



Episode 121: Alternative Options for Bar Exam Preparation

Lee Burgess: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox Podcast. Today we're talking about finding the right bar prep option for you. 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 career-related website, [CareerDicta](#). Alison also runs the Girl's Guide to Law School. If you enjoy the show, please leave a [review](#) on iTunes, and 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 love to hear from you. And with that, let's get started.

Alison Monahan: Welcome back. Today we're going to be talking about alternative bar prep options outside of the commercial programming that you've probably already heard about, because it turns out not everyone learns the same way, and we want to make sure that your bar prep will work for you. Historically, most people studied for the bar exam one way, which was taking a big commercial course like BARBRI. I actually did not take BARBRI for any of the bar exams that I took, but Lee, I know that you did, right?

Lee Burgess: I did. I did the full BARBRI experience.

Alison Monahan: Why did you do that?

Lee Burgess: Well, that's what everybody told me to do. I mean, it was BARBRI, and I think Kaplan was just getting started when I graduated from law school. They were running their PMBR program for the MBE, but basically these commercial bar review providers were at my school starting, it felt like, day one, encouraging us to put down deposits to save money in the end. And everybody just did it, because they felt like that's what you had to do to pass the exam. But it turns out that—thank you, technology—things are a little different now, and you have a lot more options out there. I don't think there were as many options out there when I was studying, but things are definitely different.

Now you, being the special snowflake you are ...

Alison Monahan: Did not. Being naturally contrarian.

Lee Burgess: ... did not take a big commercial course.

Alison Monahan: No, I did not. Also, my first bar exam that I ended up taking was in Massachusetts, which at the time had a 90% pass rate, and I had the option to do a six-week pre-clerking summer at a law firm, which would have meant ... I

mean, it did mean quite a bit of money, although I think there were six or seven of us who did that, and literally everyone else went off every night after work to go to the BARBRI lectures and I went home. They all thought I was completely, just totally nuts. To be honest, if I had studied for the bar first in California, I probably would have just signed up for BARBRI and sucked it up and gone to all the lectures and everything, but I was just looking at this and I was like okay, the pass rate's 90%, I'm pretty good at standardized testing in general, I don't feel like I need to spend eight weeks going to lectures after work all the time. This whole thing sounds like a drag. It's super expensive. I was going to be going into a clerkship, so even though the firm I worked at would eventually reimburse me, I was going to have to pay out of pocket because I wasn't sure where I was going to go. I hadn't accepted an offer.

It was just like on and on and on. It was just like uh, maybe there's a better way to do this. So I started looking around, and there actually at that time was a program that was sort of specific to Massachusetts. It had Massachusetts law, and then what it had for the MBE, which actually was the part that sold me on it, was something that's similar to what now AdaptiBar is doing. It was basically a computerized program to help you study for the MBE, with the idea that it would do space repetition and it would drill down on the questions that you were getting wrong. And I thought this actually sounded amazing. This to me sounded so much more efficient than just doing a hundred MBE questions and then being like, "Well, I got some of those right, got some of those wrong," and moving on with my life.

Here it was like, "You're missing every Fourth Amendment question. Every single one that you see you're getting wrong." And there was a reason for that. I took a war and terror class, and the professor was super right wing and thought the police were able to do whatever they wanted, so this is what I'd been taught, which turned out was not actually the law. But I'm not sure that I necessarily would have been able to identify that, and certainly not as quickly without this program. Because it was like, "Contracts, you're getting 80% of those or whatever. You don't need to do more contracts. But you're getting zero percent of this particular topic, and this is a pretty heavily tested area. You need to sit down and actually learn this law."

So I think that's really the benefit of some of these programs, is not only are they typically less expensive, but they can actually drill down more efficiently into what you don't know and really just give you the information that you personally need to pass.

Lee Burgess:

Yeah. I think that's one of the interesting things that a lot of people don't focus on in their bar prep, is really figuring out how to take whatever course or compilation of materials that they have and making it work for them, because we all come to this experience with different exam-taking skill sets.

Alison Monahan: Also, just different knowledge. Like for example, I took evidence my last semester, so I was pretty up to speed on that.

Lee Burgess: Right, but had you gone to California, you wouldn't have taken California evidence, which is now tested on the California bar. So that would have been kind of a different challenge. But I think folks have to really start to think about the efficiency and what is necessary to help them pass. I think there's this artificial comfort in this idea that one course that is supposed to work for everyone out there in the country is going to mean that you're going to be ready to pass. As people who spend a lot of time talking to people who didn't pass, that's just not true.

Alison Monahan: Right. If you think about it, no one shows up to the bar exam without preparing for it, so you can pretty much assume if you're looking at a course that has, say, 80% of the bar-taking population, probably they've got about the pass rate of the state. And if that pass rate's really low, probably the pass rate of the people who did that course are about equally low, because that's who most people took.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. What I think is great about the current bar environment is that if you're listening to this now and you're in law school or you're getting ready to sit for the bar, you can learn about different prep options and even try them out, for the MPRE specifically, and see what's going to really be a good bar program for you, based on your needs, your skill sets, and how much money you're able to invest in this process, because there are cheaper ways to study than others. There are a lot of factors to take into consideration, and you have more options than you may think you do when you walk down the hallway of your law school and you just see one or two companies hanging out like every day, every day. Just hang out every day.

Alison Monahan: I think people just have to be a little bit skeptical of what everyone's selling. Nobody can sell you a guarantee that you're going to pass the bar. We would all love that, but things happen. Nobody can guarantee you you're going to pass. So anyone who tries to tell you that, just take that with a grain of salt. That's not true.

Lee Burgess: And there's a lot of fear mongering around that. I've talked to students who feel like they have a knowledge that they need something else than is being offered by these large commercial courses, and they feel like that if they go a different route that that's actually going to hurt them. They're like, "Well, but everybody else is doing this. What if I do something different?" And I'm like, "Nobody's going to ask you how you studied for the bar, unless you come onto the podcast and talk to me about it. Nobody cares. They just care if you pass the exam."

Alison Monahan: And I think also there's that fear of like if I don't do what everyone else is doing and then I fail, what are people going to think? What are they going to say? They're going to be like, "Well, that's because you didn't do what everyone else

was doing." But push back on that, because lots of people do what everyone else is doing and they fail too. That's not really something to be ... What you need to be thinking about is what's going to help me get to the point where I can pass, and secondarily, at the lowest cost and with less hassle. I think those are valid considerations.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that that's absolutely true. We wish we could tell you that there were magic bar materials. We wish we could tell you that we have magic.

Alison Monahan: We wish we could sell you those.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, we wish that we had the magic bar materials and that I could say, "Come over to our website and we will give you the magic materials that will make sure you pass." But unfortunately, that's just not how this works. It takes a lot of hard work to prepare for the bar exam, and the question just becomes what are the tools that you need to set yourself up for success. So let's talk about what we think everybody needs to prepare for the bar exam.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Frankly, some of this ultimately comes down to luck. If you get three questions that happen to be in areas you're great in, you're probably more likely to pass than if you get three that you've never seen before and classes you never took. But on that note, I think the most basic thing everyone's got to some resource for, whatever that resource is, you've got to have a way to actually learn these rules.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, there's a lot of law on the bar exam. There's no two ways about it.

Alison Monahan: You can't just show up. You can't just show up with a vague idea of I went to law school, I'm good for the bar. This is where you learn the black letter law, and you need some source for that law.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. There need to be some sort of outlines or flash cards or something that has all of the law in it in a very concise and clear way so you can memorize it. That is, of course, provided to you by your commercial bar review providers. There are other outlines. We'll talk about some specific resources you can check out later in the podcast, but somehow you need some law. You've got law to learn, you've got to learn it.

Alison Monahan: I think it's up to you too, to really think about what depth of knowledge you need. I recall friends getting their delivery of bar books, and it was literally three feet tall or something, and you're like there's absolutely no way you're going to read and retain that material in a few months. It's just literally impossible. On the other hand, some outlines are super short, less than 100 pages for everything you need to know, and for most people that's probably not really going to be enough either. You've got to find something that works for you, that you can understand, but is not at a level of detail that there's just literally no way that ... You know, you can't memorize the whole encyclopedia.

Lee Burgess: Right. Exactly. Nor are you required to. The bar exam is actually supposed to be a minimum competency knowledge of the law test. This is to test your minimum competency. It is impossible to memorize everything, and they're not going to ask you to do that.

Alison Monahan: No, you've got to think about it from the perspective of if you've never taken this class before. Like community property, for example. I had never taken community property, because I didn't go to school in California, and I came to sit for the California bar. Basically, you have at most, best case scenario, a couple of days to learn what you need to learn for the bar exam, and that's totally doable.

Lee Burgess: It is. I had a remedies question on my bar exam. I never took remedies, because I didn't like the professor at my school who was teaching it, and I just memorized the remedies outline pretty much. I just memorized it, and I did really well on that question, because I had just memorized the rules that needed to be applied and I applied them and then that was it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and sometimes I think that's the reality is the less you know, sometimes the better you do. If you know too much, you're going off on these tangents. You're not just like the rule is this. Here's how the facts are used with this rule. This is what the outcome is likely to be. This is the rule. That's what they're looking for.

Lee Burgess: So true. Stick to Iraq, like drill down. I think that that's really important. Most commercial providers that sell you a bar prep program are going to sell you hours and hours and hours and hours and hours of video lectures.

Alison Monahan: And hours.

Lee Burgess: And literally, guys, talking about 20+ hours of video lectures a week typically.

Alison Monahan: I think that for me was just like why I couldn't do BARBRI. I was like it is not a good use of my time to spend four to six hours a day listening to a lecture on a topic that I already took a class in. I just cannot do this.

Lee Burgess: Now come on, most of them are just four hours a day.

Alison Monahan: I don't know, it just seemed horrible, I was like you gotta be joking. I'm like I sat through contracts for a semester, why do I need a four-hour lecture on is there a contract? I have an outline on that. I have a flow chart I can consult.

Lee Burgess: This is one of the sticking points, I think, with bar prep, is that a lot of folks feel like if they go to these lectures that that is the way that they're going to retain this information, and I think that one of the things you have to ask yourself is if these lectures are going to be helpful for you to learn the law. For me and for many, many people I know that have taken these courses, they often find that

just listening to lectures doesn't actually help them unless maybe it's a class that they didn't take or something like that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think it has value if like you've never ... if you have no idea about community property, there's probably value in sitting through a several hour overview, but if it's something you already learned, why bother?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. You have to say should I be spending these ... Like you said, you just took evidence right before you sat for the bar, so should you have probably taken six to eight hours and listened to BARBRI lectures on evidence, or should you have just reviewed outlines on evidence and done practice? My recommendation would probably be listening to lectures on evidence, probably not the best use of your time. You were going to retain more information if you did practice and application and memorization of that law. So again, you can't just say they told me to do the lectures, that must be what I'm going to do to pass, because plenty of people do that that end up hiring us because they are coming back from a failure. Remember as you're figuring out what you're paying for in all of these different options, make sure that you're going to get something from those hours and hours of lectures.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think you should have to be strategic about using your time. And yeah, I get that maybe you sunk a lot of money into a course, but that doesn't really matter if you're going to use that course unstrategically and then sit for the bar and fail, because that's going to cost you a lot more money. So I think there's a lot of this sunk cost fallacy of like well, but I paid for all this stuff so I've got to sit and do all of it. No, you need to do the things that are going to make you pass, and only those things. That's your goal.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. Yeah. The other thing that you need, outside of a way to learn the rules, is you need a way to practice questions.

Alison Monahan: Hopefully real ones.

Lee Burgess: Yes. So another thing that you need to think about is how many questions is your bar provider going to provide you. Are you going to get feedback on that? We'll talk about that in a second. Do you have enough questions to practice? Are they the right kind of practice? California just changed its performance test to a 90-minute exam. What are the bar providers going to do to give you more practice on the 90-minute performance test? You need to just find out what sort of depth of materials that they're giving you, because the practice is probably the most under-utilized element of your bar prep, I think, and you need to make sure that you have plenty of questions to do practice.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think practice and also getting feedback. I remember the feedback that I got. I was all excited, like "Oh, I'm going to get feedback on my answer," and then I got it, I'm like, "This is it? I'm sorry, this is not really very helpful."

Lee Burgess: I think you have to remember that the commercial bar prep providers are giving feedback very quickly, and some of it may not be as in depth as you're looking for, depending on what you need. And there are all these crazy stories about people sending in the sample answers for questions and then having their commercial provider fail them. Or I knew someone who had gone to Harvard for both undergrad and law school, and she was telling me about how she was failed every one of her practice bar questions, and she was just like, "which is insane, because I wasn't going to fail all of my bar questions." It sounds a little conceited, but I get her point. Statistically, she was probably going to pass the bar.

Alison Monahan: Even if she didn't, even if she failed the bar, she's not going to get a terrible grade on every single question.

Lee Burgess: Right. She had some basic exam-taking skills that she was going to be able to apply. You always also hear all these crazy stories of tricking the bar providers, but again, you have to find out how much feedback they give. Maybe try and see if you could get a sample of their feedback, and make sure that you think it's going to be helpful, because there are a lot of different ways to get feedback ... that's a lot of what we do in our tutoring programs ... but especially if you're someone who struggled with essay writing in law school, if 1L classes are pulling down your GPA in law school, you need to think about the additional resources that you can access to work on your writing. Because writing is half of most bar exams. So you don't want to let that bring you down.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely. Basically, if you can't write a coherent answer, you're not going to pass the bar. Game over. I'm sorry, that's just the way it is.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. And another thing you want to do is come up with a way to self-evaluate your own work, and I think this is again owning your own bar prep, this idea that you really need to do what you need to do to become an expert. So how are you going to evaluate your own work? What self-evaluation questions are you going to ask yourself when you finish an essay to make sure you're doing a good job? This is something that we've tried to work into our Writing of the Week program, which we offer for our bar takers to help you learn what is a passing answer, because as much as the practice that you turn in to your bar provider is helpful, you also need to be able to, every time you do an essay question, decide whether or not you think you did a good job. And in the moment, you have to be able to make game time decisions about how to spend your time, and that ability to self-evaluate your work and say okay, I'm in the exam, I have to make a decision, do I take this exam question to the left or to the right, but my experience tells me to take it to the right. And you have to know what a passing answer requires to make those game time decisions.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely. I think the more that you're basically your own coach ... I mean, obviously you're the only person who can go into the room with yourself, so you're not going to have someone to turn to and be like, "Oh, do you think I

should use more headers here?" You need to be like, "Okay, this is my strategy for using headers. I have a strategy, I'm implementing that strategy, I know what to do if the strategy goes off the rails and I'm freaking out." All this stuff, the more that you've practiced beforehand, the more experiences you're going to have of having to make those decisions and then having to evaluate how they went afterwards. If you decide I'm not going to discuss this area of remedies and then you learn that it's half of the exam answer, well that was a bad choice. Next time don't do that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, you learn valuable lessons from the practice, but you have to evaluate that practice and make sure you know what's going on.

Alison Monahan: And I think even if people are getting feedback from a commercial provider, they still need to evaluate for themselves does this feedback make sense, did I look at the sample answer, do I agree with it. Because these people are not, they're not God.

Lee Burgess: True. And in the end, it's your bar prep experience. You have to do what you think you need to do to get ready. For the MBE, you definitely have to have a way to practice for that too. That's the multiple-choice program, I'm sorry, the multiple choice ... now I can't even say it ... the multiple-choice part of the exam. You definitely want to make sure that your commercial bar review provider is giving you questions to practice. I think it's wise to find out if those practice questions are licensed from the National Conference of Bar Examiners, or that they are written by the commercial provider. I kind of like to use past questions myself, because ...

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I feel like you're better off. I mean, why not? There are lots of them available. You probably should be practicing on them. I personally think the MBE is the area that in some ways is most ripe for innovation and for innovative approaches, primarily because I think it's the place where you can see the most improvement the fastest. And part of this is technique, like the more questions you do, you start seeing the patterns, you start seeing how they're put together, but also just like the example I gave earlier. If there's an area of law that you're missing everything in, you've got to get up to speed on that on the MBE, and they basically tell you more or less what the percentage breakdown is of each type of question. So I feel like it's a more contained universe, and if you do really well on the MBE, you're probably going to pass the bar. That's just the reality of it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and as my dad told me the day I was walking into the MBE, "At least the answer's on the page."

Alison Monahan: Exactly. It's there somewhere.

Lee Burgess: It's there somewhere. The other thing ... Well, I like what you were saying about being able to report out and evaluate how you're doing. I think some bar review

programs compare how you're doing to other students, and I maybe wouldn't spend as much time going through those. I mean, maybe it makes you feel good if you're doing better than the student population, but I think what you're talking about, Alison, about evaluating where your pain points are is much more important. I don't care if you are a rock star and you're doing better than everyone else. I care about whether or not you are missing all the civil procedure questions.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, if you're getting 80% in one area and you're getting 30% in the other area, that's valuable information to know, because that's something you could correct. Just saying, "Oh well, I'm at the 67th percent." It's like okay, great, what are you going to do with that?

Lee Burgess: Right. I also think another mistake that some folks make is they don't get questions from maybe a different provider to just get a different practice test experience. Sometimes somebody will say, "Well, I did all the questions that my provider gave me, or thousands of questions, but then I felt like the actual MBE was so different."

Alison Monahan: That shouldn't happen.

Lee Burgess: That shouldn't happen. You should kind of try to collect a variety of questions so you can get comfortable with a variety of different questions and approaches. Because of course, the actual MBE will feel a little bit different.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, but I would almost say there's literally at this point no reason to be practicing on MBE questions that are not past bar questions.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's probably true.

Alison Monahan: I mean, personally I would draw a line there. I want to be using the actual questions as they appeared on the exam. That's what I want to be preparing for. Obviously, certain ones like the civil procedure are new, they may not have that, but for me, that would be a bright line rule.

Lee Burgess: I think that's a really good piece of advice. Outside of just these different parts of the test, you also need to have an effective and reasonable study schedule. I would like to highlight two words in this statement for you: the word "effective" and the word "reasonable".

Alison Monahan: And I would add, to some extent, "personalized".

Lee Burgess: I like personalized.

Alison Monahan: Depending on your circumstances.

Lee Burgess: Yes. Some folks are going to need a more flexible study schedule than others. Some folks are going to study for a longer period of time, especially if you're trying to work and study. Some people want to study for a longer period of time because they have concerns. And some folks may get accommodations, and if it takes you time and a half to do every practice question, you're going to need more time to study than someone else to do the same amount of work. So you really need to think about your individualized situation and how you're going to do this. If you have a family wedding in the middle of bar prep, maybe you should try and find a bar prep provider that will let you start a little bit early, so you could take a week and do that family wedding.

There are so many options out there that you can find one that's personalized for you, and then you need to make sure that how you're being recommended to spend your time is going to be effective. Again.

Alison Monahan: Again, I think you just have to take the standard recommendations with a grain of salt. I, for example, know that I don't really learn that well by listening or by watching video. So if I just take a study schedule, I'm like, "Okay, great, it has me doing four hours of videos a day." I'm like, "That probably isn't going to work for me. I need to have the self-awareness to say you know what, I think I could spend that time better elsewhere most days." And that's fine. Again, as you said earlier, no one actually cares, no one asks you, "How did you pass the bar?" Does anyone care? No.

Lee Burgess: Nobody cares. Nobody cares. And then I think the other thing to think about is what's reasonable, because burnout is a huge problem in bar prep, and folks can really, really just drive themselves into the ground.

Alison Monahan: Crash and burn. Total crash and burn territory.

Lee Burgess: Crash and burn, exhaustion, anxiety.

Alison Monahan: And getting sick. You're almost certainly going to be sick at some point.

Lee Burgess: Having issues with family members or significant others because you're kind of in this extreme situation. The bar is like a very intensive job. If you treat it as such, you still have time to breathe, and go to yoga, or go for a run, or even have dinner with your significant other, or talk to your mom, or walk your dog. It's all about what you need to be successful, but 12, 14-hour days, typically not a great idea.

Alison Monahan: No, if your provider is telling you you need to be studying 12 hours a day, seven days a week, for eight weeks, that's crazy. I mean, come on. (A) you don't need to do that, you just don't, and (B) it's not even going to be effective.

Lee Burgess: No, it's really not. So often when I talk to somebody who's a first-time taker who's feeling like they're in crisis, my first question is, "Are you sleeping? What

time are you going to bed? When do you stop studying? Are you exercising? What are you eating?" Because oftentimes in the beginning of a conversation we can unpack that a good chunk of what's going on is overwork, not taking care of yourself, and your body's kind of shutting down. And you have to clean all of that up and take a step back and revamp how you're doing it so you can make it, the marathon.

Alison Monahan: When I was studying in California, I was working and I took three weeks off and spent the first week sick in bed, but I really focused for those two weeks. I was lucky to pass. But I was going to yoga at some points twice a day, because I'd study for a couple of hours and then I'd go to a short yoga class, have lunch, go back, study a bunch more, go to a nighttime yoga class. I mean, you can fit things like that into your day, and it's actually going to make you more effective when you're studying.

Lee Burgess: It really is. You need to take these mental health breaks so you can come back and focus. I find that in my work day all the time. That coffee break of walking a couple blocks to the coffee shop makes me so much more productive than just sitting and beating my head against the table because I can't figure out how to move from point A to point B.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think a lot of this is if you're going to approach bar exam prep more strategically and think about it from this alternative perspective is really taking seriously these things about how long can I possibly focus, and most likely that's not more than say, three hours with a break every hour. Beyond that, your brain is really not functioning, so you may as well take a break, get some food, get some coffee, take a jog, whatever it is. But you're allowed to do that. You're a grownup, you know how you work best, and you know when you're spiraling off the rails, so just ... You're allowed to do what's going to work for you.

Lee Burgess: That's so true. I think another thing every bar prep student needs is some sort of moral support or motivation or way to keep yourself sane, especially if you have struggles with exams in the past or you've already failed the bar exam. It's important to figure out how you're going to stay in a good mental state and find that support and motivation you need to move forward. So if there's something that you need, if you need a therapist to help you through this anxious time, if you need a standing dinner date with your best friend to be able to talk about something in the outside world, if you need a group of friends who are all studying who have an email chain going where you guys can ...

Alison Monahan: That sounds like ... I was like if you need a group of friends who have nothing to do with the bar, please. The idea of a "what's up" group with a bunch of people studying for the bar is literally my worst nightmare. I'm sure some people find moral support there, but I cannot even imagine the hell that that would be.

Lee Burgess: It could be anxiety-inducing, that's for sure. But you should take some time and figure out how you're going to create this support network for yourself, and

make sure it stays positive and is moving you towards your goal, but don't discount that. If you're alone, studying without a lot of support ... maybe you've moved, maybe you are taking the exam at a different time than your friends ... it can get really lonely, so make sure that you do have a lifeline to folks who are going to help you through that process.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think this is also about getting clarity with your people in your life to let them know I'm not going to be as available as probably I would be otherwise. Hopefully you can understand that and be supportive. That's the goal.

Lee Burgess: But also talk to people about how they can help you. I think that's something I really learned in the last few years, is that when crummy times come it's really important to be clear with folks about how they can be supportive, because if you tell people ... If somebody says, "Well, what can I do?" And if you're like, "What I really need are like really healthy frozen meals that I can put in my freezer," most people will say, "Okay" and then they'll bring over a good lasagna to put in your freezer so you have food. I think it can be helpful to come up with ways that people can support you. Clean your house, go grocery shopping for you, whatever it might be. Walk your dog. And then you'll feel supported, but people also will know how to support you.

Alison Monahan: Or even just, "It would be really helpful if you went to the coffee shop with me so I could study and you could do whatever it is that you're doing, so I don't feel so alone."

Lee Burgess: Yeah, absolutely. All right. We talked about all these different things that you need for bar prep, so let's just talk about some actual programs and options so that you, our listeners, can understand the breadth of things that are available to you outside of the large commercial programs such as [BARBRI](#), [Kaplan](#), [Themis](#), and [BarMax](#) that I think most people will run through. If you haven't heard of all of these, then I would Google them all. We can link to them in the show notes.

Alison Monahan: Again, they're all valuable. They all are very valuable for different types of people, and I think if you're choosing between these it makes sense to dive into all of them and say, "Oh well, maybe this approach is going to work better for my style" or "this is going to work better." Even within that category of the typical commercial prep, I think there are options that are worth considering.

Lee Burgess: Absolutely. And if you are in law school and you have yet to take the MPRE, I think all of these options are going to offer you some free MPRE prep that you can try out their products, and I think that's a really, really smart use of your time, because it's going to give you a window into what preparing for the bar exam will be like with that product, and you might find good things and you might find things you don't like. So try it out. Take it for a test drive. See how it goes.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. If there are things that drive you crazy, maybe that's not the right product for you.

Lee Burgess: All right, so let's talk about some different outlines. One of our favorites, especially if you're studying again or if you're feeling overwhelmed by the amount of material that you might have sitting in the corner of your room for bar prep, are [Lean Sheets](#). Lean Sheets are very lean. The whole packet is probably about 75 pages or so for all of the subjects in like the UBE or California or pretty much any major jurisdiction. One of the things students like about Lean Sheets, what I like about them, is it's kind of a really great starting point, and then you can always add to them, supplement them with your own notes or other rules that you might find through your MBE practice and things like that. They're probably too lean to learn a subject that you've never seen before, but I think they can really help you see the universe that you need to know for a given subject and give you very concise rules to memorize and buzzwords so you can quickly memorize the rules. So they're worth checking out, and they're something that a lot of our students and folks that we know have found really valuable.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly, and on that point, there's a very similar product called "[SmartBarPrep](#)". I think you know probably a little bit about this. What do you see as the differences between this and Lean Sheets or anything like that?

Lee Burgess: SmartBarPrep is trying to do something slightly different. They are focusing on not only creating outlines, but linking them to what they're calling a frequency analysis. They have categorized all of the questions for the bar exam and then keyed their outlines to what the most heavily tested issues are. So as you're studying-

Alison Monahan: Very smart strategy.

Lee Burgess: Right, so if they're like oh, personal jurisdiction is tested 85% of the time, maybe I should make sure I memorize that one. You can download their frequency analysis for free, so you might as well go check it out, and then I think you can take a look at some samples from their outlines. Again, they're not magic, but they offer something a little bit different, and it can be interesting to check out when you're trying to figure out which materials that you're looking for.

The National Conference of Bar Examiners, for the UBE specifically, does publish [subject matter outlines](#), which are going to give you the framework of the law that can be tested, and these can be really helpful too, because you can take them as kind of a template, and even fill in your own rules maybe that came from your bar prep books, or even from some of your class notes. But they're going to tell you this is the stuff that's tested, and then you can fill that in. Those are free. Go to the National Conference of Bar Examiners website and you can download those for the UBE and the MBE as well. I think those are both worth checking out.

Alison Monahan: I definitely remember when I was studying for the MBE I went and got that one, because I was kind of like, "Oh my gosh, I really need to know what the universe is that can be tested." And once you look at it, it's honestly kind of like oh, okay, this isn't that terrible. I can learn this.

Lee Burgess: This is a reasonable sort of amount of information.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's not like oh, it's nothing, but you're like oh, okay, I understand the universe and I feel better about knowing what the confines of the box are.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, for sure. So we talked about outlines. You also need to have questions to practice.

Alison Monahan: Lots and lots of practice.

Lee Burgess: Lots and lots of practice.

Alison Monahan: If you want to pass the bar, really the best thing to do is do lots and lots of practice questions.

Lee Burgess: Yep. And we think this is actually so important that we have built a new tool that we're releasing for this upcoming bar season called the "Brainy Bar Bank". And what we have done is we have created a database that includes all of the possible release questions for the UBE, the MEE, and the MPT, and then all of the release questions I believe for the last 15 or so years for the California bar as well. What's going to be handy about the Brainy Bar Bank is that you can quickly find questions on the given topics or issues that you are trying to study. So if are struggling with personal jurisdiction, and personal jurisdiction turns out to be heavily tested, you can go onto the Brainy Bar Bank and say, "Hey, Brainy Bar Bank, show me all the questions ..." I wish it could talk back to you, but we're not that sophisticated.

Alison Monahan: It's not Siri.

Lee Burgess: Sorry, it's not Siri, but you can say like, "I need to find all of the questions on personal jurisdiction," and then you will get a list of four or five questions that all touch on personal jurisdiction so then you can print out those questions and practice them. And I bet by the time you have done four or five personal jurisdiction questions, whatever confusion or struggle you were having is probably over.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. The other thing that's kind of cool about it is it basically does the frequency analysis for you, so if you're just like, "Oh, I need to spend two or three hours doing some practice questions," but you're not really sure what you should practice on, well you can just go and it will tell you literally, "Oh, this is the single most commonly tested topic or subtopic," or however much you want to drill down. For example, in California, I was shocked at how many

professional responsibility questions there were, because I didn't know that was on the test when I took it. If I'd had the Brainy Bar Bank, I probably wouldn't have made that mistake.

Lee Burgess: That's true. The Brainy Bar Bank was so smart, it would have told you.

Alison Monahan: It would have been like, "Hey, guess what, literally the most commonly tested topic in California in the essays is professional responsibility. You probably want to do a couple of these."

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So as you can see, we really feel like thoughtful bar prep and focusing on heavily tested issues and topics is incredibly important, because you have a lot of time to waste.

Alison Monahan: That you don't.

Lee Burgess: So this a tool that we have developed for our students, and then we're offering it on a larger scale separate from our tutoring program, so you can hopefully be more targeted in your practice, and then you're going to feel more prepared on exam day.

Alison Monahan: And frankly, it just saves you the time and hassle of having to go out and find these questions. Yeah, you can pull [questions from the California State Bar site](#). They don't go back that far. You can probably pull some MBE questions. But all these are licensed, they're real questions, so it just saves you that time and hassle basically of having to figure out what you should be working on when you basically know, "Oh, I need to be working on personal jurisdiction." Great, two seconds later here's the question to start working on. So we're trying to make it easy for you.

Lee Burgess: Yep, exactly. We'll link to the [Brainy Bar Bank](#) in the show notes, but we hope you will check it out.

There's another tool for the California bar that I think is handy dandy. It's called [BarEssays.com](#), and what the founder of BarEssays has done is he has been buying past bar exam answers off of students who have failed the bar exam. The only people in California who get their answers are people who've failed. And he's compiled a database of real student answers for each question. One of the things we were talking about earlier is you need to be really good at self-evaluating your own work. For the California bar, BarEssays I think does a really nice job of helping you do that, because if you do a question, you can then go onto their database and say, "Okay, let me read questions that got different scores." Would it have got a 50? What got a 55? What got a 65? What got a 75? 65 to 75 is basically passing. Then you can compare your answer.

This can be less frustrating than just comparing your answer to the model or the sample student answers that the California bar releases, because they are

insane and basically impossible to recreate, so it also helps you figure out where you are in the scale that may be a more reasonable goal. I think they also have some good substantive outlines on BarEssays.com. There are some essay templates. There's some good stuff in there. So we'll link to some [reviews we've done of BarEssays](#), and we even offer a promo code for them, but it's a tool that we use with our tutoring students and I think it's worth checking out.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, because I think one of the key things is if you see that, say there are six to 10 issues that could potentially come up in a question, it really allows you to see which of these were the most critical, because if somebody doesn't have one of these and they still get a passing score, okay, I know that one's not so critical. But if everyone who has a 50 missed the same two issues, then you know those are pretty important.

Lee Burgess: Yep. So totally worthwhile to check it out, and in the end the price point is pretty reasonable, so if you're taking the California bar, go ahead and check that out, and if you don't, sorry. I don't think anyone's done one for the UBE, mostly because it's harder to get your answers for a lot of jurisdictions.

Alison Monahan: It's just kind of fascinating to read all the answers.

Lee Burgess: It really is. It really is. We also believe a lot in essay practice and feedback, and so something else that we offer is called our Writing of the Week program, and this is a program full of helpful ... I call them facilitative practice assignments.

Alison Monahan: I was going to say exactly the same thing.

Lee Burgess: It's almost like we are of one mind. The place that the WOW program came from was students would talk to us about the fact that they felt like they couldn't do effective practice because they were confused about the law or they didn't know the law well enough. So what we have done with WOW is we do an intro video for a question, and we basically give you all of the law that you need to know. I mean, we just tell it to you. You can write it down, you can memorize it. But we take that part out of the equation, so then when you do the assignment you are focusing on applying that law to the facts and issue spotting.

And then we give you another video to help you evaluate your work and talk through what you needed to have in the question to pass. And so it allows you to kind of focus in on this issue spotting and analysis piece, which is sometimes the hardest part to focus on, because so much of bar prep feels like it's all about just learning the law. So that's what the [WOW program](#) is. We have it for the California bar. We have it for the UBE, which can be broken up into the MEE and the MPT. So we'll link to that in the show notes as well. But even if you don't want to use our programming, I think this idea of really testing yourself and seeing whether or not the law is the issue, or the issue spotting is your issue, or the analysis, applying the facts is your issue, is very important as you self-evaluate your work.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think part of it is you also learn the law through applying it. So say, for example, you're doing a WOW video, or you've looked up the law on something, you're like well, I've not committed this to memory yet, but in the process of using it and applying it and writing about it, that's a really great way to start committing that law to memory.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yep. It's so true, because every time you do a question, you're studying. That's what people seem to say.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. I think it could be a really valuable way of actively practicing the law and then, at the end, you're probably a little bit closer to having it memorized than you were at the start.

Lee Burgess: Yep. We also talked about feedback and the importance of feedback, both from self-evaluation. So like we said, programs like WOW I think can help with that. You should try and check out different ways to get essay feedback, whether it be from a commercial bar provider, or our tutors do that. That's a key to our tutoring program. Our tutors can often give you feedback, but you should ask for a sample of their feedback so you know what you're buying before you get it. Feedback can be a really great way to work on your writing, but again, even when you get that feedback, you need to take that feedback and incorporate it into your work. So you have to rewrite your essays after you get that feedback and see if you can replicate what they're trying to ask you to do. And then take those lessons and apply it to the next one. The heavy lifting does fall on you in a lot of ways, but the feedback helps you do the heavy lifting.

Alison Monahan: Well, it helps you see what you're doing correctly that you don't really need to worry about and, again, what you're not doing so well that you do need to worry about.

Lee Burgess: That's true, and usually if the folks giving feedback have a lot more experience with what the graders are looking for, so it can also highlight this is a mistake that is likely not going to be looked on kindly by the graders, this is something you could do to clean up your writing that will oftentimes be looked on favorably by the graders. You know, there's a lot of wisdom from people who work in this space that could be shared.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. All right, how about a few more specific types of things? Like I know a lot of people tend to spend a ton of time making themselves flash cards, but you can just go buy those.

Lee Burgess: Yes. [Critical Pass](#) does a nice job with flash cards. We have a lot of students who have used them and find them to be helpful. We have a review of them on our website that we'll link to. But they're worth checking out, if flash cards are something that you get excited about. Why spend hours and hours and hours drafting them when you could use someone else's and then just annotate them as needed.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. I think that's one of those places where I was like yeah, in an ideal world if you had unlimited time, sure, great to make a thousand flash cards of your own. You don't have unlimited time, so let someone else do it for you.

Lee Burgess: If you're a visual learner, something that's out there that's interesting in the space is something called "[SketchyLaw](#)". This is based on a product that was developed for med students to help them study for their boards, and they are videos that use pictures and a story to help you memorize. Alison, I'm blanking on what the memorization technique is called for this. Do you know?

Alison Monahan: Basically, it's kind of a take-off on the Chambers for Memory Palace idea, which ...

Lee Burgess: Thank you. That's what I was not being able to pull out.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, well.

Lee Burgess: Because I didn't have my Chambers of Memory Palace working.

Alison Monahan: I actually read an entire architecture book with that title, so I never forget it. But the idea, basically, one of the techniques that people who have really fantastic abilities to memorize use, is they might imagine walking around their house and assigning objects to certain concepts or certain words and then ... This stuff is totally up my alley. I think SketchyLaw is awesome. I mean, I would question maybe if it's like the absolute best use of your time, but if you're starting to study early, I think something like this could be really fantastic, because the idea is they make up essentially a story about a concept and then you watch it play out. I've only watched a couple of the videos, but I actually remember a few of them.

Lee Burgess: I do too.

Alison Monahan: I think it's the sort of thing that can really stick in your head, and they're just more fun.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think for repeat takers too, it can be kind of nice. It's a fresh approach to memorizing the law, especially if you feel like you're stuck in the mud and can't get rolling. But yeah, I think one of our tutors was going through the videos and said something similar, like, "When I was watching it, I just didn't really think it was doing much, and then I realized I remembered it afterwards."

Alison Monahan: Right, because it is so visual and it's a story, and that's what humans really remember much more than an outline or something like that. I probably couldn't tell you the exact law, but if I watched that SketchyLaw video again, I'm sure I'd be like oh yeah, right, it was about this, and now I remember that. I mean I think they're worth checking out. I think it's pretty cool.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So for the MBE, the multiple-choice portion, we've already talked a bit about AdaptiBar and the fact that we-

Alison Monahan: Seriously, just go buy [AdaptiBar](#).

Lee Burgess: It's very helpful. It's good stuff. We will link to our [reviews of the product and where you can get some discounts on AdaptiBar as well](#). We think it's worth doing a trial.

Alison Monahan: Honestly, at the price point it's just like, this is the fastest way to improve your bar score, I guarantee you. If you were struggling with a bar exam and if you struggle with the MBE at all ... I mean, if you're struggling with the bar you're probably struggling with the MBE ... just go get AdaptiBar. We're not being paid to say this. I just really believe in that.

Lee Burgess: That's true, we are not. The National Conference of Bar Examiners, the people who administer the MBE, do have practice questions that you can purchase directly through their website. So if you are let's say working with a commercial provider that does not use real past bar exam questions for the MBE, I would probably recommend downloading one of these practice tests, because even though it might be a little bit extra money, it's going to be an important reflection of how you're actually doing. So I think those are worth checking out, and you should check them out.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, none of these MBE tools are super expensive in the whole scheme of things, which is why I think just go get them.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. We also think Emanuel's have, they're called "[Emanuel's Strategies and Tactics](#)" MBE books. There are many, many volumes. I think these are of high quality as well if you're looking for some additional practice. You may even find some of them in your law library that you can borrow for a little bit, because they're probably at the reference desk. But that's another way to get some extra practice on some different questions.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely.

Lee Burgess: And then I guess another option that is out there is really coming up with kind of your own self-study option. So folks have been doing this, like Alison did, when they realized that they don't want to kind of conform or spend the money or use one of the commercial bar review providers. This takes a bit more creativity on your part, because you need to piece together the resources in order to make sure that you have everything that you need for your bar prep. One of the things we have done over at the Bar Exam Toolbox is we are releasing a self-study option for the California bar and the UBE, which will help you with study schedule templates, helpful handouts and videos to help you optimize your study, recommendations on studying for the MBE, access to our Writing of the Week course and our Brainy Bar Bank.

So we're trying to give you all of the pieces that you need. You'll get access to Lean Sheets for some substantive support, so you can effectively study on your own at a much more reasonable price point than you're going to find lots of other bar prep. So if you're looking for something slightly alternative, maybe you want to come check out what we've got going on over on our site.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean I think for me it was definitely scary to just decide that I was going to do this on my own, when I was a beginner. I had no real idea what I was doing. So the goal here is that we try to make you feel a little more comfortable that you have some structure, you have some support, you have someone you can ask questions to. One of the tutors will give you some feedback on your plan so that you do have the confidence to go forward and say, "You know what, I've decided this is the way I'm going to do it. This is going to work for me, and I'm full steam ahead."

Lee Burgess: Yep. So we'll link to our [self-study options](#) as well in the show notes, but if you're looking for a different solution, it's worth checking out. All right.

Alison Monahan: Why not?

Lee Burgess: Well, that's been a lot of bar prep talk, so I think we're out of time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, we are way over time on that.

Lee Burgess: Sorry, guys. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox Podcast, hopefully it wasn't too bar anxiety-inducing, please take a second to [leave a review or rating](#) on iTunes. We'd really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. Our episodes are typically released on Mondays. We encourage you to check out our bar website, [BarExamToolbox.com](#), where we have lots of free advice, helpful courses, and [one-on-one tutoring](#) for the UBE and California bar exams. Please check it out and feel free to reach out if you have any questions. I'm happy to talk to you about our different options to help you with your prep or to point you in the direction of resources that I think will be a good fit for you. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to myself or Alison at Lee@lawschooltoolbox.com or Alison@lawschooltoolbox.com, or you can always contact us via our [website contact form at LawSchoolToolbox.com](#).

Thanks for listening. Good luck with your bar prep, and we'll talk soon.

Resources:

- [BARBRI](#)
- [Kaplan Bar Review](#)
- [Themis Bar Review](#)
- [BarMax](#)

- [Lean Sheets](#)
- [SmartBarPrep](#)
- [NCBE Subject Matter Outlines](#)
- [Brainy Bar Bank](#)
- [State Bar of California Past Exams](#)
- [BarEssays.com](#)
- [BET Review of BarEssays.com and Discount Code](#)
- [Writing of the Week Course](#)
- [Critical Pass](#)
- [Sketchy Law](#)
- [AdaptiBar](#)
- [BET Review of AdaptiBar and Discount Code](#)
- [Emanuel's Strategies & Tactics for the MBE 2, Second Edition](#)
- [Bar Exam Toolbox Bar Exam Self-Study Program](#)
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