



## Episode 130: Making Difficult Decisions in Law School

Alison Monahan: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox Podcast. Today, we're talking about making hard choices in law school, because there's a very good chance you'll have to make some. Your Law School Toolbox host are Alison Monahan, that's me, and Lee Burgess. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience, so that 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](#). I also run [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#).

If you enjoy the show, please a [review](#) or rating on iTunes. And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the [contact form on lawschooltoolbox.com](#), and we would love to hear from you. With that, let's get started.

Welcome back. Today we're talking about how to go about making difficult decisions in law school, because let's be honest, you'll almost certainly have to make some. So, what exactly are we talking about? Well, we're gonna talk about a range of things. Should you stay in law school, or should you go? It's the time of year when some people are struggling with the question about whether or not they should drop out of school. We're gonna talk about what kind of job to apply for and accept, what clinic or what externship to do, what journal to apply for or join, and just how to spend your time on a daily or semester basis.

So, what a lot of these have in common is they involve a trade-off between something you might like to do, like take a nap. Let's be honest. I could use a nap.

Lee Burgess: Who doesn't like that?

Alison Monahan: Exactly. It's cold and rainy outside. Naps would be perfect right now. And something you feel like you should do, like working on your outlines.

Lee Burgess: Right. I mean, sometimes, obviously, if you're gonna get anything done in life, it's good to override your want to do, take a nap, and do the work. But I think the problem is this habit can lead to unpleasant longer term unpleasant outcomes, when you apply it to big decisions, for example, what job to apply for.

Alison Monahan: I mean, I certainly knew people in law school who wanted to do public interest work, but they felt pressured to try out a firm job and to do OCI. I mean, ultimately that might not be the best plan for them, but there's a lot of pressure to get on board, especially at these schools where OCI is generally successful for people.

Lee Burgess: Right. And I think I was definitely one of those people who ... I wasn't sure I wanted to go the big firm route, but when everyone tells you, you can probably get one of these jobs, and you're looking at your bank account-

Alison Monahan: Right. It's very tempting.

Lee Burgess: Hey, I'll go ahead and do OCI. Why not?

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And people kind of rationalize it. Well, I'll just try it out for the summer, and then I can get back to doing what I want. But the problem is, once you make that choice, it sets you on a different path. And it's gonna be a lot harder to get these other jobs, if you didn't demonstrate your commitment to them in law school, and you didn't do internships or summer jobs in those areas, because you were busy working at a big firm.

Lee Burgess: I think that's true. I think a lot of folks often forget that sometimes the public interest jobs, the DA's office, the public defender's office, certain non-profits are often highly competitive positions. And so-

Alison Monahan: Oh absolutely.

Lee Burgess: And so they, even if you're not making a lot of money, they still wanna see a commitment to the type of work that they're doing, because they have a whole host of highly qualified resumes that they have to pick from. And if they think someone's just gonna swoop in and do this work for a year or so and bolt, that's probably not who they're gonna invest in.

Alison Monahan: Right, or they're not gonna invest in the person who has literally no experience. They're gonna take the person who every summer has been working in that area and learning and actually has some practical knowledge, because let's face it, that person's more useful.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-That's a good point. So, say you're unhappy in law school, and you're considering that law school's not for you. You're considering leaving law school. Everyone around you just tells you that this is normal, and you should stick it out now that you've started. But, Alison, what do you think you do? I know we get a lot of these questions this time of year.

Alison Monahan: We do, and I think it's a reasonable thing to ask yourself. And I think most people are just gonna get advice, like oh, you're just unhappy, because that's the way it is. And you're a one-oh. And maybe people tell you it gets. Maybe they don't. But basically, the expectation is oh, just suck it up. Stop whining. Suck it up. Study more. And you'll be fine, and you'll be glad that you stayed. In that situation, I think you've really gotta look at the bigger picture. What are you even doing in law school? What's your motivation for being there? And I think without that, there's no way you can evaluate if it makes sense to stay or not.

Lee Burgess: I think that's true. I mean, you might even go back and read your personal statements of why you even applied to law school, because I think sometimes those reasons can really get lost in the shuffle.

Alison Monahan: Oh, for sure. And the reality is a lot of people who end up being unhappy, frankly, didn't have a particularly great reason for going in the first place.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: And I think, at that point, you have to take it seriously, as a question at least. Okay, if I'm gonna be totally honest here, I basically applied for this, because my parents told me too and because I did pretty well on the LSAT. I didn't really have a strong motivation, in terms of what I think I wanna do, probably didn't have a lot of experience. Now that I'm here, I'm doing that well. I'm not really enjoying it. I'm not sure I wanna continue. I would take that seriously.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I also think that, if you're really, really struggling academically, not I got B minuses or B plus, and I'm disappointed about it, but really on academic probation or at risk of not being invited back to school, I do think you should use your school's resources to evaluate all of your options and really understand what it's going to take to become academically successful again.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely.

Lee Burgess: These are not fun conversations to be had. They're awful conversations. I don't want anyone to think that it's easy to go to the Dean and have these kind of heart-to-hearts, to go to Academic Support, to sit down and do the math with your GPA and really understand what kind of grades you have to get, to get a competitive GPA to either keep you in school or get the jobs that you want. And it's also important to look at bar pass rates. I think that that's something that oftentimes if you're a one-oh, and you're struggling academically, you don't think down the road. But if there are some fundamental things about the way that law school works, that makes it difficult for you to excel at it, and you've tried lots of different things, getting accommodations if you need them, working with a tutor, working with academic support, all these things that you should try too. But it is also possible that there are roadblocks that may also plague you at the bar. And you have to kind of think down the road, because the last thing you want is to incur three years of debt and then not be able to pass the bar.

Alison Monahan: I mean, that's absolutely right. And I think, for me, the key takeaway and the thing I would discuss with a lot of people is, A, do you have a really good reason for doing this? Are you actually motivated to continue for some sort of internal reason? If the answer to that question's no, well, maybe you should cut your losses and move on. But if the answer to that question's yes, I legitimately wanna do this. I have a real interest in doing this work, then I think the question has to be, have you really exhausted all of the options?

Can you say that you've give this your very, very best shot? Can you say that you've done everything you possibly could do to make this work? And if you can't say yes to that, then I think it's probably premature to give up. But if you can, and you just really start to feel like, I'm just banging my head against this wall. And this is just not seeming like something for me. I think it's okay to walk away. I mean, I did a previous undergraduate degree in something that I actually wasn't very good at, architecture, has nothing to do with law school. And I think after my first year, particularly after the first semester, but really the first year, I was very beaten down. I had been put through the wringer. I was not successful. I decided to continue, but ultimately, I decided not to practice. I never worked as an architect. I spent the last year sort of repositioning myself. And I mean, you could make an argument that I probably have just quit after the first year.

Lee Burgess:

Yeah, I think that is interesting. I also think sometimes folks forget that, even if law school isn't the path that they wanna take, that there are plenty other careers in the legal, I guess you could say, marketplace or sphere, where if you have interest, but law school isn't going to be the path that works for you, you can still participate in the legal system a lot of different ways. So, I know someone who decided to drop out of law school for a variety of reasons, but then she became a translator for the courts, because she was bilingual. And one of the things that was really important to her and her desire to become a lawyer was working for especially immigrant families and helping them navigate the court systems. And she was able to do that as a court appointed translator, because she was kind of getting to meet that goal.

She worked with, oftentimes, immigrant clients, and she was helping ... She felt like she was really helping them understand what was happening to them. And I thought that that was really a great way to kind of pivot but still be able to reach some of her goals and participate in the legal system.

Alison Monahan:

Yeah, and I think that's why it's so important to figure out what your goals really are. I mean, the reality is Lee and I can't give you the right answer to any of these questions. That's why they're hard questions, but we can possibly give you some thoughts on how to think through and evaluate your options and really figure out what it is that you want, because I mean, the interesting thing here is ... I think it's useful to recognize that law school itself tends to attract a certain type of person, which makes it actually very hard for law students, taken as a whole, to kind of figure out what they want. I mean, basically, most people in law school, let's face it, we're all overachievers.

Lee Burgess:

Right.

Alison Monahan:

We've spent our lives trying to win approval from authority figures, whether it's teachers, parents, whatever. I mean, we can admit it. We were all the teacher's pet, right?

Lee Burgess:

At one point or another, probably.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, that's how you get to law school. You're good at school, but the thing is, this habit of mind where you pay more attention to what other people expect of you versus what you really want, it's really hard to break. And sometimes you might even not recognize that you're doing it, so part of making these hard choices is often figuring out really fundamentally, what you actually want. And I think that's hard for a lot of people to do on their own without help.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's true. I mean, I think therapy or working with a coach can help, if you are really hitting a wall, reading books. One of the things that I have done over the years, during my times of searching I guess I would call it-

Alison Monahan: When you were lost on the wilderness.

Lee Burgess: When I'm lost about something in my life is, I read a lot of biographies. And one of the things I always find interesting about biographies is I like learning from other people's stories, and I found it very interesting to kind of meet people in books and see what their paths are. I did when I tried ... I decided to become an entrepreneur. I read a bunch of biographies about entrepreneurs. I've read books about powerful women, impressive women, women who've accidentally become leaders. And I studied leadership in college, so I've read a lot of books about different leaders. But there are lots of different ways to kind of brainstorm what you want by learning about what's important to other people or learning from other people's mistakes or successes. And books are one way that you can do that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I'm also a big fan of books. I mean, it's probably is not surprising. Any of our listeners know both of us are big readers. I can't say I've ever read a biography actually. I tend more toward the sort of self-help genre, although one book that I found really helpful, that I think I picked up when I was trying to figure out if I was gonna leave my firm job, is a book called ... I think it's called, "Finding Your North Star," or something like that. It's by Martha Beck. And Martha Beck is super interesting. If she had a biography, I mean, I'm sure it would be incredibly interesting, very, very, very interesting person. But this book is really about kind of how to use your bodily sensations basically, somatically, to figure out what decisions are gonna be best for you when you are a person who's kind of tamped down and sort of feeling, basically. I mean, I remember I went to therapy my second semester of law school, because I wasn't getting out of bed, and I was clinically depressed. And one of the things that she would have me do is I would tell her some crazy story about some situation, and she's say, "Well how does that make you feel?"

And I was like, well, I think that blah, blah ... She's like, that's not the question I asked you. I asked you what you feel about this. And I was literally like I have no idea. I don't even understand your question. And it basically turned out to be the case that never in my life had anyone kind of explain to me, okay, this is what this sensation you're having actually maps to, in terms of an emotion we can describe. So, oh, this is what anger feels like. This is what sadness feels like.

This is what happiness feels like, all these things that you should learn when you're a child. And somehow, I had gotten to an Ivy League law school without having that ability, which sounds crazy. But it was really true. I was like, I literally don't understand what you're asking me. And so, I think if you are one of those people, who has been ... Your motivation throughout life has been external successes. People are saying, well, this is what you need to do to get an A, and you just put your head down, and you work harder than everyone else. And you do it.

I mean, that describes a lot of law students. And I think, if you are that person, it's gonna take taking a step back and learning how to develop these other aspects of yourself, which are completely normal human things. It's not bad to have an emotion. And it can be helpful.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and if this is something that you're listening to, and it's resonating with you, I think summertime is a great time to start these explorations. Everybody knows it's not summertime right now, but leading into the summer, if you feel like there's a little bit of self-work that needs to happen, as you're trying to make some big decisions, I think the summer can give you some breathing room from school, even if you're working, to allow you to do some of this work.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think sometimes, obviously, this can be pretty heavy. If this is the first time in your life you've ever kind of allowed yourself to feel angry or allowed yourself to feel sad, there's gonna be some stuff there. And you do this work whenever you have to, or you can, or you want to. But I think, there is something to be said for maybe not doing it right in the middle of exams, but things happen. There's not much you can do about it, if that's just the time it's all gonna come up. But I mean, there are also sort of lighter ways that you can go about it. It doesn't have to be delving into your deepest emotions. For example, some people, when they are trying to decide between two options, they'll actually flip a coin, and then they'll see what their instant reaction is when the coin reveals the answer. So, you're option A, option B, and you're like, okay, it comes up heads, and if you're immediate reaction is a feeling of relief, then you're like, okay, that's probably good.

If your reaction is disappointment, ooh, maybe I should pay attention to that. And this is very instantaneous, before you've had time to rationalize it, so things like that I think can be a lighter way to kind of get into some of this.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I also personally have found, that when I'm trying to make a big decision or when I'm really chewing on something, that walking, or going outside, or going away from distractions, can really allow my brain to function better. And there's an area of San Francisco called Crissy Field, which is this amazing walk, if you ever come visit, if you don't live here, where you just walk down, staring at the Golden Gate Bridge, one direction, and then you turn around and then you stare at Alcatraz and downtown on the way back. I mean, it's very beautiful. But to me, that's my meditative place in San Francisco. I've made a lot of really big

life decisions walking up and down Crissy Field, probably too, because it's a flat walk, and you don't have to look for obstacles. I love hiking too, but you have to kind of watch your feet sometimes. But, to me, moving my body and really removing distractions and being outside, helps. And so sometimes it can be changing of your environment, giving yourself some space to chew on these things, can bring clarity. If you're just trying to make these decisions in the library or in your room at your apartment or while you're studying, you're not giving yourself enough space to really noodle on things, so you can make an authentic decision.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think a lot of law students, being very analytical, think oh, I'll just make a pro and con list, and that'll solve the problem for me. So, you might find yourself thinking these endless lists of pros and cons, sitting at your desk. But then you go out on a walk, and suddenly you're like, okay, well, okay fine, the pro has five things on it. And the con has a hundred, but what you really wanna do is the pro. That breakthrough is probably not gonna come when you're making another list. You have to really let your brain kind of work on it behind the scenes and then help you come to an understanding of okay, maybe this isn't the most rational decision, but it's what I wanna do.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And the other thing you could also do is observe your behavior. I mean, you may think you don't know what you want.

Alison Monahan: I was the best at this.

Lee Burgess: But your behavior could actually explain to you or show you what you want.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah. I thought when I had my ... particularly my 2L summer job, which in retrospect, I basically hated every second of and for very good reason, but I was like, oh, I just don't know what to do. I just don't know what to do. But I look back. I was literally not going to the office, because I was hiding out in the school library, so that I didn't have to go to the office. That should have been a red flag. I mean, I find, at least, if I'm always late to something, and I just can't drag myself there. I'm making excuses not to go. It's probably a sign that it's not something I actually wanna be doing.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's true. There's always the stuff you have to do, but if it's an option, you can definitely regroup.

Alison Monahan: Well, and I think it's also worth examining, do I have to really have to do this?

Lee Burgess: True.

Alison Monahan: You might think, oh I got this summer job, and if they give me an offer, I have to take it. That's not true. You don't have to take it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Even applying for clerkships, the schools are like, oh if a judge offers you the job, you have to take it. Trust me, it's not true. I turned them down. Some of them weren't happy about it, but you don't have to do that.

Lee Burgess: That's true. Talking to people can also be helpful, clarifying what you want, but oftentimes, many people will have their own agenda, so for instance, schools like you to get nice jobs with money, so they can put that in their statistics. Maybe your parents hope you'll be able to be financially secure and pay back your loans. I heard a very interesting conversation, that I assume this family's not listening to this podcast. But actually, Alison, while you and I were just on a business trip together, I was waiting for you at the hotel, and this family was talking about this college daughter's option to go abroad. And it was impossible not to eavesdrop on this conversation, because it was on a couch right next to me. And I'm trying to read on my phone, not paying attention. But it was one of these conversations where I'm like, oh my gosh. There's so much parental expectation, and worry, and concern layered on top of this dialogue. It was really interesting. I was taking notes for my future conversations with my child, so I will not say some of the same things, but it was an interesting reminder of how oftentimes, advice comes veiled in our own opinions, or insecurities, or hopes and dreams for another person.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, there's nothing wrong with talking to the people closest to you about these big decisions, but at the same time, you have to recognize they're almost certainly gonna have their own agenda. They're gonna have preferences about what you do, about where you live, or whatever. And of course, those things are important, and they're worth listening to, but again, it may come to the point where you just sort of have to push back and say, hey look. I understand that you think it would be best if I don't study abroad, because you're afraid about maybe I'm gonna be a victim of terrorism. But I'm gonna go anyways. And that's sort of legitimate. I mean, that's part of growing up is you have to push back against people, like your parents, who they're not you. They're not living your life.

Lee Burgess: Right. No, it's very true. I also think it can be good to talk to people who've made similar choices to what you're considering, so you can actually understand what it's like to make that choice. So, talking to law students who did the clinic that you might be considering, or talking to lawyers or ex-lawyers about their job choices, talking to people who dropped out of law school, if you're considering that, you can learn a lot. But again, listen carefully. I mean, you and I have been to a bazillion lectures, and panels, and talks, and sometimes-

Alison Monahan: Roughly speaking.

Lee Burgess: Yes, but there are many times where you and I have kind of sat in the back and been like, this is all BS. I don't wanna hear it.

Alison Monahan: Or more, this is not resonating with me, as a way to but it.

Lee Burgess: Okay, if you'd like to be more politically correct about it, but I've definitely sat in talks, especially if you're a woman. Oftentimes these talks are about being a woman, and I've heard some pretty terrible advice, so you'd have to really listen with a critical ear and say, wow, that does not sound authentic to me. That does not sound like an authentic choice to me. I mean, you name it. You hear everything about why you should be freezing your eggs, because that's the best way to make sure you can children later in life, which is a complicated thing, that maybe should be talked about in career panels, things like that, or to the fact that you can do it all, and there's no trade-offs. I mean, there's a lot of different perspectives. You should go listen to them, but you have to really listen critically, because oftentimes, the truths about individuals' choices in those panels come out through their dialog, if you're listening very carefully.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think too, you have to think about basically the perspective of this persona and what experiences they've had, and are those experiences still relevant? I think, for example, the legal economy had probably changed a lot from the time that maybe someone's parents were trying to find a job. In 30 years, it's completely different, so of course, you can listen to that advice, but it may not really be that relevant to what you need to be thinking about, in these times, so I mean, with any of these decisions, you've gotta take everything in but kind of take it with a grain of salt. I mean, I think some outside neutral party can often be very helpful, whether that's a career coach or even a good friend who knows you really well but has a lot less stake in your choice, particularly if that person is willing to basically call you out on your BS and say, you know what? I've heard you say this before. I've seen you makes a similar choice before. Remember what happened? Are you sure you wanna go down that path again? I mean, at least for me, those are the most useful friends, because you're like, oh, I didn't really see that, but you are totally right. I'm about to go down that same path again. Maybe I don't wanna do that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I have a very good friend from college, who post-college, we took a road trip to go move some of my stuff from storage to another location. And he spent four hours in the car lecturing me about getting back together with an ex-boyfriend. And he was totally right, that I should have never considered to do this. But I was in a place where I was making ... I was not making my best choices, and I really appreciated it. I mean, really, it was four hours of telling me this was a terrible idea, totally right.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, one of my best friends one time, he spent literally two days, at Burning Man, yelling at me about, you cannot keep living your life this way. Look at what you're doing. You quit your big firm job, and now you're driving yourself crazy training for a stupid triathlon, that isn't even competitive and building the shade structure, that no one but you cares about, that you've been crying about for three days. What are you doing? And we fought about it for several days, but in retrospect, he was absolutely right. And luckily, I eventually realized that, like whoa, I am totally crazy. I need to stop.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Yeah, it can be really good to have friends that can call you out. I also remember after leaving my consulting job, where I was very unhappy. I was on a run with a good friend, and I think I said something like, wow, this is so nice. I really feel like I'm much happier than I was at that job. And she's like, oh my gosh. Talking to you while you were there was so depressing. She's like, you were so miserable. All we did was talk about how miserable we are ... you were. Don't you remember? She was just like, we've been talking about this for months. Of course, you're happier. It was just so funny.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, a lot of these things seem obvious, in retrospect, but you can't really see that when you're in the middle of it. I did like your perspective earlier about reading books. If you can't personally speak to someone, who'd been in the situating, but you know you've heard of someone, for example. I know that Carly Fiorino, at one point, went to law school and dropped out. What does she have to say about that in interviews? Maybe that has some relevance to you. I think that's a completely useful way to get more information.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. The goal is to get a pretty good idea what choice A and choice B would look like. But also, really, you'll never have all the information, and you just have to choose.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think one of the things to remember about making those choices, though, is that they're oftentimes not permanent.

Alison Monahan: Right, very few choices are totally irreversible.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And there might be ways to test it out, which I always recommend people doing. And if somebody comes to me, and I really don't think this is for me. I wanna drop out. It's like okay. You may have a totally valid reason for that, but can you take a semester off? Can you take a year off and preserve the option to go back, if a few months out, you're like, oh gosh, I really did wanna be doing that? Maybe you don't have to leave completely. If you really can't decide which job to have, maybe you can split your summer. There may be creative options that basically allow you to test this out, but at some point, I mean, it's either gonna be Job A or Job B. And one of my professors had an interesting way of looking at it. He's like, you guys obsess over do you take firm job A or firm job B. He's like, the reality is, yes, is gonna drastically impact your life, and no, you have absolutely no way of knowing how that is gonna impact you. You don't know that you're gonna walk into the Summer Associate Meeting, at firm A, and meet your future spouse. There's a degree of randomness here, and you just have to accept that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's true. And even within those jobs, there's a lot of luck that goes into it. What partner do you get assigned to? What group do you get assigned to? Because two people at the same term, could have very, very different experiences, just based on the type of work you get assigned.

Alison Monahan: Oh, for sure, and does a case end up on your desk that you happen to find interesting in an area that you didn't know anything about. And that completely change the course of your life. I mean, these things happen daily, basically, but you can't predict them, so you also can't really plan for them. So, I think you just have to kind of put yourself in the best position, try to gather as much information as you can, and be realistic about the options. But then you just have to decide. I mean, there's no other choice.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think another good point is this idea of trying to think beyond the immediate. So, for instance, if you hate law school, you might like practicing law. You should get a legal type job over the summer. Go try to do more internships or externships during the year. And really get as much perspective on practicing law as you can, before you decide that it's really not for you.

Alison Monahan: Oh, yeah, there are lots of people who hated law school and really are fine with being a lawyer, and conversely, there are tons of people who love law school and hate practicing.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, very true.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think you've gotta look a little bit out, and obviously, some things you just have to suck it up. I mean, sure journal work is probably tedious, but it's inherently time limited, and you probably don't wanna just quit in the first week just because you don't like it.

Lee Burgess: No, and oftentimes, it's kinda like going through a little bit of a boot camp. You oftentimes are honing skills that may not be the most fun skills to have, but they can be good skills to have. So sometimes, you just decide to suck it up and do it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think there is definitely an element of that. I mean, in terms of picking which journal you wanna apply for, that's more of this big picture decision, where you've gotta figure out, okay, maybe you have the grades for law review, but for whatever reason, you really don't feel like you wanna do it. There's another journal you really wanna do. That's kind of a big picture decision, where that's gonna be a hard choice. But just okay, I don't like site checking. Well, no one likes site checking.

Lee Burgess: Right. Oh, come on. I don't know. I think some people do. I know some of those people.

Alison Monahan: I honestly don't. I don't know. I mean, I think people hate it more or less, but I don't think anyone likes it.

Lee Burgess: I have a few friends who are technical editors, who I think really kind of enjoy it in a weird way.

Alison Monahan: Maybe they enjoy telling other people to do it.

Lee Burgess: Maybe, I don't know, but I think there are people ... I mean, there are people who like just straight up redline editing other people's work too.

Alison Monahan: Well, I don't mind doing that. I just hated having to go into the bowels of the library to look for some ridiculous paper copy of something. I was like, this is a total waste of time. But the other thing to keep in mind is okay, and then you have to as a second year, you do have to do the grunt work. And you're the one who has to go to the far-off campus library, but your third year, you might be the one who gets to tell other people what to do, which is probably more fun.

Lee Burgess: That's true. My second year, the law review wasn't the most exciting, but I was on the board. And it was a really great experience for me.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, whereas as I, finally, by the time I was a three-oh, I was ready to be like, you know what? I'm not doing things I don't wanna do anymore, and people were encouraging me to run for the board, and oh, maybe you could be the editor-in-chief. I'm like, I don't want to do that. What I actually wanna do is have as minimal a commitment as possible. So, I applied to be social chair, but there was a lot of competition from all the people who wanted to be slackers, so I think I had to be alumni liaison or something, but it was fine. But again, there was a lot of pressure, and it was like, oh the idea. You could maybe be some bigwig on the Columbia Law Review. Maybe it would help you get a clerkship, blah, blah, blah. You have to stand up and be like, you know what? I don't wanna do that anymore.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Yeah, and there are parts of this law review ... I mean, I remember ... There are parts of the Law Review Board reality, that I remember fondly, and there are parts that are totally grunt work. I mean, I can't even remember how many times we read each article before it got published-

Alison Monahan: Oh God. I'm sure hundreds.

Lee Burgess: But it was a lot of times, and you're reading another draft of the same article. It's on a topic that's not of great interest to you. And you're seeing that your changes that you've recommended haven't been made, and now you have to go back and ... I mean, there's tedious work in it. So, you have to really think about whether or not you wanna do it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I guess for me, I was just finally at a point where I was like, I do not wanna do this anymore. And nothing you can say about the possible impact it will have on my future hypothetical career, is going to convince me to put in any more time or energy. And the irony is because I then had more time to do other

things, I actually started doing research for what became The Girl's Guide to Law School. So, someone would have probably said, oh you're just wasting your time on this little hobby. You should be out of the Law Review Board. But the reality is, looking back, that was actually a lot closer to what I wanted to be doing and what I ended up doing.

Lee Burgess: Right. That's a very good point. Sometimes, you do have to just really see what interests you, see where you wanna spend your time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely, and I think, sometimes, there also can be external factors that might be impacting your decision in the moment. For example, bad things happen. People die. You get sick. You get divorced. It's often the case that things are gonna look really different in a few months, and I think the standard advice here is you've gotta try to avoid making big changes immediately, based on the way that you feel, after say, a parent passes away.

Lee Burgess: True.

Alison Monahan: It's just a really tricky time to be making a huge life choice.

Lee Burgess: It is, and you've gotta give yourself space, because you need to heal from that. You're not gonna be able to think clearly. You should reach out for help, if you can get help and resources, so you don't find yourself having made a lot of choices in a dark time, that you end up regretting.

Alison Monahan: Right, or say that you had a serious illness, and you didn't do so well in your classes as a result. Maybe that's a time to look at taking some time off or something like that. But I don't think you have to be like oh, I need to drop out, because I did poorly last semester. It's like you were really sick. That's not a fair representation of what you could do, if you were not in this situation.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Absolutely. So, what can you do, if you know you're gonna face some resistance when you make your choices?

Alison Monahan: Well, this is basically called setting boundaries and growing up, right? I mean, I think, for me, it's always helpful to be really clear in my own head about what I'm doing, and why I'm doing it, and maybe even write that down, and essentially have a mantra that I'm ready to repeat as many times as necessary. Say that you've decided that you're gonna leave school for a while, and your parents aren't happy about it, okay, that's fair. They're probably concerned. But you need something like, Mom, I know you want me to continue in law school, but my results are showing me it's not a great path. And I'm not enjoying it, so I'm going to take some time off, rather than spending a lot more money on this right now. I mean, there may be an argument, but you just repeat that as many times as you need to.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's true. And you have to accept that sometimes people won't like your choices, and that's okay, because disapproval, turns out it doesn't kill you. It can be annoying, but you just have to learn to roll with it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, I think a lot of people in law school are people pleasers. I mean, again, that's how you got there. And I think, actually, that's a very insightful point. Someone else disagreeing with your life choices is actually okay. You can live with that.

Lee Burgess: Yep, and you never know. That might work out in the end.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly, and I think also boundaries, clear boundaries, I mean, this is also ... You might find it with people like professors, other people at your school, who think they're offering you a great opportunity, that you've told them you don't actually want. So, something like as we've discussed, Professor X, I'm more interested in applying for district court clerkships, not appellate ones right now, so while I really appreciate the offer, I'm actually not going to call your law school friend, who's an appellate judge, about clerking for him. I mean, is the person not gonna be happy? Maybe not, but if you're not gonna do it, you're not gonna do it. And that's what you need to convey in a firm, yet polite manner.

Lee Burgess: Yep. I think it's important to just trust your instincts. If something seems like a bad fit, it probably is, so in the long run, you'll be happier and probably more successful, doing things that you're intrinsically motivated to do. External motivators, like money and prestige, it turns out, aren't generally satisfying in the end.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, there's a lot of data on this. You can go look it up. I think it's Michigan that does this study of their graduates, and it's pretty clear that the people who are making the most money and have the most prestigious jobs are actually the most unhappy.

Lee Burgess: Yep.

Alison Monahan: Which is probably a whole other commentary on the profession, but we're out of time-

Lee Burgess: So, we'll save that for a future podcast.

Alison Monahan: Exactly. I mean, I think my key takeaway is look, it's your one life, and you get to decide what to do with it. And if what you're doing is not working out, making some changes is totally fair.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. If you enjoyed this episode of the "Law School Toolbox Podcast," please take a second to [leave a review and rating](#) on your favorite listening app. We'd 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 to myself, or Alison, [Lee@lawschooltoolbox.com](mailto:Lee@lawschooltoolbox.com) or [Alison@lawschooltoolbox.com](mailto:Alison@lawschooltoolbox.com), or you can always contact us via our [website contact form at LawSchoolToolbox.com](#). We love hearing from listeners, and we even take suggestions for future episodes. So, feel free to email us questions. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon.

**Resources:**

- [Martha Beck, Finding Your Own North Star: Claiming the Life You Were Meant to Live](#)