



Episode 98: Top 1L Questions: Non-Traditional Law Students

- Lee Burgess: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox Podcast, today we're sharing tips for non-traditional law students. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan and Lee Burgess. That's me. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be. We're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#) and the Catapult Conference. Alison also runs [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#). If you enjoy the show please leave a review [on iTunes](#). If you have any questions don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can reach us via the [contact form on lawschooltoolbox.com](#) and we'd love to hear from you. And with that, let's get started.
- Alison Monahan: Welcome back. Today we're sharing some tips for non-traditional law students. If you're getting ready for law school, this episode is going to definitely be one to flag. There's actually great stuff in here for everyone. Even full-time or traditional law students. So, we're sure you'll learn something.
- Lee Burgess: So, to start us off, Alison, who would you consider to be a non-traditional law student?
- Alison Monahan: Well I think some of the categories are people who are older when they go back to school, say, if you're 30 or pushing 30 and older. You're going to be a decent amount older than your average law student. Students with significant family obligations, whether that's partners, children. People with significant work experience, I mean that's probably also going to fall into the 'older' category. And then really part-time students, whether they're working or not working. We get a lot of questions from part-time students who have specific time management challenges just given the sheer volume of things they're trying to do.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah. And in this episode, we're also going to chat a bit about being a law student, who is the first in your family to attend college or graduate school. So, stay tuned for that. I wouldn't necessarily consider these students to be non-traditional. But being the first in your family to attend college or law school can present its own challenges. And so, it's good to know what your resources are to make sure you're as successful as you can be.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah absolutely, I mean I guess in some ways they are not so traditional because the traditional law student you know is, let's face it, typically fairly upper class level. So, there could definitely be some issues whether, if you're the first person or if you just come from a family without so many resources, I think you

can definitely experience things that are different from other people might be experiencing at your school

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's true. But let's start with discussing some of the challenges of this class of non-traditional law students. So, the first one is really going to be, like you mentioned, time management, especially for part-time students. Sometimes you might be working and going to school. If you are an older student or you have family obligations, you're going to be [balancing law school and taking care of kids](#) or perhaps other family members. You might have a home, you might have responsibilities within that home. Life happens, you might have a family member who gets sick or needs some assistance. And all of these obligations can also play into money challenges, which could be even I think more stressful sometimes for the non-traditional law students because they might have more demands on their finances than a typical student who can just live with multiple roommates and eat ramen.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think that's true and I think sometimes people run into problems where they can only take out loans easily for the typical student budget. And if your budget is not that of a typical student, you're going to have to cover that surplus somehow or another.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I've been really amazed recently at, I guess this would still be considered the sharing economy, but I think Facebook is kind of a double-edged sword. I love things about it, I hate things about it. But there are some pretty amazing Facebook groups.

Alison Monahan: I thought - didn't you give that up like at the beginning of the year, I recall?

Lee Burgess: I did, it's totally back. But you know what? It's interesting because it's back in a more helpful way.

Alison Monahan: That's good.

Lee Burgess: And one of the things that I have found helpful about Facebook is there are some really collaborative and helpful communities that have kind of sprung up on Facebook that can help you with some of these challenges. So, a lot of urban communities are now having '[buy nothing groups](#)' on Facebook. You can search for them in your given community. And it's amazing what folks are offering and giving away. The other thing that's also amazing is sometimes folks will put on these Facebook groups that they need something. They either are hoping to borrow something or they need something for their home. And sometimes people are like, "Oh yeah, I have an extra microwave in my garage, I'd love to send it to another home." And then that microwave just goes on. So, it's not necessarily the greatest thing for the economy. But I think it can actually really lighten your burden. Folks with kids with oftentimes will post about that they're taking a trip and they just need snow gear for the weekend and folks will be able to borrow stuff.

So, I think if I was starting law school, trying to engage in some of these communities where my virtual village could help me, especially where finances are concerned, could be pretty cool.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think there's also one that was existing, more generally called '[Freecycle](#).' Or even on Craigslist, I mean, I've given thousands of things probably away on Craigslist. Where sometimes you have the best intentions of having a yard sale or bringing it to Goodwill. But there are times when I'm just like, "I just need to get rid of this stuff. And the very first person who comes to get it can have the ceiling fan that kind of works but needs a little work. Or my old snowboard that I don't need because I got another one."

It's stuff like this it's just like people would be happy to have it, so I am happy to give it them.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, but I think the cool thing about the virtual nature of a lot of this stuff is that it doesn't take a lot of effort to go see if there are options like this where you can maybe even save money or time because you don't have to go shopping for a lot of different things. Because it might not matter what microwave you need, you just need a functioning microwave.

Alison Monahan: Yeah exactly it's like no one really cares. Like I have no idea what the different features of a microwave.

Lee Burgess: I have no idea either.

Alison Monahan: You just need one that heats up your leftovers, basically

Lee Burgess: Exactly. So, other things that are challenging for the non-traditional law student can be getting used to being back in an academic environment after a break. Because school is different than work.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think sometimes people can have like an identity crisis around this because if you've been working for a while and you've been presumably pretty successful. And you got some good feedback about what you're doing on a regular basis and suddenly you are in a law school classroom where in some cases you may be older than the professor. And they're basically tearing you down and telling you, "You don't know what you're talking about," and all this stuff. I think that can be really hard for people to adjust to and you're not bringing in an income necessarily so you don't have that piece of your identity anymore. You're taking out all this debt a lot of times. So, I think there can be a lot of moments of like, "Is this the right choice? Did I totally mess this up?"

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I remember on the way that we did our law review. I'm sorry not our law review, our legal research and writing, first semester final exams, it was over a weekend. And I remember Monday morning, you've been grinding away at this thing all weekend. I am getting into my car around the same time I used to catch

the train to go to work, I had to drive to school. And I've been stressed, I haven't done anything all weekend, I'm still in yoga pants and a sweatshirt or whatever heading to school. And I remember driving by the train stop, and looking at all the people dressed for work and thinking, "What did I do? I used to just roll over there with my cup of coffee, get on the train. Someone would pay me money for my job, I would come home, I would pick up some to-go food and go back home."

And it was kind of this idea of like, what a simple life that was. But I do think that's it hard when you shift because school has a lot of benefits but there's the simplicity sometimes to working that you might have to mourn.

Alison Monahan: Right, exactly and I think for a lot of people there's a pride in doing a good job and being told that you're doing a good job and getting paid for it. And all that's pretty much gone.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think one of the other things that's a challenge is you have to put aside the way you used to do things. This was something that I struggled with in law school. Because I kind of came to, again my legal research and writing class with this idea that I was a pretty good writer. And I had worked and done some writing for a living. And I had a really creative way to organize things. And I kind of had all of these ideas and then I got killed on my grades [because nobody really cared about my creativity](#), I just needed to do the assignment as that was asked. And that was a big shock to the system that these skills or things that I had been praised for in the workforce were not praised when I was in school.

Alison Monahan: Yeah absolutely I think that can be really tough for a lot of people. I mean it's almost an inverse relationship, the more experience you have in the real world, the more experience you have at work, the less malleable you're probably going to tend to me. So, the more you're going to struggle with basically someone else telling you this is what you need to do.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, "This is the way we need to see you write. This is how you have to write. If you don't do this, you will be penalized."

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And I think a lot of people really struggle with that.

Lee Burgess: I think that's true. And you can have rusty study skills. Because-

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah.

Lee Burgess: You haven't been in academia. And the one thing I think that can be kind of surprising to a lot of law students is the volume of information you just have to

memorize. So much rote memorization. And if you haven't done that in years and years, that can be a shock to the system.

Alison Monahan: Yeah it's funny I was talking to one of our students the other day and she was telling me her daughter who was in high school was watching her study or something and she was basically like, "Mom you have no idea how to study. This is not how we study these days." You know and so she's like, "Okay well tell me what I should be doing." And she's like, "Yeah it was actually really helpful, she had some very good ideas that were not things I had thought about doing."

Lee Burgess: Yeah that is really interesting. I mean it's hard when you've been out of the game for a while, it's not all flashcards anymore.

Alison Monahan: Yeah exactly. And then I think sometimes to the extent people have to deal with technology, I think that can also be a challenge.

Lee Burgess: That's a good point.

Alison Monahan: Just not understanding, well, how do I use footnotes and set up my Word documents? Or how do I use a table of contents in my Word document? That kind of thing I think if you're struggling with, that's kind of what in classes we'd say that's the bad confusion. You need to figure out who can help you or watch a video on how to set this stuff up. But you know you don't want to be the day before your legal writing assignment's due manually trying to type out a table of contents.

Lee Burgess: Yeah that is very true, that's a terrible use of time.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. But it's not all negative because I think [non-traditional law students can have quite a few advantages too](#) as I think we've already mentioned, you've got perspective. You've been in the real world so you know what it's like to work. You know what it's like to function likely in a professional environment. And I think that real world experience is going to quickly become a benefit when it comes time to interviewing for jobs and things like that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think so, I mean you're a grown-up, you know you're not coming straight out of undergrad at 22, where you've never been in a professional work environment, you've never done a real job interview. You may have to suffer a little bit through these first months of law school to get your bearings. But ultimately, I think you have a lot of advantages in terms of being able to combine that previous work experience, which could be in some interesting area that has a bearing on a certain area of law. Or at least to combine, "Okay, I've been in the real world, I know what it means to show up to a job every day and do that job well." And I think people ultimately are going to appreciate that when you're doing interviews.

Lee Burgess: Absolutely. And you're just more mature. You're probably done with getting blitzed at bar nights. Which is going to help you.

Alison Monahan: Probably. Maybe not.

Lee Burgess: Maybe not, no judgment, but you know it's likely that your partying days might be somewhat behind you to help you keep focused. Especially if you are a [part-time student or balancing a lot of responsibilities](#). You might not have time for some of those extracurriculars. And you're probably really motivated because you gave up something to be there. And this wasn't just a default option for you, this was what you wanted to do. You likely gave up a career path or you gave up a job and so you're not going to waste this time. Because it means a lot to you to have made this choice.

Alison Monahan: Right, I think that's the really key point. That keeping that motivation or remember why it is that you decide to do this on the bad days can really help you stay focused on the task at hand. And to see the light at the end of the tunnel, like yes this is going to be several years that are going to be pretty difficult. However, when I get to the other side, you know whatever your goal is, I'll be able to have a more stable career path or I'll be able to really affect change in the world. Or whatever your goal is. Keeping focused on that is going to help you get through those darker times.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And when it does come time to start searching for jobs and things like that, the fact that you have a professional network, likely from your previous life, that might actually help you in your job hunt as well.

Alison Monahan: Yeah or even, I think people get connections in their parent groups and things like that, or your kid's school. You know you have this broader life that potentially could help you with those weak ties that are actually often how people get jobs.

Lee Burgess: Yeah that's very true. Especially if you're not going the typical big firm route and you're looking for more boutique job opportunities or even government agencies, like learning about what different opportunities are out there and just talking to people and sharing what you're looking for. You never know what's going to happen.

Alison Monahan: Yeah absolutely.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I mean sometimes you even see scholarship opportunities for different types of non-traditional law students. So that's definitely something worth looking into. Because hey, who doesn't like free money?

Lee Burgess: Exactly. A lot of the affinity groups sometimes have scholarship opportunities but I know of some here in the Bay Area for students returning after a break, for parent students, lots of different types of students who are kind of coming back into the legal profession after doing something else. And so, if you can get recognized for being one of those folks and getting a little cash, you'd be foolish to turn that down.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. All right so there's good stuff that comes with this as well. I think one thing I'd also add to this list is that if you're a part-time student, so you're working and going to law school, although that can be an incredible burden, I do think it does allow you to keep some perspective because you have one foot into the real world and one foot in the academic world. And that can help when things get a little stressful at school because you kind of leave the school bubble and go into this other space where maybe you feel more confident about what you do. You're producing work that's getting you praise, I think it can actually be a benefit from a kind of an emotional confidence place.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, the judge I worked for actually had been a part-time law student, and he was a journalist during the day and then he went to law school at night.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. That's pretty cool.

Alison Monahan: And you know it worked out pretty well for him, because he ended up being a federal judge.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: So don't sell yourself short.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And I think if you can make it through law school as a part-time student and be successful, I think a lot of employers are going to really commend you for that. And see that as very impressive even if it takes you that extra year. The fact that you were able to manage your life and meet all of those goals, I think that says a lot about the type of person you are.

Alison Monahan: Yeah absolutely, I think one of the key problems that people face is that question of, when am I supposed to get legal work experience? And I think that's worth thinking about from the early days and it's worth talking to your school about. Like, "Well what do people typically do?" Sometimes we see people who focus on academics for the first year or two and work in their normal job more or less as they would have, but then start phasing out that job so they can get more experience doing work, doing legal work. Because you'll usually to be thinking about what does your timeframe look like for getting legal experience? Are you going to take time off over the summer? Is your job okay with that or are you going to eventually phase it out?

These are just things you want to be kind of tossing around from the get-go.

Lee Burgess: Right. As a part-time student is it possible to do legal clinics? That's another way that you can get experience at school. Maybe even qualify for some sort of an externship where you can get class credit for working for a judge or in a US Attorney's office or a DA's office, PD's office, something like that. So, there are those opportunities, but I wouldn't wait too long to talk to career services. Because you need to plan ahead for that stuff and for some of those externships you also have to have completed certain classes. Oftentimes you have to take evidence before you can do some of those externships. So, you need to see the long-term plan because you don't want to get to a point where you're like, "Great I could totally apply for this externship." And they're like, "You haven't taken evidence, you can't do it."

Alison Monahan: Right, exactly. Or your current job is like, "Oh no there's no way we can be flexible with your hours. We need you here nine to five every day." Well, you can't work for a judge then.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: But if they're willing to let you work part-time or let you do some work at night or let you have say two days a week and work 10 hours a day the other days. These are things you can manage but everybody needs to be on board.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So, a lot of conversations have to start happening. And you have to think about what your long-term goals are. You know is that job that you're in now really something that you're going to continue with after law school? Or is this just the placeholder to support your life while you're in school?

Alison Monahan: Right exactly. Maybe you save money so that your final year you can reduce your work hours or really focus completely on working in a legal context.

Lee Burgess: Right. I've also known part-time students who do one or two years part-time and then they switch to full-time ...

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: To try and finish school a little bit faster. And then can say, "Okay well at this point I can take a year and not work, go to school, pass the Bar and then move into my legal profession." And I've seen that work pretty well too.

Alison Monahan: Yeah so, I think there are lots of different options. But you want to make sure that you're talking to people who've tried these different things, talking to your school, you know thinking about your job situation. So that you can set yourself up to be successful.

Lee Burgess: Do schools have like part-time student groups or mentorship programs? Have you heard of these?

Alison Monahan: I don't know, it's an interesting question.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: They should.

Lee Burgess: They should. I'm wondering if maybe some women's law associations might have some mentorship programs where you could specifically ask to be paired with someone who was also a part-time student. That might be another way to try and get some ideas of different ways to get work experience in your community.

Alison Monahan: Or even just reaching out to alumni who did the part-time program and now are several years into their career. I would imagine many of those people would be happy to help you smooth out the bumps that they may have experienced.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that's true. I think it's very important to be willing to do that networking and ask for help and ask for guidance. Especially if you are kind of on this non-traditional path, because if you reach out and say, "I'm in this position. You and I were in similar positions. And this is the type of advice or these are the type of connections I'm looking for." Most alumni, most people are going to help you if they can.

Alison Monahan: Yeah and I think a lot of schools have older student associations. Like I was I don't know I think president or something, vice president (I don't really remember I didn't do anything except throw some cocktail parties) of the older wiser law students association, The OWLS.

Lee Burgess: The OWLS.

Alison Monahan: And that was ... right?

Lee Burgess: Did you all do Harry Potter stuff too?

Alison Monahan: Yeah exactly.

Lee Burgess: It totally sounds like a Harry Potter group.

Alison Monahan: But it was actually a good place to meet people who were a little more mature and who had a little bit of different perspective so that you could build those mentoring relationships, ask questions. You know stuff like that, like that's pretty low impact in terms of time but could pay a lot of dividends.

Lee Burgess: Yeah that's a really good suggestion. All right so what about tips, more nitty gritty tips that we can offer to folks who are in this non-traditional law student category? [Time management](#) is a big one, we have [another episode on time management that we think is very helpful](#). But when you're balancing more than just your own life and you're balancing school, possibly work, possibly kids, possibly a spouse or a partner, you're trying to take care of yourself. You have a lot of pieces to manage, and it's going to take a lot of organization and probably a master calendar. Because-

Alison Monahan: Yeah for sure.

Lee Burgess: You have to know where everybody is at any given point and what are all the needs of the different people that are in your life. So that you can make sure they're all being met.

Alison Monahan: Right because you're not going to be able to focus on your work if you're worried about who's going to pick up your child from daycare.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: You know you've got a lot of moving pieces and it needs to be very clear. Like these are my primary responsibilities, this is who we're going to call if something goes wrong. This is somebody who can step in. We can call on our village maybe to step in. Who's going to, say that you're off at mock trial practice and someone gets a call that your child is sick and needs to be picked up from school. You want to have that list of these are the people who I can call in decreasing order of likelihood. And hopefully someone can help me.

Lee Burgess: And maybe this is an interesting point for some of the moms that might be listening. That if you do have a partner, maybe you have to be very specific with the school about who is the person that the school should call. I was reading an excerpt from an interview with Ruth Bader Ginsburg who was talking about how her son's school only would call her. And she finally told them that he had another parent and that they should try calling that parent sometimes. And then they stopped calling because they didn't want to call the dad. Which I don't know that things are that bad. But I think among my professional mom friends, it is still the norm that the school's going to call the mom first. So, if you are the mom and you're balancing more work than is humanly possible and your significant other has a little bit more bandwidth to pick up a sick kid from school. Maybe you have to talk to the school and be like, "Don't call me first."

Alison Monahan: Right, exactly. And getting explicit about that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I think that's a great point. I mean we all know sexism is still rampant, so.

Lee Burgess: Yeah oh my gosh, I was just reading an article on the New York Times, I think I sent it to you but you probably haven't had time to read it. That they're now saying that [millennial men are actually hoping for stay-at-home wives](#).

Alison Monahan: Awesome.

Lee Burgess: You know?

Alison Monahan: Well I'm sure I would love a stay-at-home husband, too, but...

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I know

Alison Monahan: Do I think that's necessarily fair or like proper?

Lee Burgess: Well I mean you know it's everybody needs to work out their own norms, right? So it comes as its own mixed bag and I think it's just interesting that we're swinging back this idea that the men are the breadwinners and the women need to be at home again. That's probably its own other podcast but I thought I'd just mention. We'll link to that article in the show notes.

Alison Monahan: Yeah and I think that is something that people are probably going to struggle with if they're in a situation that's not, I mean we're talking about non-traditional students. You're breaking in some ways some type of norm. So there may be push back. I mean if you have a spouse and kids, you're probably going to hear from them about, ["Well you're never around. We never see you-"](#)

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: "We miss you." That's going to be tough.

Lee Burgess: Yeah that is going to be tough. And you're going to have to have a lot of discussions, hopefully before you embark on this journey, to try and make sure that everybody's on board.

Alison Monahan: Right, to the extent possible.

Lee Burgess: Yeah that's true.

Alison Monahan: And just recognizing like sometimes people may be upset with you, but you've still decided this is what you want to do. And you want to make sure that you're devoting as much effort and time as you can to it. And maybe there are ways over the winter break or something that you start trying to make it up to people.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: By spending lots and lots of time or doing fun activities that you weren't able to do. But I think clarity around those expectations is going to make everything a lot smoother.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Part-time students often ask us how they can make time for things like deep work because their schedules are often tight. And unfortunately, reality is you still have to find the time. It's like you can't not do deep work of outlining and doing practice writing and making flowcharts and really understanding and synthesizing the material. So, when you're putting together this master calendar I really recommend that you look for pockets of time. You know three hours maybe on a weekend where you can do this deep work but it's high impact. You know really, you're at a library while your kids are at a play date at a friend's house every Saturday you know from noon to three or whatever it might be. Because you need to get as much as you can out of that time but the time still needs to happen. You can't skip the deep work in law school, then you're not going to understand the material.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think the more you can minimize distractions and be possibly away from your house, where you are inevitably going to probably be distracted if anyone else is there. Taking that time on, three or four hours on the weekend, when you can really focus can smooth out everything else. Because then you're getting a lot of high quality work done. And then you can come back later in the afternoon and take a break and hang out with the people you want to hang out with and have a nice afternoon, nice evening. And not always feel like you're torn between these two things all the time.

Lee Burgess: Yep I agree. I think it's also important when you're thinking forward and looking to the semester, that you think about things that are nonessential items that you can schedule outside of the busy school year times. So this might either be for yourself or for family members. But things like dentist appointments, routine doctor's appointments, getting your car serviced. Getting the pest control people out to your house. Whatever it might be, roof work on your house. Whatever it might be that is stressful or can add distractions that can be planned for, try and do it during the summer or over a break so you're not feeling like you're trying to you know figure out how you're going to get to school if your car's in the shop for a service. When it was a routine service that you could've done a month ago.

Alison Monahan: Right and you're not sitting at home being frustrated like waiting for somebody to come and install something that really is not an emergency and could wait another couple of months, and be installed then.

Lee Burgess: Right so maybe it's creating—hey you could use the [Trello board](#) for this. What? But you could have a list of nonessential tasks and you could decide when, you know on what break or when you're going to schedule them out. And update this list as the season goes on. And then when you have a winter break you try and get as much stuff done as you can.

Alison Monahan: Yeah exactly. I think it's great to have a place to collect all this stuff so that it's not kind of bouncing around in the back of your head. That you can just be like, "Oh yeah, right, definitely I need to go to the dentist. Or I need to make this appointment to have my blood work done." And then you're like, "Okay I'm putting it on the Trello board and then I'll think about it in a month when exams are over."

Lee Burgess: Yep. Exactly.

Alison Monahan: And then you just go through and you can take an hour and you can make your appointment for this, make your appointment for that. You'll feel so productive; it'll be great.

Lee Burgess: Yep. I think it's a really nice idea. I feel like I should do that more often in my own life. Just decide those actual months that I have to...

Alison Monahan: Oh, I actually do that

Lee Burgess: I know, you're much better at that than I am.

Alison Monahan: Well it's because I have certain things I need to do at a certain time when I'm in a certain place. And it's a lot easier if I collect those as I think about them.

Lee Burgess: Yep that's so true. Do you keep them on a Trello board?

Alison Monahan: I do.

Lee Burgess: Of course you do. I think, for anybody but especially non-traditional law students, you've got to remember that it takes a village. So you've got to rely on friends and family to help you out. So maybe you know if somebody wants to know what they can do to help, maybe they're going to help by dropping off some food to go in your freezer. Maybe they can walk the dog, pick up your kid from school. If people ask you what you want for your birthday or for a holiday you can ask for gift certificates for a housekeeper or a dog walker or even food delivery. Really try and be explicit for how your village can help you when you're struggling.

Alison Monahan: Yeah absolutely and I think there are a lot of different ways you can do this. I've seen all kinds of things people with new babies have done. Scheduling people to come by and help them certain times of day and stuff like this. There are lots and lots of options because I think generally people do want to help, they just don't necessarily know how.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: It could be an enormous help to you to have someone else pick up your child from school a couple of days a week and take them to the park for an hour or

two so that you can finish what you need to finish in terms of classwork. And they're already going to school, what difference does it make? They're getting their own kid anyway; their kid wants to go to the park. So think of these ways that it's really not that big of a deal but can be enormously helpful to you.

Lee Burgess: Yeah and I think for us Type A folks, it can be really hard to ask for help. Because we're used to just doing everything on our own.

Alison Monahan: Just power through.

Lee Burgess: Yes, power through. But that's a mistake. I think the older I get and the more I see other folks live through challenging times, I've realized that it is the power of explicitly asking for help so folks will help in the way that you need them to. That is where the true benefits come.

Alison Monahan: Yeah absolutely and I think what would be helpful for different people is totally personal. And so, you've got to really think about ... people may have their own idea about what would be so fabulously helpful for you. But you're like, "It's actually not that helpful for you to ask me to go for a massage even if you're going to pay for it."

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: "Like I appreciate that gesture, but I can't do that when I'm in the middle of exams."

Lee Burgess: Right. "But if you do want to give me a gift certificate so somebody could clean my house. And then I don't have to spend an hour cleaning my house. And then my house is all clean." Maybe that is the way that they can really remove some stress.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Some people are great at figuring out what would be helpful, other people are not so great. But they do want to help.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: So, teach them how to help you.

Lee Burgess: Yes. Being explicit I think is really great and maybe during final exams, just in the same way people do when they have new babies or if somebody's been in the hospital. You ask your friends to create a food delivery Excel spreadsheet. And folks sign up for a week and maybe you get one large container of food each week from your group of friends. I mean if one friend delivered food to you once a week, that's like the month of finals, it's pretty amazing.

Alison Monahan: Yeah exactly. You'd have more casseroles than you knew what to do with.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. And-

Alison Monahan: Just don't forget to tell them your entire family is vegan.

Lee Burgess: That's right. And we talked about this in our time management episode, too, but I think with part-time students or students that have a lot of responsibilities, you've got to talk about taking care of yourself and making that a priority too. They always say, "You have to put on your own oxygen mask first." If you are completely depleted, you're not going to be a good law student and you're not going to be what everybody else needs.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean at some point it's better to get that extra hour of sleep versus rereading a case or something like that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Or even trying to read all your cases when you're so exhausted you can't see straight. At that point, you may as well go to sleep. I mean I'm not telling you not to do your reading, but occasionally you might just have to pull the plug.

Lee Burgess: Yep exactly. Okay, so let's talk a little bit about the students that we were mentioning that are kind of the first in their families to go to college or law school. So, Alison what do you think are some of the challenges that this group of students really can face?

Alison Monahan: Well I think there are a number of challenges, there probably are so more financial issues, you probably don't have as much of a net if something happens. And you can't necessarily call up your parents and be like, "Oh I just realized I'm not going to be able to pay my rent this month, can you send me a check for \$2,000," or whatever. That may not be realistic, I mean maybe it is, but probably it's not.

I think there are a lot of cultural issues, just feeling out of place, feeling like maybe I don't belong here. Maybe I'm not smart enough to be here. Maybe I don't deserve to be here. I mean I had a friend who had kind of grown up in a really rough area of Seattle, I think it was. And sometimes he and I would just sit laugh and be like, "How did we get here? It's ridiculous. I'm from a town of 6,000 people in rural North Carolina, where to get into UNC was considered a really big deal. And here I'm somehow sitting at Columbia Law School." And he's like, "Yeah, most of my childhood friends are in jail."

Lee Burgess: Yeah. It can be very intimidating and you know I grew up in a smaller town too and I think something like 30 of us went away to four year schools. 30 or 40 of us went away to four year schools to go to undergrad and I had attorney parents supporting me. But I still remember interviewing for my first corporate job and standing in a skyscraper down in the Embarcadero in San Francisco at like 21, looking out at the Bay Bridge going, "Don't they know?"

Alison Monahan: "What have I done?"

Lee Burgess: I am totally out of place here, that like I just put on some nice clothes and like showed up but I have really no idea what I'm doing, like these are not my people. I didn't go to a prep school. high school in the Bay Area like a lot of folks did. So, it can be sobering and I think I've had students and friends confide in me all these types of stories where you feel like that you might be kind of found out that you aren't part of this club yet. That your family doesn't kind of come from maybe the pedigree of what you think traditional law students are. Even though that's a complete falsehood in a way. But you know-

Alison Monahan: Well-

Lee Burgess: I think people feel that way, they feel like-

Alison Monahan: I think also, go ahead.

Lee Burgess: Oh, no, I think they just feel like that that's something that they should be ashamed from. But I think it's something to be celebrated. I think your own story is something to be celebrated.

Alison Monahan: Oh, I completely agree. I mean one thing I found kind of surprising, I mean Columbia was the first sort of Ivy League place I'd ever gone to school. And just the staggering degree of family wealth with so many of these people. You know where it was just sort of like, "Oh yeah, well, you know, of course I just went skiing in Taos for the winter. And then we went to Barbados." And you're like, "People do that?" That's not abnormal in a lot of these law school environments, that's actually kind of the norm. And if you are someone from middle class parents or working class parents, you actually are out of the norm in a lot of ways. And I agree with you, I think it's something, you know more power to you. Like you got there yourself. But it can be very, I don't know it's just a weird experience to look around and be like, "Wow these people are all really wealthy."

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I had a friend in college who I remember meeting and her last name was the name of a department store. And I said, "Oh, like the department store?" And she goes, "Yeah." I was like, "Oh."

Alison Monahan: You're like, "Oh, right."

Lee Burgess: "Oh, okay." I was, "Good to know, good to know." And I had grown up in an area where that wasn't the norm that you had folks well-off. So, it can be intimidating, but I think for students who are coming from this background where maybe you feel like that you're not on the traditional path, I think it's all about finding your community. It's about collecting mentors and asking for help. And being specific about the questions that you have and to not be

embarrassed by the questions that you have. If you're not sure how to dress for a certain event, you know ask somebody to make sure...

Alison Monahan: Yeah, ask your roommate if you can borrow clothes from them. They're not probably going to care.

Lee Burgess: Right. Or even say you're going to a network event, it's fine to say, "Do I have to wear a suit? Do I not have to wear a suit?" You know talk to career services, talk to your friends, talk to mentors through different affinity organizations or whatever they might be. Because if you don't have your home community able to kind of share this knowledge with you, then you need to build up the community outside or in your law school environments to support you in that way.

Alison Monahan: And I think one of the great books to read if you are someone who's feeling a little bit out of place or you feel like you might be is the [biography of Justice Sotomayor](#). Because she really talks about all of these experiences of being this kid from the Bronx who then I think goes to Princeton and-

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Then goes to Harvard or Yale. I can't remember, sorry. But talks about these experiences. And they are common and people tend not to talk about them because I think there's a shame element. But really there's no shame. It's just like you wouldn't know how to read a case before you start law school. If you've never gone out to a really fancy dinner with 12 forks, you're not going to necessarily know which fork to use.

Lee Burgess: Right. Which is funny that is one of the stories to that was told in this [Hillbilly Elegy book](#) that I recently read by an author named J.D. Vance. Who grew up in the Rust Belt and wrote this interesting book about his childhood and his journey all the way to Yale Law School. And he was at a dinner and I think he was calling his girlfriend in the bathroom asking which forks to use. It's been the first time...

Alison Monahan: That rule of thumb, start from the outside, work your way in-

Lee Burgess: Outside working your way in.

Alison Monahan: You'll be fine.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. But you know he didn't know or had never had sparkling water. And he didn't realize that there was flat water and sparkling water. And that's not a judgment that he didn't know that. But those are the little nuances that can make you feel really out of place. And so-

Alison Monahan: Well particularly when if you're going to do a big firm interview, they're almost certainly going to take you to lunch or dinner.

Lee Burgess: Right. Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And so, you don't want the first time you've ever used a salad fork to be at your first big firm interview.

Lee Burgess: Yeah exactly. So, talking about this stuff I think just helps you feel more confident and comfortable. But you also have to remember that just about everybody feels out of place in one way or another.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: I think most people are slightly uncomfortable at those fancy dinners, you know? And-

Alison Monahan: It probably wouldn't be most people's first choice of a way to spend a few hours, let's put it that way.

Lee Burgess: Yeah and everybody's trying to remember which fork to use. And I think-

Alison Monahan: Outside in.

Lee Burgess: Outside in. But to just remember that, you know to kind of be your authentic self and do the best that you can. But you are the experiences that got you where you are. If you have made it to law school, you were supposed to be there. And they've invited you to this dinner because they want you to be there. And I think it's important that you muster up the confidence you can to make the best of the situation and really show how you can shine. I think I'd forgotten about Sotomayor's book but you're right because I haven't read it in a couple years. It's a really great story of her path to being as elite of a jurist as you can be. I mean-

Alison Monahan: Well and she's very honest, you know she's very honest about the experience of going and buying a winter coat with her mother and being so proud of it. And then getting to Princeton and realizing that nobody was wearing that sort of coat. And like it's a difficult thing to do, to figure out how you maintain your identity but also sort of morph into this lawyer persona in this world that may not be what you're used to. But I think that is a challenge for everyone. And there are ways that you can find your people, find the place that's right for you and get the help you need to feel more comfortable in these environments. That frankly, often, are pretty rarefied.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that's very true. I think reading biographies or reading stories of others who have kind of made this journey is another great way to maybe feel more comfortable with your own journey too. And remind you that so many

folks who you would consider ... that you would never think came from a background that might be similar to yours, did.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think in other words I've seen a cartoon drawn by Liza Donnelly I think where it's just this woman who walks into a boardroom and it's full of white guys. And she has this moment in her head of saying, "I belong here." And I think that, you know telling yourself that even explicitly, "I belong here, I'm qualified to be here. I'm going to succeed here." Can be very powerful.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. That's true. The stories we tell ourselves, the mantras we tell ourselves really influence how we feel in the moment.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely. Well unfortunately with that we are out of time. Before we wrap up we just wanted to take a second to let you know we have a [Start Law School Right course](#) on our website which can help you feel more comfortable and confident going into law school classes. It's an on-demand course which includes feedback from one of our awesome Law School Toolbox tutors. And you can find that at lawschooltoolbox.com/start-law-school-right.

You can check it out, feel free to contact us if you have any questions. If you enjoyed this episode of Law School Toolbox Podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating for us because we would really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything.

If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out. You can reach Lee or Alison at Lee@lawschooltoolbox.com or Alison@lawschooltoolbox.com. And you can always [contact us via our website contact form at, you're going to guess it, lawschooltoolbox.com](#). Thanks for listening, and we will talk soon, best of luck in law school.

Resources:

- [Start Law School Right Course](#)
- [Parenting in Law School: Surviving 1L Year While Raising a Family](#)
- [Buy Nothing Project – Find a Group](#)
- [The Freecycle Network](#)
- [Be Ready to Throw Your Writing Style Out the Window](#)
- [Non-Traditional Law Students: Exploit Your Strengths, Meet Your Challenges](#)
- [Balancing Life as a Night Student](#)
- [Time Management for Non-Traditional Law Students](#)
- [Stephanie Coontz, Do Millennial Men Want Stay-at-Home Wives? N.Y. Times, Mar. 31, 2017.](#)
- [Relationships and Law School: Can They Coexist?](#)
- [Podcast Episode 95: Top 1L Questions: Time and Life Management](#)
- [Sonia Sotomayor, My Beloved World](#)
- [J.D. Vance, Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis](#)