



Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're excited to have law school admissions expert Anna Ivey here with us, to talk about applying to law school. Your Law School Toolbox host today is Alison Monahan, and typically, I'm with 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. Together, 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 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 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 to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're excited to have law school admissions expert Anna Ivey here with us, to talk about applying to law school. So, welcome, Anna.

Anna Ivey: Thank you.

Alison Monahan: I'm so excited to have you back. Well, to start off with, could you give our listeners just a quick sense of your professional background?

Anna Ivey: Sure. I went to law school myself, so I feel your pain. I went to the University of Chicago for law school. Then I practiced for a few years in corporate law, eventually specializing in film finance. And then I had my quarter life crisis, and decided I didn't really want to practice law for the rest of my life. So I went back to my law school and joined the admissions team; eventually, I became Dean of Admissions. I've also worked in Development at Stanford. "Development" is just a fancy way of saying fundraising. So, I've seen how a lot of sausage gets made in higher education, for better or worse, and I've been able to see this whole process from all sides of the table – as an applicant, as a law student, as a practicing lawyer, as an admissions officer. And I've been running this admissions consulting firm for over a decade now. So we work one-on-one with applicants to help them navigate the whole process and make smart decisions. As you know, because we do it sometimes together, I like to keep creating content or at least updating it, whether that's books, blogs, newsletters, YouTube videos, being a guest on a podcast like yours. So, here we are.

Alison Monahan: Here we are. And where can people find all of this stuff, if they're interested?

Anna Ivey: Yeah, just come to [annaivey.com](#).

Alison Monahan: And you have a book as well. Can we get that anywhere?



- Anna Ivey: Yeah, that is called [The Ivey Guide to Law School Admissions](#), which is available on Amazon. The paper version is pretty old now, so I'd actually recommend doing the e-book, which I update regularly.
- Alison Monahan: Oh nice. Yeah, that seems the wave of the current and the future.
- Anna Ivey: Paper books, with content that changes, it's not the best way to go anymore.
- Alison Monahan: Alright, so get the e-book version.
- Anna Ivey: Yes.
- Alison Monahan: Alright, well, let's jump right in. So, people often say – I'm sure you've heard this a million times – "Law school admissions is just a number game, your fate is totally determined by your LSAT and your GPA. You can just go put it in this calculator, it's going to tell you if you're going to get admitted." Do you think this is accurate?
- Anna Ivey: It's partially true. Certainly the LSAT and GPA, in combination, are a huge factor in the outcome. So, you made reference to this calculator – for your listeners, there's this [calculator on the LSAC website](#). They make it weirdly hard to find, but once you find it, it's just this really powerful tool. And you only plug in two numbers – your undergrad GPA, and your LSAT score. So, those are the only two variables this calculator pays attention to, and then, for whatever numbers you plug in there, it spits out the odds of admission for a whole range of schools, based on the previous year's admissions results. So, if you plug in those two numbers and you play around with those numbers – you sort of dial them up or dial them down, you can see the odds of acceptance move pretty much in lockstep as a result. So, I think it is fair to say that they correlate very strongly. But that being said, when it shows the odds, there are plenty of schools where the odds are going to come back in the middle – sort of 40 to 60%. And then you have to ask yourself, "Well, in that zone, what kind of applicant is actually getting in?" They're on the fence about you, basically, based on the numbers. So, it's in that middle zone where all those non-number factors – what I call the "soft factors", and the soft parts of the application most come into play and have the most power to tip you from one pile to the other. So, those soft parts would include things like the essays, the recommendations, the interviews, how you position yourself and tell your story, your resume, your life experience. And then all this follow-up that you do after you submit your applications, or should be doing after you submit your applications. So, that's to give you a sense of those non-numbers factors. And then if the odds are really low – say they're coming back 10% – somebody's getting in.
- Alison Monahan: Right, it's not zero.



- Anna Ivey: Not many, but somebody's getting in. And there too, clearly, there's something else going on besides just the numbers. But at the same time, odds are odds, so it's a good way to manage your expectations. I think when people are putting lists together, we're all susceptible to magical thinking in one part of our lives or another, and I see that come up a lot when people put lists together. So I love the calculator, because it's just data. The data isn't judgy, the data isn't magical thinking, the data isn't Anna Ivey's gut instinct. So I really like to use that to anchor the whole process of putting a list together. And if the odds are really high and that makes that school a safety, then by definition, you're a big catch for that school, based just on the numbers. And then frankly, the rest of your application doesn't have to be great; it's okay just to be good enough, they're still going to want you. So, how those soft factors come into play and how much they matter, really depends on how hard that school is for you to get into.
- Alison Monahan: Right. I guess if schools say you're either on the cusp... I guess there's maybe two different categories too. So if you're kind of in that middle zone, what do you think schools are really looking for beyond the numbers to decide, "Okay, these five people all have the exact same LSAT, they have basically the same GPA." What are they looking at to decide, "Okay, we want this one and not that one?"
- Anna Ivey: Well, everybody comes into the process with different experiences and different things that they bring to the table. But I would say on a macro level, they want you to know yourself, they want you to have done that introspection to figure out, "Why are you here, knocking on our door?"
- Alison Monahan: Right, does this make sense?
- Anna Ivey: Making this really big investment of time and money. And even at a top law school, it's still an investment of time and money.
- Alison Monahan: Oh, for sure.
- Anna Ivey: And you could be doing lots of other things, and as we all know, the employment market is not great. Even coming out of a top law school can be a little bit of a slog.
- Alison Monahan: I'm definitely still paying back that top law school experience, so yeah.
- Anna Ivey: Oh my gosh, yeah, I think that's very common. So, they want you to understand why you're there. And what I find with a lot of applicants – at least when they're starting the process – in their minds they think, "Yes, I want to be a lawyer. I want to go to law school." Or their parents are on their backs to go or whatever the case may be. But if you ask them – and it's part of my intake process in our



questionnaire – we say, "Why do you want to go to law school?" And very often, people have very little to say in answer to that question.

Alison Monahan: It's kind of terrifying.

Anna Ivey: Which is fine at the start, but you're going to have to do that homework and that soul-searching and that research to really get to know both yourself and what you want and what you need, and then what schools match up with that. And sometimes going through that exercise leads to the conclusion that, no, you shouldn't be doing this. It's not a good investment; you should be doing other things. And that's fine too. There are days where I joke that I'm the anti-admissions consultant, because our priority is not just to push people into law school, and our whole team is very clear on that. Our priority is to help you do what makes the most sense for you, and sometimes that means, yes, go to law school. And at the end of the day, we'll always support you if you do want to go to law school, but this is all about managing expectations. So you have to know yourself, and that has to come through in the application, certainly.

And then you also have to think really about the totality of your life experience and think about, "Okay, what are the parts that are worth showcasing here? And where do I best show them off in the application?", because you have these different pieces of the application. That's a bit of an art and a science because you have to fit it into the four corners of that application. And it's not a long application – even the personal statement is two pages double-spaced. It's not Moby Dick. And so, if you are also thoughtful about what you cherry-pick out of your whole life to tell them about, and then convey it in a coherent and well-written way – those two things are huge. And a lot of people applying to law school don't have either of those; sometimes they might have just one of those two things. But if you really want to succeed in this process, you have to be good at both of those things.

Alison Monahan: I think that makes a lot of sense. And then, what about these people who are in that 10% who clearly don't have the numbers? It seems like something fundamentally different is going on there. What's going on there?

Anna Ivey: Yes, and I would say that those are people where you as an applicant looking at that, it's really not the kind of thing that you can go out and engineer.

Alison Monahan: Right. You need to have been a refugee or something.

Anna Ivey: Yeah, it usually has something to do with who you are, what you've lived through, and that's not something you just go out and do in a month or two. You can't change who you are either, and your life experience is just not quite that unusual. But if they're out there, right. In the spirit of managing expectations, I wouldn't put too much stock in those 10% odds. But certainly



there's no downside to applying if the application fee isn't a problem for you and you'd spend the rest of your life wondering, "Oh, what would have happened if only I had applied to Yale Law School?" or whatever – then apply.

Alison Monahan: "Could I have gotten into Harvard?"

Anna Ivey: "I could have gotten into Harvard." Now, I will say... And you and I both went to so-called top schools, right? You went to Columbia, I went to Chicago. And what I've noticed over the years with that calculator is that the top schools have been sort of opting out of participating in it.

Alison Monahan: Oh, interesting.

Anna Ivey: Which I find really kind of shameless and naughty, because I think this whole process should have more transparency rather than less. And I understand why they do it – they don't want you to look at those 10% odds and say, "You know what? I'm not even going to bother." For a variety of reasons, if you're interested in them, they would still like you to apply. I think they basically don't want people to get scared away, but the reality is, they are very hard to get into. But it's frustrating because if you look at the top 10 schools, they're the most likely to have opted out. So you have all this data once you go down a little bit further down the list, but for those top schools, you have less data. But I would say there are always proxies. So for example, if one year Penn is participating but Chicago isn't – that's fine, they're roughly proxies. You can use proxies to figure out your odds. Or if UVA one year is showing 25% odds, you know what? You can assume then that Stanford is going to be harder. So, you can just apply some common sense even when schools aren't participating. But yeah, that's a bone I have to pick, I think. Trying to make the process more cloaked and opaque is not the right direction.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I would tend to agree with that. Just tell people what their odds are and then they can make a rational decision about it. It's the same thing with OCI, you're getting all these weird things...

Anna Ivey: Yeah. They're grown-ups. Yes, exactly.

Alison Monahan: People are applying to firms they have literally no shot at, and that's fine for one or two, but don't do that for all 10. Well, on that topic actually, what do you think people should really be thinking about when they are assembling this list of schools to apply to? Should it just be like, "Hey, this is what it says my 70 to 90% chance is. I'm just going to apply to these 10 schools that are all over the country and hope for the best"?

Anna Ivey: Yeah. Again, that goes back to knowing yourself and why you're even doing this. And people's goals are different. And once you drill down and think a little bit



more specifically about where you want to end up and what kinds of things you want to be doing, you know what? You don't need to just go down the rankings. If you want to be a real estate baron in Louisiana – truly, you do not need to go to Harvard. You don't.

Alison Monahan: You should go to Tulane. Done.

Anna Ivey: You should go to Tulane. You should go to LSU. Once you drill down a little bit, you scratch that surface, you really have to come up with your own ranking. I think the U.S. News rankings fall apart very, very quickly once you scratch the surface a bit. To your point though, when we were chatting before and it was for one of my YouTube conversations, I believe, where you were my guest – we had a whole conversation about how you don't really have to think too much about what specifically you want to do when you're putting your list together. But I've thought about that some more. We're kind of our own little case studies, because I ended up doing entertainment law. I had nothing to do with entertainment law before law school or during law school. And then I think you had a similar experience on your end. And as I've reflected on that some more, I think you have the most freedom to just kind of go find yourself if it's a top law school.

Alison Monahan: Oh, for sure.

Anna Ivey: It's kind of an insurance policy because that brand is so strong and the alumni network is so well-connected that you have some freedom just to kind of, "Ugh, I'll figure it out when I get there, or after." I think that once you're outside of that very narrow band of top law schools, I think you owe it to yourself to really think carefully about what that law school is actually going to do for you, and that might actually have something to do with the curriculum. So anyway, I thought about it some more, and I think there is that sort of nuance that is worth adding. The other thing I would say is that I don't always recommend the same approach that I would for college admissions. So, when you're applying to college, you're used to, "Okay, I have to diversify my list, so I'm going to have the reaches and the targets and the safeties." And I think for college, that makes a whole lot of sense because there's so much data to support the fact that the difference between going to college and not going to college is huge. And so, you've got to go somewhere. So you've got to have those safeties on the list.

With law school, again, it's one of many things you could be doing. You don't have to go to law school, and it is expensive. And so, I would say as you're putting your list together, yes, you want to manage your expectations and be realistic, but at the same time you might decide, "For what my goals are, maybe they're fairly lofty. Maybe my goals really are only realistic if I'm coming out of these schools over here." I'm completely fine if your whole list is reaches, as long as you understand they are reaches and you might not be going to law



school at all with this list. And that might be the right outcome, right? You might decide, "You know what? I've got other options. I've got other ways to accomplish things in my life that I want to accomplish, so this only makes sense if it's this batch of schools over here." But again, that assumes you know yourself, that assumes you know the schools really well, and that just requires some time and some reflection. Not everyone does it. There's what I call the "spaghetti method" – you throw spaghetti at the wall and hope that something sticks. Or people just kind of very robotically go by the rankings, which actually gets tricky, especially if they're in a waitlist situation. Because if you get that call from a waitlist, you're not going to have a whole lot of time.

Alison Monahan: Right. I assume they don't necessarily want an answer on the spot, but probably within like 24 hours or something.

Anna Ivey: Yeah, they're looking to fill that spot right then and there. And sure, if it's Stanford calling, you're probably going to say "Yes". But once you're outside a very small number of schools, people go into a panic. They really fall apart during that waitlist stage because they haven't done...

Alison Monahan: And you're like, "You haven't thought about this?"

Anna Ivey: No, they haven't. They haven't done that hard work of really thinking about, "What is my own personal ranking?" Even before the pandemic, a lot of people don't visit law schools. They're trying to decide whether to accept an offer, and they haven't even set foot there. So, getting to the waitlist stage, or even the deposit stage, which is in April typically – that's really not the best time to be thinking about these things in a serious way. You should have done that a lot sooner. You really need to be thinking about that when you're putting the list together. And I would argue that also helps you in the actual application because even if, for example, a personal statement prompt doesn't say explicitly, "Why do you want a law degree? Why do you want to come here?" – in which case, you should have something sensible to say. A lot of law schools do interviews now, and almost certainly it will come up in the interview. And what are you going to say without sounding like a ding-dong?

Alison Monahan: Right, like, why are you in this interview?

Anna Ivey: Right. You can't just say, "Oh, rankings", right? So yeah, I would say, think about it in a serious way and think about it in the earlier stages rather than in the later stages, which is when a lot of people do it and then just panic.

Alison Monahan: I remember when I was applying, I definitely only was basically going to go to law school in New York, although I applied to some places in California, where I was living. And I'm pretty sure that a large part of the reason I did not get into Stanford was because I basically wrote an essay targeted for Columbia and then



sent it to Stanford but changed the name. And I think they could kind of tell that.

Anna Ivey: Yeah. At the same time, I actually think it's very helpful when people have a geographic goal. So, some people know, "Gosh, I really want to end up in New York." And maybe there's a stakeholder in this decision – there's a spouse or whatever, whose location also matters to you. Then I think it's fine to focus on a particular geographic area and then put your list together and, "Okay, these are harder to get into than those." But what I see very often is people just go straight by the rankings. First of all, there's something like 200 ABA-approved law schools out there.

Alison Monahan: Right, how do you pick?

Anna Ivey: What are you going to do? But they'll go straight on the rankings and they'll say – I think we talked about this before too – they'll say, "Oh well, I'll apply to law school in Colorado because it's ranked four slots above the school in Pennsylvania." And I'm like, "Have you been to Colorado? Do you know anyone there? Do you have any kind of network?"

Alison Monahan: Do you want to live in the mountains? Is that appealing?

Anna Ivey: It just doesn't make sense in the cold light of day. But I can understand how people get sucked into that thinking, so I think it's sort of our job to pull people away from that and look at it a bit more clearly.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, we definitely get some weird questions where I'm like, "Huh, you can't figure this one out on your own? Random stranger on the Internet, I will give you my opinion on what you should do with your life."

Anna Ivey: We try. We try.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, no, I think that's a key – to really know what you're thinking, know what you're looking for. In general, I think people who were more successful and happier that I knew in law school and afterwards, who are still actually practicing attorneys, most of them – they kind of knew what they wanted to do going in.

Anna Ivey: Oh, I agree 100%. I mean, I did not know where I wanted to go.

Alison Monahan: I didn't either, I was just like, "Huh, I want to live in New York. Whatever, I'll go to law school. That sounds good."



- Anna Ivey: When I think back or when I see now where people have ended up and what they're doing, I realize the ones who actually had a plan coming in really got more out of it.
- Alison Monahan: Oh, for sure.
- Anna Ivey: They were much more focused. They were focused not just in terms of what classes they were taking. They were also really focused with their OCI – their on-campus recruiting and the kinds of employers they were going after, and they were then able to sort of leverage that. Even the ones that aren't practicing law anymore, and that's actually quite a few, they were then able to leverage that legal experience into something bigger and better, but it was still because they had gotten themselves there. So, I think that is definitely the smarter way to do it, and I think it's not a coincidence that in most cases, those are also people who have been out in the working world before going to law school. I think that's so important. I think you will get more out of law school and you will be a better law student and you will be a better lawyer because of it. I think if your only goal is to be an academic, then fine – then you really only need academic experience and you need to know yourself in your academic life, but that's not the case for most people.
- Alison Monahan: That's really not a realistic goal for most people anyway.
- Anna Ivey: It's not, even people who want to be academics. I mean, talk about a brutal job market, my God!
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, I was like, "Are you at Yale? Okay, let's not have this conversation."
- Anna Ivey: It's just grim. Even coming out of Yale, that doesn't mean you're going to be teaching at Yale.
- Alison Monahan: Oh, for sure.
- Anna Ivey: Academia, full stop, is grim, whether it's law school or otherwise. But anyway.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's true.
- Anna Ivey: That's a different conversation.
- Alison Monahan: I have professor friends, and they're even a generation ahead of the worst of it. Alright, actually, let's switch gears a little bit because that leads into some of the things I wanted to talk with you briefly about. Let's talk about a few common scenarios, and you kind of just touched on this one. So, I'm applying right out of college, I really don't have a lot of exposure to the law, I don't have a lot of work experience. Is this going to be a problem for getting admitted?



Anna Ivey: It doesn't have to be a deal breaker. I mean, law schools do take people right out of college. Are you going to be a stronger applicant if you're not coming right out of college? Yes, and that doesn't even necessarily require a whole lot of exposure to law. But if you're coming right out of college, you haven't been out in the working world, and so, typically then, your only options to talk about when you're presenting yourself are things in the classroom that got you interested in the law. Maybe it was a kind of baby Constitutional Law class, or maybe it was an internship at a pro bono clinic or something. You've got to use what you have. And so, in those scenarios, that's usually what you have. There are instances where people's life experience has basically exposed them to the law – maybe they were immigrants or whatever the case may be – in which case, then you actually have a compelling personal story to talk about, because you've had that exposure to the law.

But in your hypothetical here, they haven't had a lot of exposure to law, so yeah, then you're grasping at academic experiences, maybe internships. And then I would say you really have to sound plausible when you're talking about your goals, the forward-looking part. If you don't have that much to talk about in the backwards-looking part – okay, let's talk about the forward-looking part. What are your goals and how is a law degree going to help you achieve them? And I will say that when you're writing about why law school and when people are really struggling with what to say, at least for two pages – I find that when I say, "Why law school?", that can be kind of paralyzing. When I reframe it as, "What problems do you want to solve?", all of a sudden they open up. So, I would say just reframe it a bit and think about what problems you want to solve and how does a law degree fit into that and you might discover it doesn't actually. Or there are six other ways I could kind of be effective in that way without having to have a law degree. Bottom line is, the law degree should add some kind of value for that goal, and then that's what you write about. So, maybe then you're more forward-looking because you just don't have that much in the past that is terribly interesting or compelling.

Alison Monahan: And what if I'm listening to this and I'm thinking, "Okay, you're making a compelling case that I shouldn't apply straight out of law school. But if I'm looking realistically at my options, my options are kind of working at Starbucks for two years." Do you think that is a benefit at all just by being out in the world, or do you think that makes no difference?

Anna Ivey: Oh gosh, I don't know that there's a right or wrong answer to that. I mean, a lot of people ride out recessions by going to grad school, right?

Alison Monahan: Yeah.



- Anna Ivey: Whenever the market turns ugly, there's what's called a "flight to safety", and then you think, "Well, then I'd rather just ride this out and have a degree at the end." But you and I both know a lot of unhappy JDs.
- Alison Monahan: Oh, for sure.
- Anna Ivey: And so, even in that scenario... There's this phrase – I don't know who came up with it – at this point it's a cliché, but the idea is if you're going to spend all this time and effort building a ladder to get to the top of the building, make sure the ladder is leaned up against the right building.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, well, I did this straight out of undergrad because I graduated not quite into a recession but basically...
- Anna Ivey: Yeah, I did too.
- Alison Monahan: I literally graduated a year early, moved to LA, got a job. The only job I could get was working at Eddie Bauer. And then I did temp stuff for a while, and then I went to architecture graduate school and that was kind of like, "Okay, sure, I'll do it." I didn't even want to be an architect. What was I doing? I don't know.
- Anna Ivey: Right. And so, I would say if money is no object – sure, go get a whole bunch of shiny degrees and occupy your time. I think for most people money is an object.
- Alison Monahan: I'm still paying for that degree too.
- Anna Ivey: Exactly. I think for most people there is a real cost to going out and getting a shiny degree, so you just really have to make sure that it's justified.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. Alright, well, let's switch completely. So I'm actually a non-traditional applicant, I have lots of prior work experience, maybe I have a whole other real career. Is this going to be a problem? And also, undergrad was a while ago. Is it still that important?
- Anna Ivey: First of all, I think admissions officers love those kinds of applicants. I wouldn't even necessarily call them "non-traditional" in this context. They love seeing that prior experience – work experience, life experience. And so, that is not in any way a liability or a negative. And it's so interesting because when we hear from what I call "older and wiser" applicants, they all assume it's a negative and they all assume, "Oh my gosh, this is something I'm going to have to massage or spin or compensate for." And I'm like, "No, no, no, no."
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. This is a good thing.



- Anna Ivey: This is a feature, not a bug. So, you certainly have a lot more to talk about and you probably have a whole lot more credibility about why you're taking this step. The part that's trickier is that because undergrad was a while ago, it's probably next to impossible to go back and get academic recommendations. And law schools do prefer academic recommendations. But that's all of us being equal, and they completely understand that that might just not be realistic, even with recent undergrads. If you went to Florida State or UCLA – good luck getting an academic recommendation.
- Alison Monahan: Hope you had a thesis advisor or something.
- Anna Ivey: We hear that all the time. A story I heard out of UCLA was, "I have this professor, I did really well in his class, but he said his policy is, 'I won't write a recommendation for you unless you were my teaching assistant.'" So, that's a problem even if you're not out of school for a long time. But admissions officers understand that reality, so that doesn't have to be a deal breaker at all. But the transcript still matters. Your academic performance is still really important to law school admissions officers, even if it was a longer time ago, and sometimes that requires some explaining. Maybe you weren't the best student back then, but you're also not that person anymore, in which case, write an addendum. You don't necessarily have to use your word count in your personal statement to explain that, but do write an addendum because otherwise they're going to look at your undergrad transcript – and this is true for any applicant – the reason they care so much about your undergrad transcript is not just because in the grand scheme of things they really prefer people who have distinguished themselves in some way, but more practically they use that as a proxy to try to predict how you're going to do in law school. So, they want to look at how you did previously in a demanding academic environment to try to get some comfort that you will do well in their own demanding academic environment. And so, if that older transcript is really not accurate with respect to who you are now and what kind of student you would be, then make that case, do it in an addendum. I think it's a harder case to make if it was really recent.
- Alison Monahan: Right, "I've changed so much in the last 18 months."
- Anna Ivey: Yeah. That's true even for a required disclosure. If you have three alcohol-related incidents that you have to disclose, a year later have you changed that much? I don't know. So the passage of time probably works in your favor in a lot of these cases, because you've had a chance to go out and grow as a human being.
- Alison Monahan: Rehabilitate.



- Anna Ivey: In one form or another. And what some people do is, they might have some kind of grad school experience before law school that shows a better track record academically than undergrad.
- Alison Monahan: Right, I was going to ask about that because sometimes people say, again, "Well, does it matter your grad school, that you did better?"
- Anna Ivey: It can, yeah, to the extent it supports that argument. So, I wouldn't say go to grad school just to get into law school. Again, this is the whole problem with just piling up shiny degrees. But if you're thoughtful about it – whatever the master's degree is or maybe a certificate – if it actually makes sense in terms of your trajectory and your goals and the story you're telling about yourself. For example, right now people are quarantined. There are some wonderful certificate programs out there. Penn is an example, they have wonderful certificate programs. Fine, if you want to learn how to read a financial statement or a balance sheet, which I argue every graduating law school student should know how to do.
- Alison Monahan: I would really like to have done that.
- Anna Ivey: Right. Fine, go take advantage of this quarantine and go do that, and then you have something to put on your resume. Or maybe there are just skills you need to refresh if you've been out of school for a while. Those are all good signs. So you can be a bit proactive about that.
- Alison Monahan: Even community college.
- Anna Ivey: Or community college. I still take classes at community college. I love community college.
- Alison Monahan: I know it's free in San Francisco.
- Anna Ivey: Yeah, there you go. I take classes at Santa Monica College, I love it. So, it's okay to be a life-long learner, and in fact I would argue that's what lawyers have to be.
- Alison Monahan: For sure, that's what you do. You basically walk into a case, at least as a litigator, and suddenly you're doing a case on hardware patent or whatever.
- Anna Ivey: Right. You always have to learn new stuff.
- Alison Monahan: Tires, I don't know, all kinds of different things. And you have to be an expert.
- Anna Ivey: Exactly.



- Alison Monahan: Let's switch gears a little bit. Talk to me about the LSAT. So people who are like, "I've never been that great at standardized test, but then I have really good grades. My LSAT is also not the best." Do they listen to this story?
- Anna Ivey: They'll listen.
- Alison Monahan: Do they buy it?
- Anna Ivey: Whether it actually moves the needle... They only have so much wiggle room to overlook the LSAT for reasons that are totally bigger than you and totally out of your control. They have to care about the LSAT because those get reported to the ABA that in turn factors into, that's where the rankings get the data from. So, even if schools don't want to participate, they don't really have a choice. The data is out there, are out there. I study Latin, so every once in a while I'll use it as the correct plural, but then I sound like a dork. It's interesting though – all these colleges are going test optional. Even before the pandemic, there was this big movement that was already in progress. Law schools have just sort of doubled down, just adding another test, like, "Well, if you don't want to do the LSAT, go take the GRE." They can't actually just abandon the testing requirement even if they wanted to, because that too is an ABA requirement; I would argue an absurd one. I think the role of the LSAT is just as suspect as standardized tests are in undergrad. But they're required for now, and so if you're not great at tests, I think your best argument is to be able to show, "Hey, when I took the SAT or the ACT, my percentile wasn't that great, but then I graduated in the top 10% of my college class. So there's just kind of a weak connection, there's a weak correlation between how I do on standardized tests and then how I actually perform, and I think that's what's happening here too." But at the same time, I think what other argument are you really going to make? If you just had a bad day during the test – well, go take it again.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. Well, and I think realistically, if you are someone who's just never performed well on standardized tests, the reality is you have to be thinking about the bar exam down the road, because that is the world's biggest standardized test.
- Anna Ivey: That is very true. That is true, and honestly, I think that it's really the only compelling argument in favor of doing the LSAT. I think the GRE is just a dumb exam, so I don't have a lot of respect for it. The LSAT is actually really hard. I think it's the hardest.
- Alison Monahan: It's rigorous.
- Anna Ivey: I think it's the hardest. Cognitively, it's the hardest of the standardized tests. Substantively, does it matter so much? Probably not, but in terms of how hard it is and how you have to study for it, I've seen people write an addendum where



they say, "Well, I have test anxiety and I freak out during high stakes tests." And I'm like, "Okay, that's not helping you to tell me that."

Alison Monahan: You're like, "Don't tell them that."

Anna Ivey: Because law school is full of high stakes test. And then of course, you have the mother of all high stakes test at the end, which is the bar exam. I took two different bar exams, two different states. At the time, they were both three days long. That's the kind of thing admissions officers actually have to worry about, because they have to report their bar passage rates. And frankly, it's not doing you any favors either. They don't want to set you up for failure.

Alison Monahan: Right. It doesn't make sense to take your money for three years and then have you not be able to pass the bar and never practice.

Anna Ivey: No. And shamelessly some schools do.

Alison Monahan: And are in danger of being de-accredited because of it.

Anna Ivey: Yeah, exactly, they're basically diploma mills. If the standardized test really is a huge problem for you, I would think very carefully about going to law school, not least because of this bar exam at the end.

Alison Monahan: Right. And if you do go, I think you need to be thinking about that literally from basically the early days.

Anna Ivey: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: "How am I thinking about passing this test?"

Anna Ivey: In an indirect way, I think it also has to do with cost, because the higher you push that score, the more schools are going to want to discount your tuition in order to get you, because they want your numbers, basically, for all those reporting purposes. So, the higher that number is, the less you might end up paying. And I would say if your score is really low and you're not able to get into a good law school – it doesn't have to be a great one, but maybe even a good law school is out of your reach – for the love of God, don't pay a lot of money to do it.

Alison Monahan: No.

Anna Ivey: And certainly don't borrow to do it.

Alison Monahan: That's what's shocking, is a lot of these schools that are pretty terrible are actually the ones with the highest debt loads, which is horrifying.



Anna Ivey: That's right, that's right. The last thing we would want for you is to go to law school and make you worse off than you were before, and that's been true for a whole lot of people.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, for sure.

Anna Ivey: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: No, I think it's an incredibly expensive decision for a lot of people. And the bar passage rates at some of these schools particularly in places like California are truly horrific.

Anna Ivey: Yeah, yeah.

Alison Monahan: I would strongly encourage people not to consider signing up for this unless they're pretty sure they're not going to be in that category.

Anna Ivey: Yeah. Because law is a legal cartel.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Anna Ivey: You're only allowed to practice if you have joined this brotherhood and jump through these hoops. There are other more versatile degrees out there. You don't have a cartel if you get an MBA, you don't even have a geographic restriction if you go get an MBA. And so if I qualify to practice in New York, I can't just go practice in California. I have to take a whole another bar exam and pass a whole another bar process.

Alison Monahan: Don't even talk to us about the California bar right now.

Anna Ivey: Yeah, it's very restrictive.

Alison Monahan: It really is.

Anna Ivey: Whereas an MBA, you could take that anywhere in the world.

Alison Monahan: Well, the people who want to do public policy or something, and they think they have to go to law school – it's like, you could go do a policy degree.

Anna Ivey: No. Go get an MPP, yeah. I have that conversation a lot. If you were really mission-driven in terms of public policy, you do not have to have a JD to go do that. Maybe you'd like to have a JD, but you don't have to have a JD. There are other ways.



- Alison Monahan: And there might be more interesting things to do.
- Anna Ivey: It might be more interesting, yeah.
- Alison Monahan: My sister went to SIPA at Columbia after I went to law school, and frankly, I think her job is more interesting than mine.
- Anna Ivey: Well, probably SIPA is more interesting than law school.
- Alison Monahan: Oh, no doubt, yeah.
- Anna Ivey: What scares a lot of people away who want the JD, who might be better served by an MPP – what scares a lot of them away is the quant component of MPP. In their minds, that's prohibitive. "I'm not good at math, so I can't go do this degree that's going to require math stuff." But one, honestly, you're going to need some math stuff as a lawyer too. That's just the reality of it, so buckle down, buckle down.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, suck it up, learn some algebra.
- Anna Ivey: Exactly.
- Alison Monahan: I think it's mostly statistics, frankly, which is actually a very useful skill set to have.
- Anna Ivey: It's so useful, oh my gosh. The story I tell – and it's anecdotal, it's a one-off – but I remember we spent an entire class once when I was in law school talking about, I think whether it was Judge Easterbrook got the regression analysis correct in footnote seven. That happens. It's not crazy.
- Alison Monahan: I remember a class where a professor asked somebody to subtract something and she just looked at him blankly.
- Anna Ivey: Oh no.
- Alison Monahan: And she said, "I don't do math." He's like, "It's basic subtraction." She's like, "Yeah, I can't do that in my head." I'm like, "Wow." It was like twenty minus eight.
- Anna Ivey: Wow, yeah.
- Alison Monahan: It was really bad. It was just like, "Whoa, okay, this isn't... How do you function in the world?"
- Anna Ivey: Well, that's where we're grateful for computers and robots and such.



- Alison Monahan: True, and our phones being able to do every math problem for us.
- Anna Ivey: Yes, yes.
- Alison Monahan: Alright, well, before we wrap up, because we're way over time, let's actually touch briefly on financial aid, since lawyers are not good with numbers. Do you think it's a good idea to intentionally apply places that you might not really want to go that you think you can get solid scholarships from, maybe to use as leverage? What is the gap here where that might really work?
- Anna Ivey: Yeah. The reality is that what gives you leverage is if the offer is from roughly a peer school. If it's not a peer school, if it's just in a different bucket of law schools in terms of prestige and all the rest of it, they're not going to care.
- Alison Monahan: Right. It's like, "Oh, you got this full scholarship to, like, the worst law school in your state. Congratulations."
- Anna Ivey: Right, so they know it's apples and oranges. But the smaller that gap is, then the more leverage you have, because then it's just more realistic that you might actually turn them down to go take this very close offer at a much lower price point. But as we were alluding to before, if you can get those numbers up, that is actually your best ticket to getting money. In the higher ed world – this is true undergrad too – they don't even call them "scholarships" internally; they call them "tuition discounts", which is all they are. Now, they call them "scholarships" because we all have egos.
- Alison Monahan: It sounds nicer, yeah.
- Anna Ivey: People feel wanted and special, but it really just comes down to, at the law school level, scholarships are a recruiting tool. They want you because of something that is good for them. There are some exceptions. Harvard, Yale, Stanford, I believe, are need-based only, so they don't even engage in this nonsense. But pretty much everybody else does engage in this nonsense. And so, whatever you can invest in getting those numbers up, ethically, legally – very often does pay for itself. Even if you end up going to the same law school that you otherwise would have with lower numbers, you're almost certainly going to pay less for it.
- Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, for sure. No, I think that's definitely true, and I think that people don't realize they can negotiate this stuff. It's like, it doesn't hurt to ask, and they can say "No".



- Anna Ivey: That's such a good point, and that's where truly non-traditional students, like first-generation or whatever, are at such a disadvantage. How would they know that this is just the opening salvo, that you can actually ask to negotiate.
- Alison Monahan: I remember at the admitted students day, I think someone from the admissions office basically invited us to negotiate our scholarships. And I was just like, "Oh, you can do that?" And I did, and it worked, and I was like, "Great!"
- Anna Ivey: Yeah. That's a really good example of an instance where the schools think they're being really transparent, but they're absolutely not. And I think it's a function of us all being in our own little bubbles. And so, things seem completely obvious to us that aren't to other people. I've had this conversation with some admissions officers, where some of them are skeptical about admissions consultants because they're like, "What value could you possibly add?" And I'm like, "Well, let me give you a list of things that people genuinely don't understand." There is that disconnect, and I don't think it's that they're trying to withhold information... Except for that calculator, so I'll keep rapping their knuckles for that, but otherwise... For example, I don't think they're terribly transparent about the fact that there's all this stuff that you can still do to advocate for yourself after you submit your applications.
- Alison Monahan: Oh, I've learned things recently, actually, from speaking to someone who worked with you, and I was like, "You can do that? Wow, go Anna!"
- Anna Ivey: And that's not the case in undergrad, right? With undergrad, you hustle to put together a really good application, get it in by the deadline, and then you just sit back and wait for them to decide your fate. You absolutely don't want to do that with law school, but is that obvious anywhere if you go to their websites or look at their admissions stuff? No. And so, people project their experience from undergrad onto law school, and that's a big mistake. But that's just one example, where they think it's all completely obvious and it's not. The system really does work to the benefit of insiders or people who can, one way or another, get access to good information. There's a huge information asymmetry out there, and it is what it is.
- Alison Monahan: No, I'm still learning things, and I think I'm a fairly well-informed person about this sort of thing. I literally learned something yesterday that just shocked me from one of your clients, and we can talk about that offline, but yeah.
- Anna Ivey: Yeah, now I'm really curious.
- Alison Monahan: I was very impressed. I was like "Wow, okay, awesome." Well, unfortunately, we are really out of time here. Any final thoughts you want to share on this?



- Anna Ivey: No, I think we've probably sounded very discouraging in this podcast, and I don't mean to sound unduly discouraging. This law school might absolutely be the right thing for you, and it might absolutely be a worthwhile pursuit. Again, this is about magical thinking. Don't succumb to it, be realistic about it. And I would say even right up until the bitter end, even if you've put a deposit down somewhere, if you decide, "You know what? This isn't the right thing for me" – walk away. It's okay.
- Alison Monahan: Or even after you start.
- Anna Ivey: Yes, walk away. Don't double down.
- Alison Monahan: We can give you lots of examples of people who walked away from law school and they're pretty happy about that. If it's the right thing, do it; if not, get out.
- Anna Ivey: I still get emails from people that I talked out of law school, and they still write me and they're like, "Thank you so much!" So, those are just as valuable, yeah.
- Alison Monahan: I think it's just about finding the right fit. It's like, is this the right thing for you? If not, then don't do it.
- Anna Ivey: But it's easy to be kind of lazy about it and be like, "Well, a law degree is always valuable and safe. I'll just go down the rankings and..." No, don't be lazy about it. It's too big a decision, it's too big an investment. So, don't be lazy is the bottom line.
- Alison Monahan: I agree. Well, thank you so much for joining us, and remind people where they can find out more about your work if they're interested.
- Anna Ivey: Yeah, my website is annaivey.com.
- Alison Monahan: Well, thank you so much for joining us, I've really enjoyed this.
- Anna Ivey: Thanks, Alison. Always fun.
- Alison Monahan: Great. Well, with that, we are 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 would really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to Lee or Alison at lee@lawschooltoolbox.com or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com. Or you can always contact us via our website [contact form](http://contact-form) at LawSchoolToolbox.com. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon!



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[The Ivey Guide to Law School Admissions, by Anna Ivey](#)

[Start Law School Right](#)

[LSAC – UGPA and LSAT Score Search](#)

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