanded each member category of the Inn, so that today there are approximately 150 Inn members, 50 in each of the three categories. From the beginning, the Branch Inn has involved lawyers in both Forsyth and Guilford Counties. The interest in being a member of the Inn outstripped our ability to expand in size and keep our collegial character, and in 1996, the Guilford County chapter of the American Inns of Court was chartered as Inn number 278 under the great leadership of Steve Crihfield. Steve has volunteered to write an article for the next North Carolina Bar Journal focusing particularly on how to form an Inn. On this subject, I will only say that the first thing to do in forming an Inn is to get the agreement of judges to be in the initial masters of the bench class. If the judges agree, your subsequent recruitment will be far easier.

Every year we have six meetings of our Inn. The meetings begin in the early evening for a demonstration of particular facets of the litigation process, almost always involving ethical and professionalism issues. After the demonstration, we have a reception and dinner to allow members of the Inn to discuss the technique, ethics, and professionalism issues raised by the presentation. We have a custom during dinner at our Inn which we have for years called “the Rule.” We have tables for six at dinner and ask one judge and one lawyer master of the bench to be at each table with two barristers and two pupils. We also ask that people concentrate on being at a table with different members at each of the six meetings and not people whom they see
After the first couple of years of the operation of our Inn, one of our five founding Board of Directors members confided in me that when I first proposed the idea to him, he thought “Gee, just what I need, another trial lawyer organization.” He indicated that he agreed to work on the project as a favor to me and to Wake Forest. After this revelation, however, he then stated that being a master of the bench of our Inn was one of the most worthwhile professional activities in which he had ever engaged. It allowed him to participate as a teacher and mentor to a great number of young lawyers and law students outside of his own law firm. He was able to pass down the values and customs of the profession that he had learned since he began practice in a smaller and more intimate bar over 40 years ago.

In addition to mentoring in ethics, professionalism, and the highest customs of the legal profession, the establishment of an American Inn of Court chapter in an area has one other great professionalism benefit: collegiality at the bar. In The Taming of the Shrew, Shakespeare said: “Do as adversaries do in law, strive mightily, but eat and drink as friends.” One great advantage that our British counterparts enjoy is that their trial lawyers all practice in one jurisdiction in one of four Inns in the city of London in a country with most of its population within 250 miles of London and a very much smaller bar. One great effect of our two-county Inn of Court has been that it has greatly contributed to lawyers on different sides of the bar getting to know each other better in an atmosphere that makes for a cooperatively functioning bench and bar, avoiding the anonymity that helps breed incivility.

I was a litigator in Los Angeles in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. I later was a trial lawyer in Little Rock during the 1980’s. Most lawyers who have practiced for approximately the same amount of time would say that collegiality and civility at the bar were greater in the earlier time. That was not my experience, because I practiced in a smaller community in the later time. Even though Little Rock had about 1,000 lawyers, those who did the same type of civil litigation that I did were a smaller group. Lawyers on the other side of a case would know that they would probably be seeing you or your partners in future litigation and also got to know you as people. It is harder to be uncivil to someone you really know.

I have been an evangelist for the American Inns of Court movement since I was first introduced to it in Little Rock in 1988. In the last year, I have been ordained as a more formal evangelist by being elected as a member of the Board of Trustees of the American Inns of Court Foundation. I have made it my mission to both expand American Inns of Courts to the approximately one-third of America’s law schools that have no associated Inn and to try to expand the Inns in my home state of North Carolina. The American Inns of Court Foundation has a wonderful staff who are devoted to helping new Inns get up and running. I hope that many of you will consider starting new Inns in your area and will associate with the American Inns of Court Foundation. I would personally be happy to help, if you contact me. I will also ask the national foundation staff to help.

You can make a difference to the professionalism of the next generation of lawyers.

Robert K. Walsh has been dean of Wake Forest University School of Law since 1989. Since coming to North Carolina, he has chaired the North Carolina Bar Association’s Bench, Bar and Law School Liaison Committee for two years and was a vice president of the North Carolina Bar Association and a member of its Board of Governors. He also has been a member of the North Carolina Chief Justices Professionalism Commission since its founding in 1999.

Endnote
1. As I was writing this article, Dan Fouts passed away suddenly. He had been president of our Inn for the past several years, taking that job seriously and doing it brilliantly. He was a wonderful role model of professionalism for our law student and young lawyer members.