Lee Burgess: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking with admissions consultant Shirag Shemmassian about getting into and choosing the right law school 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 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.

Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking with Shirag Shemmassian about how to decide which law schools to apply to and where to ultimately choose. Shirag is the founder of Shemmassian Academic Consulting. They work with both undergraduate and graduate students to get into school, by offering individualized admissions consulting. So, welcome and thanks for joining us on the podcast. We love to talk to people about how to get into law school.

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, thanks for having me, Lee. It's a pleasure to be here.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So first off, can you give us some background about your college and graduate school experience?

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, sure. So, I went to a small high school in LA that didn't have very great college counseling. So, they guided you to local schools, but if you wanted to go elsewhere – say, on the East Coast, or even Northern California or anything like that – then the knowledge was limited. I had to teach myself, essentially, how to get into top schools.

The other layer to all of this was, I grew up with Tourette's syndrome. I was diagnosed around age eight or age nine, and it's a diagnosis I still carry to this day. So, even though it doesn't impact my IQ or anything like that, I think there were a lot of teachers and staff and things like that that just didn't think I could do as well as other kids, so they didn't push me either. I know this because I even heard teachers say things like, "You're going to be a failure" or, "You're not going to get into the good schools" and things like that. But even my parents and other family, friends and stuff, they wondered aloud whether I'd be able to make it, and things like that. So, I sort of resolved to learn everything I could. I enrolled at Cornell, and I graduated debt-free from there. Then a year after graduation, was able to enroll at UCLA for their Clinical Psychology PhD program. I completed that in five years, also debt-free.

I was helping people this whole time get into top colleges and graduate schools. I think people saw my success, not only on the admissions side, but also on the financial aid side. People just started asking me a lot of questions. Then I was helping them get in, and them get bunch of scholarships and stuff. So, over time, word-of-mouth grew, and I really enjoyed admissions. I'm a total admissions nerd, I read about this stuff all the time. People are like, "Don't you already know all this?" I'm like, "I don't care. This is my weird interest." So, I just love getting to know people, love storytelling. At the same time, it's incredibly fulfilling because these are huge processes, very high stakes, very high stress. And they determine some aspects of your career and earnings and things like that. It's not everything, but it's a big piece of people's education and career. So, I don't take that trust lightly, and it's such an honor to help students out.

Lee Burgess: Well, what a fascinating story. I think we hear so often from students who maybe have a learning difference or some sort of disability. Or as you were saying about your Tourette's, that you can get all of this negative feedback, that I think plays into this idea of imposter syndrome or that you're not really cut out. So, how did you have the right mindset at such an early age, to either ignore or do something with all this negative information that you were getting, but still be able to be self-confident enough to land yourself at a place like Cornell, which is not exactly an easy school to get into?

Dr. Shemmassian: Right, yeah. I'd be lying if I said I just sort of bounced back or it rolled off or anything like that, because it was hard. It's hard to hear from parents, it's hard to hear from teachers, it's hard to be made fun of by peers and things like that. But the good news was, nothing they said had any evidence behind it. I was doing just as well in school, I was the valedictorian of my junior high, and I think one of them in my high school. So I was always doing well in school, and I was succeeding in sports and things like that. I wouldn't say I was super popular or anything, but I wasn't an outcast or anything like that. So, I was just looking around like, "Hey, all these people are saying I'm not going to be successful for this and that reason. Or I'm not going to be able to cut it" or whatever. But I was doing just fine. So, I was like, "You know what? I have this dream and I want to do it."

And then at the same time, and I don't know that this was necessarily the healthiest, but I also wanted to prove people wrong. So, I think there's this two-fold thing of proving to myself that I'm just as capable in getting into these great schools, but also proving other people wrong, and stuff like that. The reason I say it might not been as healthy is because it's not like people were waiting to see, "Oh, he did it. Now we're all wrong" and stuff like that. They were just saying what they thought, and I was probably internalizing that stuff more. It's not like me getting in was fulfilling something, when I proved them wrong or whatever.

So yeah, I just sort of kept my eyes on the goal, figured why not try? I think a lot of times when people have learning differences or they're told they can't do X, Y, and Z, they sort of buy in to that and don't try. And then it's self-fulfilling, because if you don't apply, you obviously don't get in, et cetera, et cetera. So, it's just been very important for me to stay empowered, but also, to empower other students who, for whatever reason, don't think they can get in somewhere – whether it's a disability, lower LSAT score or something like that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And I think there is that important distinction of owning your own process. For me, I was very fortunate that I had parents who were really pushing me to stretch, and go for those goals. But my high school counselor, who I do not believe listens to this podcast, he told me there was no way. I went to Claremont McKenna College in LA, and he told me that I was likely not going to get in. And I was near the top of my class, 4.0 GPA, on the student council, on a varsity sport. I mean, all of these things. I had a pretty good shot. I was from a small town, but I had a pretty good shot. And he pretty much told me it was a waste of time to apply. He spent all of our counseling sessions telling me how I needed to adjust down my expectations. I remember brokering this deal with him during the process, because I applied early decision to Claremont and I said, if I got in, he was going to allow me to drop this science class that I hated for the second semester, because I didn't need it anymore. And he was so sure that I wasn't going to get in, that he made all these deals with me. Then I walked in with my admissions letter and it was basically like, "No more Physics for me!"

Dr. Shemmassian: I love that!

Lee Burgess: And he was shocked. I think that there is something about that mindset of, you do have to own your own journey. And hopefully you have the right people encouraging you, but if you don't, it's still your journey, and you have to bust your butt to get whatever results that you want. I think there's nothing wrong with stretching, as long as you do have some safety options out there.

Dr. Shemmassian: Exactly. And the thing is too, when folks discourage, unless it's taking so much attention away from your target schools, or your borderline target reach schools or whatever, what is the downside? If you're approaching this stuff ahead of time and you're approaching it thoughtfully, and your school list doesn't entirely comprise far reaches or anything like that, what's the downside? I just wonder sometimes, why are certain folks so discouraging of certain applications, if someone's even remotely in the ballpark. Who cares? It's probably another one or two essays, if that; and if they're willing to pay the application fee. It is what it is. I'm the type of person, and I know many of my students are like this, where I would wonder, what if? Simply not wondering what if, is worth the application effort.

Lee Burgess: That's a good point.

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, rather than wonder, "Well, what could have been? I went to this school, I don't know if it was the best place for me." Well, find out what all your options really are, and make decisions based on the information and outcomes you have.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, because you might even be surprised at where you feel like you fit best. You never know.

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, totally. Or who gives you aid, or whatever.

Lee Burgess: Right, yeah. There are lots of factors. We'll make sure we talk about money, because I like the fact that you clearly know how to work that system, too. So, you said you're an admissions nerd, which is cool. I'm a law school nerd and a bar exam nerd. I have to hire people who think like me, so we don't feel weird about what we're nerdy about.

Dr. Shemmassian: That's right.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. So, what do you think it's about the admissions process that you find so intriguing?

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, I think it's this combination of how does data – these quantifiable factors like grades and test scores and things like that – fit with what you've done, how you spent your time, what drives you. But then, how do you communicate that story? I think a lot of times we try to oversimplify every admissions process. I think this is very true of law school admissions, since it's so contingent on stats and things like that. But we still over-simplify. It's like, "Well, I have these stats. I think I can get in here, but not here", et cetera. Actually, there's a lot more to think about. It's just getting to know people and figuring out, "What have I done? Where have I demonstrated my passions and my interests? Who am I personally? And how did this all come together to tell the story of how I arrived at law, and why I'm going to make a great lawyer?" So, it's just fitting all this stuff together and figuring out how we can deliver it in such a way that will make the admissions committee see you as an asset to their community, not just another applicant. That mystery and that process is something that I love.

Lee Burgess: I really like that idea. I was just talking about a similar thing, in the context of trying to build your job application on the other end of law school, with someone who had had some life events happen, that had caused this student to take some academic missteps, and then was getting her act back together to move forward again, and wondering if those academic missteps due to these external factors really have sunk her chances at certain jobs. And I said, "I don't think so, but you've got to have a story." It's like, what are you going to do to change the story? What are you going to say? Who's going to say you took missteps, because external things happened in your life? That is life, life's going

to throw those things to you. It's what you do with those missteps and the story you can tell. So, if you get your act back together and become academically successful, then you can just say, "These things happen, this is my story. Look how I got my act back together, because I'm a grown up and this is life. And if things happen, I can turn them around." I think that being able to craft these stories is an important life skill too, because it happens over and over and over again.

Dr. Shemmassian: Oh, for sure. It's everywhere, you're right. It's with applications for law school, for jobs, for fellowships, for clerkships, you name it. You constantly have to communicate this stuff. And you touched on something really important, Lee, which is, a lot of times when students approach these applications, they think about how they can present themselves in this perfect light, like they figured it all out: "I had this challenge, but it's no longer a challenge for me. Here's how I figured it out. I'm the best." And something I always say is, "Be human." That's how we work. If you can communicate what you have dealt with and what you've overcome, what lessons you've learned, how you've applied it, but how you're still a work in progress – I think that's a really human way to communicate this stuff, because they're not just looking for achievements and victories; they're looking for introspection and thoughtfulness and things like this. So, the more you can focus on the qualities you want to communicate, whether you're applying for law school, or a job, or you're interviewing – that's the stuff that really comes through.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's a really good point. I mean, if you went and got your PhD in Clinical Psych, you have to love people's stories. I mean, how do you do that work?

Dr. Shemmassian: It's like the chicken and the egg.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So true. Most people who are going to one of these new goals of trying to go to college or graduate school – almost everybody needs a therapist anyway to get through these…

Dr. Shemmassian: That's right.

Lee Burgess: ...these transitions. Alright. So, when you're thinking about this decision to go to law school – and we kind of touched on this, creating this list of schools – how do you suggest that students go about choosing a list of law schools to apply to?

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah. I think what folks do is, they think about what's ranked well, and where do their stats align? So, they'll look at a school's median GPA and LSAT score, or they'll look at the middle 50th percentile of scores. And then places they want to live. And they do it just based on that. That's actually not a horrible approach, it's just incomplete.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Dr. Shemmassian: Let's take for instance, a sliver of law schools, the top 14, the T14. Sometimes people say, "I want to get into a T14 school." And I'm like, "Well, which one?" "I don't know, a T14 school." But obviously, anyone who's involved in law admissions or has gone to law school knows these aren't all created the same. So, there are a few things to consider. There's obviously your grades and LSAT score. We want to consider where you did your undergrad, where you want to live, your ability to pay for school, the cost of various law schools and things, who's going to need aid, et cetera. But then also, considering what it is that you want to do afterwards. Thinking about that from a geographic standpoint, but also what that school offers. So for instance, if I had really, really high scores and I want to be an academic, I might prioritize getting into Yale over Berkeley, or something like that.

Lee Burgess: Right. Right.

Dr. Shemmassian: But then if I wanted to pursue public interest, I might go to Georgetown over Virginia, or something like that. I'm obviously stereotyping a little bit here, because a number of these schools specialize in a number of things, et cetera. So, fit, I think, is incredibly important. That doesn't mean that you have to have it all figured out going into law school. But if you can take some educated bets, that's a good job. So for instance, you might know that, "Hey, I'm deciding between these three areas, I'm not sure." But you feel really, really confident that you're not interested in intellectual property, or corporate finance, or something like that. Those can help you filter certain schools out or to prioritize the early applications to the ones you're more interested in, et cetera. Then also, obviously location fits into that. If you're in a financial hub, then you're going to have more opportunities for local internships and local networks and things like that. So, considering the full spectrum, I think, is really important.

And then also, having balance. Going back to an earlier point you made, Lee, about having some reaches, some targets and some safeties. But making sure that all of the schools within those categories are places that you'd be happy. I think sometimes students are dishonest with themselves when they say, "Oh yeah, these are my three targets." The thought experiment you should do is, "Okay, if I didn't get into any of my reaches and I got into all of my targets, would there be one of those schools that I'd be really happy to attend?" And if the answer's "No", then we have to keep refining. Because you don't want to get in a situation where you didn't get into anywhere you liked and then you're just super bummed about the process.

Lee Burgess: I think that's a really good point. And I having another conversation with a different student… Clearly, I've been on the phone all morning. But we were talking about how life is, what's happening when you're in law school. You want

to set up this experience to hopefully enjoy it, and not just be miserable. Life is too short. I think that sometimes, folks forget that school is an elective decision, especially graduate school. You are choosing to follow this path. You are choosing to maybe invest financially in this path, and you are building for your future. Not to say that it's going to be easy – law school's not easy for most people – but it doesn't have to be traumatic, where you need to go to one of your clinical psychologists friends to cope with the decision that you've made to go to law school, hopefully.

Dr. Shemmassian: You don't want to be friends with us.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. So, I think there is that element too, of location. Not just location, but school culture. Another big thing, especially outside of some of the larger schools – this is a more of a consideration in the more regional schools – is, do you want to go to a commuter school, or do you want a school where everybody's living near campus? That's a big thing in California, both in San Francisco and in Southern California – I think even Southern California more. You've got really lovely schools. Loyola is one of them that comes to mind immediately, where people don't really live around Loyola. So, if you are planting yourself in LA, and you don't have any friends and you're just showing up at the school, you've got to know that people are driving from different parts. Everyone comes to campus to do their stuff, and then they probably leave. Are you going to be okay with that? Because not everybody's okay with that. Some people want that school culture, where even they might have dorms, or on-campus housing or something like that. I think people forget to ask those questions.

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, totally. Sometimes I feel like… Lee, I'm not sure if you have this experience but I have it often, where I think students make sort of shortsighted decisions that they might not have a lot of insight into, given their phase of life or what have you. For instance, sometimes when someone's in their early to mid-20s, or something like this, their considerations are very different than I would have, reflecting back on those times. A lot of people say, "Oh, it's only three years. And then if I do a clerkship in these places that I'm not that into, it's only another two years", et cetera. But those years are really meaningful. I've always thought that not all years are created equally. Your 20s are a special time, your 30s are a special time, whenever it is that you decide to go to law school. There is no reason to grin and bear it for X amount of time, just because you think it'll set you up for this wonderful future thing. In other words, you can have a good time during your law years, and after. It's not like you have to suffer now to reap some benefit later. Right?

Lee Burgess: Right.

Dr. Shemmassian: So, considering your lifestyle and all that kind of stuff is truly important. Where do you want to live? Who do you want to make friends with? Where do you want to potentially practice in the future? All of these are major considerations. It's not just going to the, quote, unquote "best", even though that is a consideration.

Lee Burgess: It's true. I mean, life happens. I met my husband between my second and third year of law school, and he was not associated with the law school. But that was a major life shift. All of a sudden, I started making plans, caring about another person. And my path kind of changed not long after graduation, when we decided to settle down together and things like that. But that life all happened while I was in law school. I was in my late 20s, and that often times can be when you meet somebody. Or maybe you have a family situation and you have to relocate. You need to start over in a different community. You can't plan out this whole thing. And I think you make a good point – these aren't wasted years. These are part of your life, and you should be able to make the most of it. I think school's really fun in a lot of ways. I had worked between undergrad and law school. I worked a lot. I worked for a consulting firm, I traveled. I wasn't particularly happy in some of those years too, which I've definitely talked to my therapist about.

But I think I did have that short sight of, "I'm just doing this to do it now, yada, yada, yada." There is something about saying, "This is my choice of where I want to live for the next few years, how I want to spend my time. I'm paying money, or doing some sort of investment in myself to do this." Even if you have a great school situation, where you're not paying a bunch of money to go to school, you have the opportunity costs of not working. So, something. You're giving up something to be there; just make sure that it doesn't need to be a torturous experience. And if it is, maybe you should transfer and try somewhere else.

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, totally.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Alright, so other thoughts about things that students should take into consideration when they're making this list? How many schools should be on a list for most people?

Dr. Shemmassian: It depends on the overall competitiveness of the list. For instance, if someone tells me, "I have nine schools on my list. Is that good?" "Well, I don't know if it's good. Are seven of them far reaches?" Right?

Lee Burgess: Right.

Dr. Shemmassian: So, we have to dig a little bit deeper. Let's say for instance a student is only applying to six – someone might think that's crazy, but perhaps two of the six are safeties that we can all but guarantee the student will get into, and then

everything else is playing with house money. But then, if you want to have more spread and apply to more reaches, then you should probably increase the total number of schools to accommodate those kinds of things. Depending on how confident you are in your targets and safeties, and things like that, I recommend somewhere between nine and 15 schools for most students, hopefully broken down into thirds. And of course, there's wiggle room here, like I said. The nine schools doesn't have to be three, three, and three: safety, target, reaches. It could be two, three, and four, if we know that the two safeties are more or less shoe-ins. Of course, we won't 100% assuming anything, but we can be reasonably confident. So, that's the way I think about it. But let's say a student has three safeties, and just wants to do the rest reaches. Great. But I always say, "Let's balance competitiveness and rank, and make sure that we have enough in each category to help you feel confident going into it."

Lee Burgess: What's your perspective on going straight through to law school, or taking some time?

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, it's a highly individual decision. My experience, Lee, with this is, people who go straight through will say they're glad they did it straight through, because that's what they did. People who took two, three years off will say, "I'm so glad I took two or three years off, because I wasn't ready to go straight through", et cetera. I don't know if that's actually the case for people, that they're glad they did what they did. Not to get too psychological here, but cognitive dissonance. You're saying, "I did this thing because", and in retrospect, we think about how that was a good decision. So, if you have the stats and you're ready to go straight through, I'm not one to say, "Oh no, don't go straight through, you're going to get burned out. You should live a little", or something like that. At the same time, if someone's a little bit apprehensive, or if I hear that a lot of it is outside pressure, like a parent saying, "You're wasting your years", all that kind of stuff – then that might actually be a signal that we need to have a conversation about, "Is this right for you now versus later?" I'm curious to hear what your thoughts are.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I would say, I think I'm about of one mind. I think if you go straight through, my question to folks is always, "Do you really want to be a lawyer?" Because I do think often times, it's like, "I don't have a job, so I might as well go to law school." "I'm a good student, so I might as well go to law school." Especially if you are paying for this or taking on debt, I really encourage people to want to do it, and make sure that that's what they want. I have friends that went straight through who are highly successful attorneys, but they knew exactly what they wanted to do. I think the happiest ones are the ones who went to school knowing what they wanted to do. Then, yeah, they were younger than everybody, and they were going to make partner earlier. So, that's something. But I do think that there are a lot of benefits from taking that break and experiencing a little bit of life, especially when it comes to the job hunt. I

know that my four years between undergrad and law school were something that it was discussed a lot in my big firm interviews. And I think that they appreciated the fact that I had been in an office environment, I had worked with clients, I had worked at clients' sites. I was comfortable with the level of professionalism that I think is hard to get without some of those professional experiences, and that working at that firm would be my first job. And then I'd made some of those really, really rookie mistakes on someone else's dime, instead of theirs.

So, I think that there can be a lot of benefits to waiting and getting a little bit of life, and making sure that this is what you wanted to do. And I think if you take a break, school seems sweeter. I remember going back to school and going to a 2:00 o'clock yoga class one afternoon, and thinking how decadent that seems, because I wasn't at my desk, at my office in my high rise. I was at yoga at 2:00 o'clock, and I think it's nice. It's a benefit of school, is you have so much more autonomy about how you spend your time. That seemed so refreshing after a few years of working a lot, and traveling for work and things like that.

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah. Yeah, I like that. I think my experience between undergrad and grad school was, I graduated and then that fall I applied to grad school. So I only took a year off. Personally, it was good for me. I know people who took more time, and that was the right decision for them. I think you pointed to it. It's highly individual. If you're ready and you know that you want to do this, it's great. But if you're doing it out of anxiety – either, "Oh, I'm going to be too old" or, "I don't really have a job" or, "I should get a grad degree" – these reasons that aren't, "I want to become a lawyer", then I think that should be a red flag.

Lee Burgess: And I think going back to what we were talking about earlier with this, what's your story? What's the story you're going to weave? If you're saying, "I have to go start my career", you also have to take into consideration that if you want some of these large corporate jobs, that your resume might be sitting next to somebody who did already have professional accomplishments. And maybe you've only had part-time, summer jobs. That doesn't mean that if your last job on your resume was working at Nordstrom during the summer… There are actually a lot of really good life lessons you can pull out of that, contained in a cover letter. Recruiters actually love any sort of customer service work, because it shows that you can deal with angry people. But you still have to think about, what's going to be your story? How are you going to show that this is what you really want to do? So, maybe taking that year and working in a law firm, even if it's just part-time, or just getting exposure to things, can kind of create that story, and also give you confidence that this is really what you want to do.

Dr. Shemmassian: Totally.

Lee Burgess: Alright. So, let's say we've done all this heavy lifting and we've gotten in. And maybe you are so lucky, you've gotten into a few places. Now what do you do? How do you decide where you should go?

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, so this changes the dynamic. On the front end, I know people always say, "Oh, you're evaluating them, and they're evaluating you", et cetera, et cetera. But they're the ones with the power, so it's like a sellers' market. They're the ones who are the gatekeeper. Once you're in, now you can go digging a little bit more, and you have choices. They also want to impress you and enroll you and all that kind of stuff. This is when you can start asking more questions about comparing financial aid offers and seeing if you can negotiate more aid. Or talking to current and former students about their experience. A lot of times talking to current and former students is actually the best way to get the real scoop, because obviously, an admissions committee and faculty who interview and stuff like that, they work for the school. Their perspective is skewed. They're trying to make the school look great, and market the school and all that kind of stuff. So, go digging a little bit: read forums online, talk to current and former students, ask the admissions committee folks questions about opportunities that you will get to have, or not have, and things like that. And just weigh all the options.

Now, there's also something, we were talking about location earlier, Lee. It's all great in theory, like, "Oh, I would totally go to that school." But then when you have two admissions offers in your hands, it's a very different thing. For instance, I went to Cornell for my undergrad, so I feel I get to say this. But in theory, it might be great for you to go to Cornell. You might be really excited about it. Then you get in, and you're like, "Well, do I want to live in Ithaca for three years?" It's lovely, but is that what you're looking for for the next three years? And so, when you actually have admissions offers in hand, you can actually envision what your life would be like in place A versus place B. So, really reflect on that. Obviously, if you're in a relationship, or people are going to have to move with you, or there's something else that's going to have to change, consult those people too and consider, "What life are we building here?" Not just, "Where am I going to law school, and where do I have to, quote, unquote 'grin and bear it' for the next three year?"

Lee Burgess: Right. Because life is happening while you're in school.

Dr. Shemmassian: That's right.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think the other thing, I took the soft way out weather-wise and went to school in Southern California. But my friends who went back east and went to places like Cornell, you also have to factor in weather and lifestyle. Because I think that for a lot of people, that can be a really hard transition. Seasonal

affective disorder is no joke if you're not used to it and you're not ready to take that on.

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah. Weather is real.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Yeah, so think about that. Also, I think, are you an urban person and you want to live in an urban place? I think Alison talks about, she wanted to really live in New York, and so she went to Columbia. Because that was one of the things she wanted to do, was to move to New York. She was very sure about that. But a lot of people don't like cities, so maybe you should consider not going to law school in a city.

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, absolutely. Fortunately, given the number of law schools we have in this country, and where many of the great ones are located, you do have choice. There is a spectrum of locations and experiences and specialties and stuff like that within every tier.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's very true. Now, a lot of people are focused on getting into top choice law schools. This can be different for tiers or rank for the different person, because everybody's top choice is kind of different. So, what are some secrets to the admissions process that you can share, that maybe people need to think about when really going the extra mile for some of their schools?

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah. The first one, I'll just go ahead and say it. Admissions committees care about themselves more than they care about you. And I think this applies to whether you're applying to law school, or a job or something like that. I think a lot of times students have this perspective of, what's in it for them: "I want to go to this school because it's in New York." "I want to go to this school because it's ranked like this." "I want to go here because the network is good." Or, "It's really good for IP", or whatever it is. The school doesn't care. What does the school care about? The school is looking to admit the strongest class that they can eventually brag about. And who is going to be successful, and give money back to them, and that they can say, "Hey, Lee is one of ours." I think that completely changes the way you approach things. That doesn't mean you don't write about yourself, but also consider who your audience is. If you just say, "I want to go here because I want to take advantage of X, Y, and Z. And I want to do blah, blah." It's like, "Okay, well, fine. But you're not making me feel special."

With admissions, dating analogies weirdly work well. For instance, if someone asks, "Why do you want to be together?" and you say, "Well, I feel like your job schedule fits really well with mine. I feel like you're a great cook, and I love to eat." If you make it just me-focused, it's not going to be very attractive to your potential partner. So, think of law school admissions in the same way. If you say, "Oh, and you're based in New York." It's like, "Oh, so if we weren't based in New York, you wouldn't be excited about our school?" Anytime you wonder, "Should

I talk about their location? Should I talk about this opportunity they have? Should I talk about X, Y, and Z?" – yes, it is important, but also consider that they are the ones with the power here. How can you demonstrate your background qualities, stories, experiences, et cetera, that make it really compelling for them?

For instance, if the school has a really strong environmental law program, and you discuss your experiences with environmental law and how you want to do that moving forward, you don't want to just say, "Oh, and you guys offer a great program, so I want to stay there." It's just a framing thing. How can you contribute to a certain initiative or a certain program? How would you take advantage of that opportunity in a way that betters that law school's community? What do you intend to do moving forward with the skills you gain there, and give back to that area?

Lee Burgess: I think that's a really interesting way of thinking about admissions, that also, I think, can be applied to jobs in the future, of, what can you do for the person who you're asking the favor from?

Dr. Shemmassian: Exactly. It's like the JFK quote: "Don't ask what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." I know it sounds kind of cheesy, but it's true – considering who it is you're talking to and what you're asking of them.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that's really a great way to think about it. Then that circles back to that story idea. What is it about you and your story that's going to make you a great alum?

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, seriously.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Because you're an alum a lot longer than you are a student.

Dr. Shemmassian: Oh, absolutely, yeah. And they're thinking about that relationship. What do you bring to the table, not for these next three years, but also, what is your potential for success as a partner, as a judge, as a business person, a donor, whatever it is? Schools rely on that stuff. A lot of a school's fame and rank and prestige is tied to things like alumni giving and endowments, and alum, and networks and things like that. It's really important.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's a really good point. Well, one thing you mentioned in your intro about yourself, and I wanted to make sure we talk about it before we finish up, is money – that you managed to go to school without saddling yourself with hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt, which I think is an accomplishment, for most anyone. So, can you share a few snippets of wisdoms of how to think about finances when you're making this decision to go to law school?

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, sure. First it starts with research before you even apply to places. If financial aid is a huge consideration, or a significant consideration, then you want to make sure to look into schools that have a track record of meeting a certain amount of need, whether that's need-based aid or merit-based aid. Because certain law schools might have a better track record for giving based on need, or merit or things like that. And then plan accordingly. So, for instance, if it's a school that's hyper competitive, and it's rare for someone to stand out so much academically to get merit-based aid and stuff like that, chances are even if you get in there, they're not going to give you tons of money. Now, if that same school is committed to class diversity when it comes to ethnic background, or socioeconomic background or things like that, then that might be a good fit for you, if you… Go head.

Lee Burgess: Oh, I was just going to say, how do you get some of this information? When students are researching this, how do they find out these things for school to school?

Dr. Shemmassian: It's going to vary from school to school. This is where you want to dig into certain forums, you want to speak with different schools. Do your research, call admissions committee offices. A lot of them will be willing to share. If they give good financial aid, they're also going to brag about their financial aid. That's going to be something that they're really proud of. And then like I said, if there are certain specialties a school has – maybe they offer a scholarship for people who are really interested in public policy, and your stats are really strong for that school and that might be a good candidate for you – that's on the front end, in terms of researching and all that kind of stuff.

Now, when you get into a law school, if certain schools offer you aid and other ones don't, it doesn't hurt to ask if they can adjust their financial aid. You can be nice about it. This isn't like go in there like a jerk and negotiate, and play hardball or anything like that. Thank them for their admission offer. Let them know where else that you got aid from. Let the school know that you actually really want to attend theirs and they're your top choice or whatever. And obviously, don't lie about that, because obviously you can. You can say, "I'm strongly considering attending your school" and stuff like that, "but the money's prohibitive", all that kind of stuff, and see.

The other thing is, I think students focus a little bit too much on what schools offer. They'll either apply to places that offer need-based aid, or they'll take the bigger fish in a smaller pond strategy, which is apply to schools where you're super qualified to get into, because then they will try to attract you with scholarship offers, rather than let you walk to a T14 school, or whatever it may be. But the other thing is – and this is the strategy I use, and many people I know who graduated debt-free use – is, apply to a combination of places that offer aid, but also apply for tons of scholarships. I know what people are

thinking often times: "Okay, where do I even find those? I know everybody says there's a lot of free money out there, but where is it? How do I find it? How do I apply for them?", et cetera.

I always encourage people to look where other people don't look. So, private scholarships are probably the best way to find money that other people aren't really competing for. And they can be regional, they can be related to ethnic background, they can be related to a certain type of law you want to practice. Or, like I said, economic background, whatever it is. For instance, I'm Armenian-American. And when I was in college, in graduate school, for some reason Armenians like to give scholarships to other Armenians. So, all these Armenian scholarships, but they weren't that competitive. I literally remember, Lee, there were several of them that said, "You're such a great applicant" and all that kind of stuff, "and you were the only one who applied." And I was like, "Okay, great. I'll take it."

Lee Burgess: You're like, "Well, then I definitely am qualified, as the only person who applied."

Dr. Shemmassian: I tell people all the time competition is great, but not when it's for free money.

Lee Burgess: Oh, that's true.

Dr. Shemmassian: So, look for places where people aren't looking. This is going to sound strange, but the less developed website typically something has, or the more niche something is, like, "You should be Korean-American, left-handed, and a vegetarian", or something like that. And if you fit those things… The more niche something is, the more likely you are to receive it. Of course, I'm just giving these examples sort of tongue-in-cheek. But it makes the point of, the more niche you get, if you qualify for it, the better odds you have. So, build a spreadsheet of all these opportunities, what the eligibility requirements are, when the due dates are. Chances are, you can use your law school personal statement for most of these scholarships. Modify and recycle them to meet their mission and so on. And you just go crazy – apply, apply, apply, apply. You're only limited by your research and your willingness to submit. And don't assume something is more competitive than it actually is.

Lee Burgess: I think that's a really good point. Also, it goes back to a larger point of, if you want this to happen for you, you've got to hustle. It's doing this research, and working your angles, and finding the breadth of scholarships, and applying, applying, applying, and going after it. I think that sometimes people really forget how much a lot of student debt can really hang over your heads, especially when you're trying to someday buy a house or start a family, or we were just talking about paying for preschool. These things start to come up. I think doing

this work and hustling, maybe even when you're young and you're not thinking about those end goals, it's really going to pay off in the end.

Dr. Shemmassian: Absolutely. One other thing I want to highlight, Lee, is when we think about these big numbers, like 200,000, or 50, 150, whatever it is. Then you see these scholarships for like 2,000, 3,000. I think sometimes people think, "Eh, that's not going to make a dent", or something like that. Except, these things add up. Law school's, I don't know, 40, 50K a year, but you get like 10,000 in scholarships. Well, that's 20% of your $50,000 tuition. And it's not just about lowering it from 50 to 40. The interest that this debt accumulates is rough. Accruing interest on a smaller loan will be worth tens of thousands of dollars in the future. It's more than just reducing your amount today. It's a much bigger thing than that.

Lee Burgess: I think that's a really good point. You never know where money can come down the line. Maybe your first year, you're doing 5,000 here, 5,000 there. But maybe the next year, you are a teaching assistant, and that's some sort of money. Or, I was on the board of my Law Review, and for my status as one of the editors, I got discounted tuition. That's how I got paid for that role. I didn't know that that was on the table, but that took a big chunk out of my tuition. You take a big chunk out of something through that, and then you still have some of these $5,000, $2,000. You start to add all this up, and it becomes real money. I think that people forget that, yeah, you're looking at a bigger picture, and $2,000 that you don't have to pay interest on is great. Take it. It's worth it.

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah. And there's a snowball effect. If you go into year two armed with five scholarships from the prior year, and you apply to a sixth scholarship and they see you have a track record of getting all these scholarships – they think, "Oh wow, this person must be really good. Look at all the awards they've won." Each scholarship you get makes you more attractive for the next one. So, there's this exponential sort of snowball effect.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Oh, that's a really good point. Well, I think that gives folks a lot to think about, but also to just chew on making a very thoughtful decision, and not just going down the U.S. News rankings, and only applying to schools that they think are going to look good in the end, because it's a more complicated decision than that.

Dr. Shemmassian: Of course. Of course. Yeah, there's a lot to process here.

Lee Burgess: So, before we wrap up, because we have to go soon, do you want to share a bit about what you do in your business, and if people want to learn more about you, how they can learn more about you?

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, sure. I help people get into law school. Everything involved in that process – from choosing school lists, to choosing rec letter writers, writing great essays,

writing diversity statements, interviewing, if that's what you have to do for a certain school. Everything involved in the admissions process, we do. Folks can go to our website to find resources. Lee, perhaps you can link to our Law School Personal Statement guide.

Lee Burgess: Absolutely.

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, folks can think about how we think about storytelling. That'll also link to things like diversity statement, and just larger law school admissions guides and things like that. But, I'm very reachable. You can email me, you can find the email on the website – shirag@shemmassianconsulting.com. And I'd love to answer anyone's questions.

Lee Burgess: Great. Well, thanks so much for taking time out of your day to chat with me. I'm sure this won't be the last time we get to chat. But I encourage people to reach out to you if they want information. I had a lot of fun talking, so thanks a lot!

Dr. Shemmassian: Yeah, likewise. It was such a pleasure. Thank you, Lee.

Lee Burgess: Alright, and with that, we're out of time. 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 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, and we'll talk soon!

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