



Lee Burgess: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we are talking about some of the most surprising things we found when we started our 1L year. 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 or rating on your favorite listening app. 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'd love to hear from you. And with that, let's get started.

Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking about the most surprising things we found about 1L year. So Lee, what did you find most surprising when you were starting law school?

Lee Burgess: Well, the first thing I realized when I started law school is it felt like I was back in high school. There were lockers, there was orientation, everybody had new backpacks.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, where they really thought about...

Lee Burgess: Yeah. It just really felt a little clickish. We had this fair where there were all these clubs. It was a little weird to me, I'll be honest. I didn't love orientation. I was a little disillusioned with the experience, and I just kept reminding myself that I had wanted to do this. I had come from work, so I wasn't coming just from undergrad, and I felt a little bit out of place with some of the people who were straight out of undergrad. It took me a minute to find my people. So my kickoff to law school was not that great. I settled in, I made friends, I owned my experience, and I enjoyed law school and I was happy with it. But it started out rocky, I'll be honest.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I kind of agree. I felt like I was just totally overwhelmed in the beginning by just the crush of people and all these activities. Probably this might have been that I moved to New York City, which also has its own kind of crushing overload of just stuff. But it just felt like there was stuff going on all the time, and I had to figure it all out, and I had to figure it out all at once. And the whole first semester just felt kind of manic. It was always like there was some event I could be going to. And I wanted to go to a lot of them, but it just seemed like it was a lot.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And then every single academic thing I did took me forever. I consider myself a pretty fast reader, a good writer, but going through those early legal cases, it's just like slocking through molasses.



Alison Monahan: Yeah, I do remember that, because I've always thought I'm a quick reader. And then I did at some point calculate my average reading speed and I think it was 10 pages an hour, which is actually, I've now learned, pretty standard. And I was just like, "Are you joking? I don't read 10 pages an hour. I can read 100-page book in a few hours." But that's just not the way that you have to read this material. And the volume of it, and the consistency day after day after day – it just becomes kind of crushing.

Lee Burgess: It does. And I think you can take heart, it does get easier the longer you do it, but I think those first few assignments, first few weeks, everything just feels so heavy. The first LRW assignment, it feels like you're writing in a different language. It doesn't feel authentic to you, it can feel clunky, and it can be very frustrating.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I was surprised by how carefully we end up having to parse just everything. I guess it shouldn't be surprising, but I remember the first day of Torts – and I loved my Torts class, and I loved my Torts professor, but we spent the entire class on a case that was maybe two pages. I don't even know if it was two pages; it might have been one page. And you'd think, "How would you spend 90 minutes on one page?" But that was pretty normal.

Lee Burgess: And you also ended up, I think in the beginning, reading all these old cases.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I remember this being a very old case. And we're just like, "What does this even mean?"

Lee Burgess: You don't even know what it means. I mean *Pennoyer v. Neff*, and you hear all these kind of iconic names of these cases that aren't necessarily even good law anymore.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, they're kind of there just to make you parse them carefully, and figure out what all these weird words like "replevin" even mean.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, which you will know what "replevin" means, but you won't on your first day of law school.

Alison Monahan: And you probably won't remember it years later.

Lee Burgess: No.

Alison Monahan: I'm like, "Eh, I remember something about property."

Lee Burgess: I think it's a remedy, isn't it?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. Something, yeah.



- Lee Burgess: But I also found that it's like you had to slog through these old English cases about really random things, and you're kind of trying to dig out all of this information. And then all of a sudden, once you get your sea legs, then you start reading more modern cases and you realize this isn't as torturous when it's not written in 18th century English.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, but then typically your assignments get longer.
- Lee Burgess: Well, that's true.
- Alison Monahan: So you end up having the same volume of material that you're reading day after day after day. It was just, I remember, a very, very high volume of reading. And I'm a person who reads a lot.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think the other thing that is tough about the beginning of law school is you realize that you have to figure most things, most stuff out on your own. They're not going to walk you through it.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think that is a huge shift. Nobody's going to tell you how to do things. I mean, there may be some couple of workshops or something that kind of suggest maybe you want to make an outline. But nobody's going to tell you how to do this, and nobody's really going to sit down and teach you the actual material, which I think is surprising for a lot of people. You think, "Oh, okay. I'm taking tort law, they're going to tell me what tort law is." And that's just not... Nobody's going to probably sit down and say, "Okay, there are these things called intentional torts, and then here's a list of them, and here's what each one means. And then there's this thing called negligence, and here's how that works." We could basically do an hour and give you first semester tort law. Nobody's going to do that for you.
- Lee Burgess: No, they really aren't. And nobody is also going to teach you how does a case get to the Supreme Court?
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. I remember midway through my first semester at Columbia Law School, realizing I actually did not understand the federal and state court systems, and I didn't really quite understand what case was binding precedent and what other cases. And I did not feel like I could ask anyone at the school about it at that point.
- Lee Burgess: Which is why that is part of our [Start Law School Right course](#).
- Alison Monahan: It is, because I do not want other people to be in that position.
- Lee Burgess: Right.



- Alison Monahan: Because it is a little disconcerting when you're halfway through Civ Pro at an Ivy League law school, and you realize you do not actually understand how the court system works.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah. I remember sitting in my Criminal Law class and somebody asking my professor, well into the semester, how a habeas corpus petition could get to the Supreme Court for a state case. And now I'm like, "Well, of course you know that answer." But a lot of 1Ls were like, "Oh, don't call on me. I don't know what that answer is."
- Alison Monahan: That is a good question.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, that is a good question. And I think that a lot of these things that professors assume you know...
- Alison Monahan: Right, and they assume you took a Civics class at some point, but who did, really, at this point?
- Lee Burgess: Well, I took a Civics class. I can honestly tell you that that was not in my Civics class.
- Alison Monahan: Well, and it also would have been high school if you did take it.
- Lee Burgess: Right. You know what I did in my high school Civics class? I got asked to prom in my high school Civics class.
- Alison Monahan: That's what you remember.
- Lee Burgess: That's how much of a joke... That and my friend, my other friend used to eat these banana muffins that she used at the coffee shop down the street. So we'd eat banana muffins, and I got asked to the prom.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think in my case they canceled Civics before I took it. So I never took it. I don't know. It was rural North Carolina. They were like, "You don't need to know about that. Don't worry too much about politics."
- Lee Burgess: I think our teacher got sick or something and we had a long-term sub. I mean, it was a joke. It was a joke.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, so the point being, there are these things that will probably be assumed that you know, that you do not know. And there's no harm in not knowing them; you just need to find out about them. So, you can do our Start Law School Right course and we'll just tell you about them, or you can go basically to Wikipedia and it will probably give you a pretty decent explanation of the basics of the court system, or you can Google any of these things, or you can ask



someone who seems sympathetic, like maybe your legal writing instructor or something.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So what about professors? How did you feel when you started interacting with professors?

Alison Monahan: Well, that was really surprising to me. I had a master's in architecture, and there from day one, we were really treated as people who were intelligent, who had interesting things to think about and say, who were doing work that deserved to be taken seriously, and that we might have ideas that were novel or interesting. And that is just really not how law school works. There is a definite hierarchy. The formality can be very surprising. In class, you are generally going to be addressed by your last name, which is very strange. Coming from California, we were just like, "What?" All the California people are in the back of the room being like, "Miss Monahan? Why are they calling me that? That's my mother."

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: So there is a definite degree of hierarchy and formality, and I think this can be really surprising for people who are coming from more of a non-traditional background. So you may be older, you may have had another career, a different graduate study, and it can be really shocking when suddenly you're basically treated like you are kind of an idiot, and that you know nothing, and that you're just going to be this empty vessel that they're going to pour legal knowledge into.

Lee Burgess: And I think one of the things that I learned is that some professors also have a class persona, and an outside of class persona.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: And I think the most intimidating professors in the classroom often times were much, much more approachable and friendly in office hours. You just had to be willing to go to those office hours. And I think that it can feel like your professors want nothing to do with you in class if you feel like they're being dismissive, or they don't want to talk to you after class, or they maybe are somewhat harsh if you're not prepared or get a question wrong. But if you go to them after hours one-on-one and are struggling and are earnestly trying to get help, usually they're pretty helpful.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, they definitely tend to be more relaxed. I mean, they're still not going to be buddy-buddy with you probably in office hours.

Lee Burgess: No.



Alison Monahan: But they're typically more relaxed, and you can actually... I think professors like it when you come to office hours. They respect that. It shows you're trying, it shows you're interested. And the same thing, I think, assuming you're participating in class and looking like you're paying attention. If you're the person in the back of the room who's like clearly playing Fortnite or something, and not making eye contact and refusing to talk when you're called on, they're probably not going to be that nice to you in office hours.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: But if you're a person who looks like they're trying, they're probably going to be like, "Oh, okay. I'm going to give this person a break."

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's true. I think it was also weird not getting to pick my classes.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, totally bizarre.

Lee Burgess: Like I was in kindergarten.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you just show up and they're like, "Okay, so you're going to be going to Torts class at 8:00 a.m. on Tuesday and Thursday." And you're like, "Well, I'm not really a morning person." And they're like, "Yeah, too bad for you."

Lee Burgess: And then you have this weird three-hour block in the middle of the day, where you get to do your reading and eat lunch. It's very strange, because if you've been used to having a lot of autonomy, you're like, "But I like to work out in the middle of the day, or I like to do other things in the middle of the day."

Alison Monahan: Or just like, "I don't feel like taking this class." It's like, "Well, too bad."

Lee Burgess: "Too bad. Real Property, enjoy."

Alison Monahan: "You're going to be taking that class." I mean, Columbia wasn't super strict on the sections; they did mix it up a little bit sometimes. But I feel like that whole thing is just super bizarre too, that you're taking all your classes with the same people.

Lee Burgess: Oh yeah. And it is really weird because then you'll graduate and you've almost never met some of the people.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, if somebody's not in your first class. I mean, you can meet them in orientation and be like the best of friends for a week or two, and then you're never going to see them again for three years.



Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's really strange. Yeah, it's very strange. And it also is weird because most of my professors did call us by our last names. And we would meet somebody and you're like, "Lauren?"

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you don't even know people's first names.

Lee Burgess: I know.

Alison Monahan: It's really weird.

Lee Burgess: And then they are like, "Oh, that's Smith." And you're like, "Oh, Smith. Oh, I know who you are."

Alison Monahan: Yeah, "Oh, Miss Burgess. Yeah, I know her.

Lee Burgess: Right. Exactly.

Alison Monahan: "Was her name Leah? Lee? Lisa?"

Lee Burgess: It's really funny. Yeah. So it's a different world in that way. I think another thing that's a little odd about the law school experience when you get started is grades are all of a sudden maybe more important than they've ever felt to you.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah. I mean, that was really shocking, because again, from architecture school, I don't think I've ever even seen my transcript. I've literally no idea what my GPA was. It was not relevant to anything. No one was going to hire me based on my transcript. In that case, they were hiring you based on your work, and they were never going to hire me based on that.

Lee Burgess: So you went to law school.

Alison Monahan: Yes, so I went to law school. It didn't matter that I'd gotten an A in Structures. Literally no one cared. And suddenly in law school, from day one it was like, "Oh, the grades, the grades, the curve." They're like, "You're not going to get this, you're not going to get that. Your life is over if you didn't..." Nobody's going to get straight As, and the curve is really harsh, and everybody's competing for the same few good grades, or at least it can feel that way. I felt like it was different for most undergraduates too, because most undergrads are not on a curve. I mean, occasionally in the sciences and engineering and things like that, but typically if you had a class of 30 people, 25 of them could get some type of A. And that's not the case anymore.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. The other thing that I thought was interesting was the drinking, and the socializing, and how kind of formulaic it was.



- Alison Monahan: Yeah, like the bar review every Thursday.
- Lee Burgess: Bar reviews. Yeah.
- Alison Monahan: It was just like, "Ugh."
- Lee Burgess: I had like an 8:00 or 9:00 a.m. – it felt like 8:00 a.m.; maybe it was a 9:00 a.m. Contracts class on Friday mornings, and I think I went to one bar night, and it was just like, "I cannot do this." And I mean, I used to go out in my day, but I was like, "I cannot be functioning at like 9:00 a.m. tomorrow morning."
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, luckily the one good thing about my class schedules, I basically never had Friday classes, which worked out well for the Thursday night bar review, which we went to basically every week.
- Lee Burgess: Well if I hadn't had like a 9:00 a.m. Contracts class, I would have probably been there too, but you know.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, and really in New York, people drank like I've never seen people drink. And let's be honest, this results in a lot of issues for a number of people. A lot of substance abuse problems start in law school. Just something to be aware of. You're not as young as you used to be, and nobody probably needs to be drinking, binge drinking, multiple times a week anyway.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, and I think that I went to... Let's see, how old was I when I started law school? I was 26, I think, when I started law school. And so, I had done most of my real partying before then. Things were starting to start to calm down a little bit. I had been working a lot. But I think that all of a sudden, too, you're out maybe with people who are 22. And if you're not 22, it's hard to party with people who are 22. It can be, depending on if you've been doing yoga instead of going out to bars for a while.
- Alison Monahan: I think in a lot of schools the drinking can be pretty debauch.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, so if that's not your jam, you really want to find another way to bond with people. But I think it was just surprising to me how, "What do you mean you're not going to bar night?" or, "What do you mean you're not doing this?"
- Alison Monahan: Well, it was also very, very pervasive. I remember basically every event they had at the law school, there were people coming around with trays of alcohol. And I think for a number of people, that can be very problematic.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah. So you've just got to be aware of it. Partake, don't partake, but at least know that's part of the culture.



Alison Monahan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So, everybody else has started talking about summer jobs. We haven't even taken finals yet, which was kind of super weird.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, the whole summer job thing starts really early. And again, you may not realize that summer job kind of is important. Also, you're not really allowed to get any real help immediately. I think they've moved these deadlines up a little bit. But I remember there was all this stuff in the air about whether you were applying for this fellowship or that fellowship. They're giving out money for this or that. I'm like, "It's October. What are we talking about here?" And you couldn't really get a lot of assistance, and it just became this, I felt like very high stress situation. I ended up applying for jobs on December 1st in the middle of exams, and that was super weird. I remember getting a callback from one of those places I had applied to in San Francisco, and I had literally got the notice from them the day that I arrived back in New York City from the winter break. And I was like, "Wait, you want me to turn around in literally two days and fly back to San Francisco to do an interview?" And they're like, "Yeah, no big deal, right?" And I was like, "This is so weird. You just want me to fly across the country for this interview, and I was just there? And also, why are you even talking to me?" And then I remember people came on campus to interview, and it was like this again, just this sort of bizarre thing where you're like, "You're going to pay me how much to do this job, where I just go out and eat and drink a lot?"

Lee Burgess: And I think if you're going the public interest route after your 1L year, a lot of those job opportunities don't really come up until the spring, but even they can be highly competitive. If you want to work at a U.S. Attorney's office, of a DA's office, of a PD's office, or for a judge, or whatever opportunities may be available, those can be highly competitive. You should be networking and trying to get somebody to pull your resume out of the stack of people who want to go and do that kind of work. I think there are a lot of opportunities and people can get pretty down if they don't get their first couple of opportunities. But once you get some grades and you've been networking, it can be easier to find something a little later on. You just have to stay open to that and don't get demoralized. And you have to also consider whether or not you can work an unpaid job or if you need to make money, because those are also two big differences. And only you can answer that by looking at your bank account and figuring out what you can take on.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think first semester all the job stuff just becomes this kind of background buzz, when the reality is you can't actually do that much about it at that point. I mean, there are things that you should be paying attention to. For example, if there are funding deadlines for public interest work and that's what you think you want to do, you want to make sure you apply and try to meet



those deadlines. But really, the second semester is when a lot of this starts to make a lot more sense, and that's when you might have career fairs going on, and public interest career fairs, and people start hiring. I think the first semester is just this kind of source of stress that you can't do that much about. So it ends up people just spiral, spin around, and try to do things but there's not really that much to do, typically. And it just gets really weird. It just seemed weird to be even worrying about this in the fall of what I was going to do the next summer.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think outside of jobs, just generally that first year, it can take a while to really understand the culture of the school that you're at. For me, my undergrad, I went to a small liberal arts college down in Southern California, and we all lived on campus. We lived in campus or on campus-sponsored housing for all four years. It was very close-knit, everybody was together all the time. And then you're in law school, and I had friends who commuted from 30 minutes away to come to law school. And that seemed kind of odd to me. So you're kind of making friends, then you make some friends and you realize they're not around very much, which was definitely a different situation where you weren't all living on campus and things like that. Different schools have different percentages of students who are commuter students versus who are more of a tight-knit community. Different schools have different reputations for kind of arrogance, and competition, and various other things. And so, it can take a while to feel like you're kind of navigating the cultural space of your school.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. For us, most people did live on or near campus because Columbia owned all of the buildings in the area and they gave you a better deal typically.

Lee Burgess: Sure.

Alison Monahan: And it was also just easier because you just signed up and they told you where you were going to be living. But yeah, I found a number of my classmates just very weird and mysterious. I had avoided the whole idea of any Ivy League school kind of like the plague for my entire life. I refused to apply to any Ivy undergrads. I was just like, "These people are not my people." And as it turned out, probably they're not. And so, I think different schools do have different tones. Being in New York and being at this very high pressure Ivy League school, coming from California was definitely different. I had been living in San Francisco, I'd gone to Berkeley. Those two schools are pretty different.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, there are some pretty polar opposites of culture there.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, so my two grad schools, you have Berkeley and Columbia. About as far apart on the spectrum in a lot of ways as you can possibly get. Berkeley was super loosey-goosey. There were pretty much no requirements for anything. My third year of architecture school, I decided I didn't feel like doing a building



project and I just had to get a few professors to sign off on that, and they were fine with it, and I wrote a paper. It was stuff like that. That does not really fly, particularly your first year of law school. I mean, in later years, obviously you can sculpt your experience more, but that first year is just very regimented. You don't have a lot of choice. I think that can be surprising if you are coming from having worked, and deciding where to live, and deciding how to spend your time. It might feel less weird, but even from college. I think most people's college experiences, particularly their senior year, are going to be a lot more flexible than that first year of law school.

Lee Burgess: That is so true.

Alison Monahan: Which is not flexible.

Lee Burgess: No. So, one thing I think you can take away from this conversation though is, don't get demoralized if you feel like you've walked into campus and it's little overwhelming, or you haven't found your people. I think it can take a little bit of time to find your folks, the people who your experience is going to be similar to, or you're going to bond with, or you're going to be able to do this study group stuff with. But that's not necessarily all going to happen on day one, and it's okay. Take a deep breath, keep meeting people, and you'll probably find where you fit in this equation.

Alison Monahan: Sure. And I think there's a lot of posturing with people – just saying and doing kind of crazy things to make themselves feel better, and just recognizing that for what it is. And people just do some really bizarre things, I think personally out of insecurity, but people were not necessarily very nice all of the time. You hear stories back in the day of people tearing pages out of the books in the library. I remember once going and doing, I think it was our first... I know we had some legal research assignment we had to do at the library, and literally there were pages missing. I was like, "Who are these people?"

Lee Burgess: So weird.

Alison Monahan: Like, seriously? This is not just back in the myth of The Paper Chase? I don't know if somebody watched The Paper Chase and thought it'd be cool to take some of the pages.

Lee Burgess: So weird.

Alison Monahan: I mean, I saw some really, really weird stuff.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. But that being said, you have some great friends from law school.

Alison Monahan: I do. A few.



- Lee Burgess: That you are still close to. I enjoyed meeting them and being in their circle. So, you can find your people.
- Alison Monahan: No, exactly. I think it's important that you give yourself that time. I don't think too many people show up and then in the first week are like, "Yeah, I feel so comfortable and confident, and this is like the easiest thing I've ever done. I have all my buddies." People do not necessarily... Even if they appear that that's what they're doing, that's not really what they're doing. I was later friends with people who I would have thought totally had it together those first weeks, and then later on I found out all kinds of different things about them, and was just like, "Wow, okay. You were really a much bigger mess than I realized."
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, which is really such a story of life.
- Alison Monahan: It is the story of life. So, I think those people who seem... Particularly, I think this can be an issue if you're not somebody who grew up in... If you find yourself in one of these very fancy places and you're not someone who grew up in that environment, that can be really challenging. It can also be absolutely fascinating. I remember I had a friend who had grown up in a pretty rough neighborhood in, I think, Seattle or something. He and I would just sit on the couch sometimes and just laugh and be like, "How did we end up in this scenario with these people? These are heiresses and just people who like... Who are these people?" And you'd find out occasionally who someone's grandfather was or something, and you're like, "Wait, what? How am I in class with this person?" And we just thought it was kind of hysterical.
- Lee Burgess: But I think what's interesting, you make a point of this idea of imposter syndrome, which I think so many of us have felt that at some point. I remember when I got my first job at a consulting firm out of college and I was at this training in a high rise downtown overlooking the Ferry Building, which ironically, I go to now all the time to go to the farmer's market. But at that point, I'm standing up there, and they've laid our laptops on this table, and we're all supposed to go to our laptops. And I was looking out the window, and I remember saying to myself, "They do know I'm four years out of a small high school in a small town in the Central Valley, right? Do they know that? Do they know that yeah, I have now this credential, and I went to a good school, and I did well academically, but do they really know who I am?" Because I think most of us feel that in some way, and then I think there are a lot of students who are first generation and things like that who have a much heavier weight. But I think almost all of us at some moment have felt like, "Am I supposed to be here?" And the answer is yes.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, but then you show up at a place like Columbia. And there actually a number of people who absolutely feel like they should be there, and they've been told their entire life that they deserve to be there. And frankly, a lot of



them aren't even that smart or that good at what they do, but they 100% feel entitled to be there.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's true.

Alison Monahan: No questions asked.

Lee Burgess: You're entitled to be there too. So work on your feelings of entitlement, I guess.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, basically, yeah. I was talking to a friend of mine about this last night. We're like, "You need to channel your inner entitled person."

Lee Burgess: That's true.

Alison Monahan: She wanted to ask for something, and the way she was asking for it, we were practicing. We're like, "No, that is not what you say. No. No." She's like, "But I can't see these things. What you're saying sounds great, but..." I'm like, "Channel the inner entitled person." So you are entitled to be there. You got in just like everybody else. And just channel that.

Lee Burgess: Yep. Well, I think that's a good point to end on. We're out of time. Good luck with your beginning of law school 1L experience.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. You deserve to be there as much as anyone else.

Lee Burgess: You deserve to be there. Exactly.

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