Episode 34: Which Law School Should You Go To?

Alison Monahan: Hello, and welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're going to be talking about how to choose which law school to go to. Definitely an important topic. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan, that's me, and Lee Burgess. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so that you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can possibly be.

Together, we're the co creators of the Law School Toolbox, Bar Exam Toolbox, the Catapult Career Conference, and the Trebuchet Legal Career site. I also run the Girl's Guide to Law School. If you enjoy the show, please leave a review on iTunes. And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us.

We always love to hear from you, and you can reach us via the contact form on LawSchoolToolbox.com. With that, let's get started.

Lee Burgess: Welcome back. Today we're talking about how to decide which law school to go to, which is a very important decision to be sure.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely. And the key thing to keep in mind is that you're probably going to have to balance a variety of factors. Unless, of course, you happen to have a totally perfect LSAT score and a GPA and you really love cold weather because then you might be able to get money at Harvard or Yale.

But for mere mortals there are going to be trade offs and that's okay. But it's important to be smart about those trade offs and also, I would note, to really dig into this data that schools put out on job prospects, debt, that sort of thing. And one good resource for this is the Law School Transparency Project, which we can link to.

Lee Burgess: Great. All right, so what are these big things that you're supposed to be balancing? I think probably the first one is the prestige and ranking of the schools. Thank you, U. S. News and World Report.

Alison Monahan: Right, exactly. I mean, and when we say balancing, like, what are you, what are you balancing this prestige against?

Well, typically you're balancing it against cost, and also things like location. And then you've got these sort of, you know, personal preferences. Do you have family considerations? Things like that. Sometimes people are looking at specialty programs. You know, are you really into IP law? Well, there are certain schools that are great for that.

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Are you really into environmental law? Those are things you might have to take into account. And finally, of course, the big one is job opportunities, which, frankly, is really a subset of prestige, right?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think it is, and oftentimes your typical, even prestige rankings, may not really correlate with job opportunities, because sometimes schools that may not be ranked as high as others have great connections to their local legal marketplace, and maybe if you want to practice where that school is located, the job possibilities can be really good. So it's worth really digging into and trying to discover, you know, what are the opportunities that are going to be available to you in the areas that you may want to practice, you know, based on where alumni go and things like that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think this is a really key point is, you know, sometimes, I mean, it's hard to, you know, people talk about like the top, top, you know, 14 schools or the top three or whatever. I mean, the reality is if you go to someplace like Stanford or Harvard, You don't really have to worry too much about location, but even there, location still matters, you know.

I went to school at Columbia, and it was way easier to get a firm job for the summer in New York than any other place. And you might think, like, oh, Columbia is totally, like, national school, and that's true. You know, you could get a job in Chicago or in San Francisco or in LA.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: But it was harder.

Lee Burgess: Right. Yeah, and I think some schools, it's easier to, you know, have that national reach than others, but if, you know, you want to practice, you know, in Florida, you need to ask yourself if going to school is In Chicago is the best idea.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think, you know, sometimes it kind of cracks me up, to be honest, because we get some emails from potential students who are looking, you know, that have been admitted to different places, and it's clear that they just sort of applied to, like, the top whatever schools and maybe, you know, it doesn't have to be like the top, top schools, but you know, maybe they decided they were sort of in the range of like the top 50 to a hundred schools and they just applied sort of randomly to like 10 different schools all over the country.

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And they're like, you know, I got into like this school that's ranked number 30 and I got into this other school that's ranked number 40 and like the school that's number 40 is like right where I wanna live and practice. But the school at number 30 is, they're higher ranked. I should go there, right? And you're just like, are you kidding me?

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Like, I mean, I just want to kind of be like, do you have the necessarily, like, logical analysis skills to go to law school right now because what you're telling me is frankly so insanely stupid at some level that, like, I can't even believe I'm having to write you this email and I mean, I don't want to be harsh about it, but it's just like, Think about it. No that's a totally stupid idea.

Lee Burgess: Well, I think it's, you know, we, we talk about how you need to think about your career from day one. You know, when you're in law school. But, you know, you don't have to necessarily have your whole career path mapped out, but you probably need to be thoughtful, even when picking your law school, about what you think you may want to be doing and where you want to be located and, you know, what sort of opportunities you want when picking your law school because all law schools are not created equally.

Alison Monahan: Right, and I think that's a really key point. Like, and some people know, like, definitely I want to be in this certain area. You know, my family is here, this is where I want to live, I have some reason that's tying me here, In that case, the location of your law school is probably going to matter a lot more than than someone who's maybe straight out of college, you know, has worked just a year or two. They don't really know where they wanna live.

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: You know, that's a different set of considerations. So I think this, any advice that people are giving you necessarily has to be specific to your, your situation and what you're thinking.

You know, if you're very flexible in terms of where you get a job, the location of your law school matters a lot less.

Lee Burgess: Yep.

Alison Monahan: But if you know that you have to get a job in, you know, Kansas City.

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Lee Burgess: Yep.

Alison Monahan: Well, that means the location is going to matter more because the reality is you know, you have better opportunities to build connections in the local legal market if you're going to school in that market.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly.

Alison Monahan: You know, I know you went to school, for example, in San Francisco.

Lee Burgess: Right. And at that point, one of my main considerations for picking a law school was the fact that I was pretty sure I wanted to settle down in San Francisco. I had just moved here like a year before, well, while I was applying to law school, and I just fell in love with it, and I didn't want to leave the Bay Area, and I was pretty sure I wanted to, like, settle down here, practice law here, and so the idea of going to a school with deep connections to the community seemed like a really good fit, and they gave me scholarship money, which was, you know, helpful too.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, we'll talk about that little consideration in a minute.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, but you know, but it also does, I mean, that was part of it. It's like, I didn't really want to leave and go live somewhere else, but I also wanted to start, you know, building my legal community here, which I did and, you know, a lot of my friends from law school still live in practice here and I see them, you know, at lawyer events and refer clients to them and stuff like that all the time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And I think that's actually an interesting point that I hadn't really thought about until now. I mean, the difference between going to a more national school and a more like established locally connected school is, you know, when I think about the people I went to law school with they're all over the world.

Right, you know, I mean, I went to law school in New York. I'm in San Francisco. I mean, I have other people I know here. I've got, you know, some people say to New York, but people are literally everywhere. There's not like a tight, like localized,

Lee Burgess: Network.

Alison Monahan: Network. Yeah. I mean, of course there are a lot of people in New York City, but that's basically 'cause New York City

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Right, exactly. It's not the same sort of thing. And you know, people could just pick up and move on a whim. It's like, oh yeah, this year we're gonna be in Dubai, you know?

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So it goes back to thinking about. You know, maybe what you want that future to look like if you know. And I also think where you're going to be happy.

I mean if you hate being cold and that makes you depressed, maybe you shouldn't go to law school somewhere where it snows.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and that's the thing, I think people just really do not want to accept is a valid consideration a lot of the time. I mean for me though, like, I basically went to law school because I wanted to live in New York City.

So, as a result, I applied to Columbia, NYU, and then a few other places, you know, basically in California. I don't remember where else. Penn or something, I don't know. But the reality is I probably wasn't going to go to law school unless I went to New York because that was the whole reason I went.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I'm not saying that's like the world's best reason to go to law school, but yeah, you know, so in a way it was kind of like this choice that I just made like, oh, I'd like to live in New York for a little while, without really totally understanding the implications of what I had done. You know, that it was just much easier to get jobs in New York City and I didn't really think I would stay there.

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: But suddenly it became a lot easier to stay there, potentially.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: 'Cause even from a school like Columbia, and even with Deep Roots in San Francisco, which I had, you know. I'd gone to graduate school at Berkeley. I'd worked for three or four years in San Francisco. You know, I'd been in the Bay Area, California, for seven years.

It wasn't like I'd never set foot in the state and was suddenly trying to get a job. But I had firms turn me down for summer positions because they were like, oh, we don't think that you're going to come back. We think you're going to stay in New York.

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Lee Burgess: Yeah. And I've heard that a lot, actually, that it can be really hard to convince a firm that you do want to relocate because a lot of people aren't willing to do it.

Alison Monahan: Right or that you're really serious about it and you're not just looking, you know, particularly in a place that's a desirable place to live you're not just looking for like a fun summer. Yeah Which is what a lot of them kind of think.

Lee Burgess: Yeah

Alison Monahan: So I think, you know, I think to a certain extent I think location is an under, under sort of paid attention to metric for which school to choose.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And I think schools, to a certain extent, encourage that type of thinking. Like, oh, we have graduates, like, all over the country. It's like, well, that might be true. But, you know, you still have the bulk of them, the easy, there's still an easy pathway.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that that's true. And I think You know, the schools are mark especially now when law school numbers are dropping.

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: And while the law student numbers are dropping, the schools are marketing themselves to you.

Alison Monahan: Oh, absolutely. They've got like highly paid marketing consultants who are doing lots of like, you know, split testing research to figure out which marketing message resonates more with their potential student.

Lee Burgess: Right. And so it is important when you're, you know, reading their information or talking to their representatives, that you are sifting through that information, realizing that it's marketing information, and try and really get a sense of the campus. I think, you know, spending time on the campus, talking to students, if they give you access to students, which I hope they do,

Alison Monahan: Well, and if they don't that's a red flag.

Lee Burgess: Red flag, like trying, if they get you-

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Alison Monahan: Students, but recent graduates. Yeah. And not just ones who happen to have those plum jobs.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: You know, a cross section of recent graduates from the last one to three years, that's a more sort of useful group of people to talk to, because those people, a lot of them are pretty angry right now.

Lee Burgess: Right, and, you know, trying to meet professors and see if you can really picture yourself there. I mean, I think, I remember doing like new student tours and lunches and things like that when I was in law school and, you know, I thought one of the things that was very telling was that since I didn't go to a huge school, I had a really good relationship with a lot of professors and If we were at one of these lunches together, it was like, oh, hey, how are you?

You know, and you could hear the banter that he knew me well. And that would have been a signal to somebody who was looking at the school of like, wow, these professors actually know these students. Like they have this personal connection where at some schools, they, the professors and the students don't necessarily interact in that way.

And so you want to like, look for those clues based on what's important to you. For me. I had gone to a small undergrad. It was really important to me that I go to a school that had a lot of student professor interaction. That was just something that I knew that I wanted, and so I was always on the look for that when I was visiting other law schools and trying to check other opportunities.

Alison Monahan: Right, I think this is a good point. I mean, people often wonder, like, do I need to go visit schools either before I apply or after I'm accepted? I mean, personally, I think, after you've been accepted, you should, before you accept their offer, you should definitely visit. I mean, I think a lot of them will actually pay for you to come and visit if that's something that needs to happen.

But even before, I mean, you know, if you have the chance, it's a great opportunity. I mean, A, it can actually help your application, because you can say, like, oh, you know, I was visiting your school, blah, blah, blah, and, like, here's why I want to go, but, you know, just to get a sense of it, I mean, some schools are commuter schools, you know, is that something you want or don't want?

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You know, I mean, the reality is, like, as we said before, like, you know, if you don't like cold weather or, like, you don't like a big city or you don't like a rural area, this is three years of your life. Like, you have to live in these places.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and I had friends who really hated their law school experience for reasons that could have probably been avoided.

Alison Monahan: Like what?

Lee Burgess: I think like, living in an urban place where they hate urban places. Or going to a large school when they, when they wanted more of a community, you know, or going to a commuter school where they wanted a closer knit community where people like lived close to school, you know, or something like that.

Yeah. It's like, oh, well I don't, the school doesn't have much of a, you know, social community because everybody drives in and drives out. It's like, well, that's not a secret.

Alison Monahan: Right. Well, it's even, you know, think about, you know, even the difference between going to Columbia and going to NYU.

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: You might think like, oh, those are basically the same.

Like, they have pretty much the same ranking. They're both incredibly expensive. You know, they're both in New York City in Manhattan. Like, how different could they be? But they're really different, and part of that is because, you know, of the location of the school, even on this tiny island, like, a few miles can make a huge difference in terms of, you know, people, there's way less housing at NYU, so most people don't live right there, whereas at Columbia, like, you're basically stuck in Morningside Heights, and they own, like, half the city, so, you know, Like, there is, I think, in some ways, like, a bit more of a community vibe, for better or worse.

Like, some people might hate that and be like, I don't want to deal with these people all the time. I, I want a different social life. I'd rather live in, you know, Brooklyn and commute to school. But you can't do that really realistically at Columbia. So, you know, even these things where you think like, oh, they're basically the same on paper, they're actually really different.

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Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that's a really interesting observation that even within, especially in urban area where you can have lots of different law schools, the law schools can have lots of different characters to them.

Alison Monahan: Oh, I mean, that's definitely the case in the Bay Area.

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: You know, even in San Francisco, we've got like, what, three schools in the city, which are, you know, radically different from one another.

Lee Burgess: Oh yeah, and then even, and there's like, there's even smaller ones. I know that there's like four at least.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you lose count.

Lee Burgess: You start to lose count, but yeah, and those are different than, you know, the one in the East Bay, which may only be like 13 miles away, but But, you know, something at Berkeley is going to feel very different than something in San Francisco or down in San Jose or something like that.

Alison Monahan: Well, they just have different focuses, too. I mean, you know, even between, like, Berkeley and Stanford, those are going to be really different experiences.

Lee Burgess: And I think you can gain a lot by, you know, spending time at a school. And if you can you know, if you do get accepted to a few different options and you are trying to narrow them down, if you can just place yourself physically on the campus and try and imagine yourself there.

Like, does this make you happy? Do, you know, look around like, could I have coffee here, could I study here, can I live here? You know, that's, it's really important and I think it's gonna feed into your happiness overall.

Alison Monahan: Well, and also paying attention to, like, the students that you meet, you know, do I like these people?

But I want to spend three years of my life around people like this because the reality is different schools attract different types of people.

Lee Burgess: True.

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Alison Monahan: And if they're not your people, you know, that might be a factor in your overall happiness. And if you're not happy, you're probably not going to be as successful as you could be.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And other things to consider, I think, too, is, you know, if you are, say you're the first person in your family to go to law school, or you are kind of blazing this trail on your own and you know that you're going to want a lot of mentorship resources, or, you know, advisors, or, you know, ask those questions.

Find out what resources are available to you. Do the clubs have mentorship programs? Does the school facilitate that? You know, how can you figure out if there's going to be the support that you need to be successful at that school? It's, I think it's incredibly important.

Alison Monahan: Oh, absolutely. And I think, you know, if a school is not willing to work with you before you accept their offer on things like this, they're certainly not going to do it afterwards, you know, like they're on their best behavior before you say yes.

So if you reach out and you're like, you know, I'd really like to talk to some students in, you know, an affinity group that's really relevant to me, whatever it is, like women or some sort of ethnic or social thing, you know, whatever. And they're kind of like, oh, yeah, we'll set that up, and they never do, or they never respond, or, you know, whatever it is, you want those people who are like, yes, I will get you in touch with these people, and like, here they are, and this is why, you know, they're good people for you to talk to, and then those people will actually get back to you.

You know, it's a different sort of community feeling.

Lee Burgess: Yep, exactly, exactly. All right, so what about money? We can't talk about this without talking about money.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, the money thing, the money thing's huge, let's face it. You know, the average student debt coming out of law school is well over 100, 000 I think at this point.

Frankly, a lot of schools are simply not worth that amount of debt. You know, I think you have to be realistic about the cost of things.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think you do, and you have to look down the road. You know, it's not just, how are you going to get through school? It's how are you then going to deal with this debt?

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Alison Monahan: Yeah, which is enormous.

Lee Burgess: Which can be enormous, and depending on what you what jobs you're interested in, you know, if you're just like, well, I'll just get a big firm job and there'll be no problem, well, one, you may decide that that's not what you want, or two, maybe you're not either at the school or going to be presented to the opportunities to get those jobs.

Alison Monahan: Well, and even if you do get those jobs, you have to think like the, you know, 80 percent of people leave in the first five years. So it's not like you're going to spend your, you know, the next 20 years of your life in this job probably. That's just, you know, again, I guess you have to be realistic, you have to look at the numbers, and the schools, you know, I mean, I have a post on the Girl's Guide about this, like, they fudge their numbers, there's a reason they were getting sued, and are still getting sued, I mean, you know, and, and again, like these are, you know, they've got a lot of smart people working on this problem of how do we bet someone to pay us 50 plus thousand dollars a year to attend the school?

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: And you might hope that they have their student or potential students' best interest in mind, but the reality is not every school does. Yeah, that's so true. You know, know, like they have, they have mouths to feed.

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm. And something I know you've written about. is with scholarships and things like that, sometimes you can actually play the schools off each other to maximize, you know, scholarship money or try and get more money or, I mean, there are, there are even some options with if you are getting the option of getting some money to maximize what you could get from schools.

Alison Monahan: Yes, that is a good point. That's actually not where I thought you were going to go with the scholarship question.

Lee Burgess: I like to keep you on your toes.

Alison Monahan: Which I'll touch base on, touch yeah, in a second. No, but it's absolutely true. I mean, the reality is you can negotiate with these schools if you have a similar, if you have an offer from a similar school, but say, you know, Your offer is from somewhere in California, for whatever reason you want to be in New York.

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And it's a similar ranking. Similar doesn't have to be the same. You know, similar ranking is completely valid to send a letter to the financial aid office or however, an email and just say, look, you know, you guys are my first choice. I would really love to attend. But I have this very tempting offer from School X, is there any way you could reconsider my financial aid in light of this? And maybe they say no. But, you know, at least in my personal experience, they wrote back pretty quickly and they were like, yes, we'll match that amount of money. Yeah. Where I thought you, yeah, where I thought you were going with the scholarship question, it was actually a more cynical situation.

Lee Burgess: What? You thought I was going a cynical direction? I don't know what you're talking about.

Alison Monahan: Well, I think, I think it pays to be cynical about these scholarships because in a lot of cases, and we've written about this, the reality is it's numerically impossible for a lot of people who receive scholarships their first year to keep them after that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, which is awful.

Alison Monahan: Which is a disastrous situation to find yourself in.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and and I think you really have to read the fine print and really ask a lot of questions to see, you know, what your reality is going to be if you take that scholarship.

Alison Monahan: Right, and I think it's hard because people, you know, they see a GPA requirement of like a 3.0 and think like, oh, pfft, I totally got that.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: But if your school curves to a 2.0, getting a 3. 0 basically means you're like pretty close to the top of the class.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, so I think, I mean, who has ever seen the curve at their law school before they start?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, not a lot of people. Nobody, not a lot of people.

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I think if you're looking for it, I believe it's in the student handbook. So if you want to know what it is before you go to law school, I think you could ask for a copy of the student handbook.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, but you have to make sure you actually understand it. You know, get one of your, get one of your friends who's good at math to basically figure out like, oh, you know, If this is the, this is the midpoint of the curve and they're saying you have to do this, you know, that means that you've got to be in, you know, X percent at the top of the class.

And, you know, some schools, the scholarship requirements are basically just like, you have to be passing.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: And that's totally legitimate. Fine. But a lot of them are just set up so that, you know, They might give scholarships to 50 or 60 percent of the incoming class basically to get people to sign up and then take away a huge number of those after the first year and it's like what are you going to do if you find yourself in this situation, you know, you've worked really hard but you've fallen just below the GPA cutoff for your scholarship.

Are you now going to pay full price for the next two years at a school that maybe you wouldn't have gone to if you were going to pay full price?

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: It's not a great situation. Like, you can't transfer because your grades aren't that great.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You've already spent a year of your life and presumably some money.

Right. But you don't want to pay them full price for the next two years. Like, the schools are pretty smart.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, they've kind of got you over a barrel at that point.

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Lee Burgess: Yeah. And we get a lot of notes from students, you know, I'm at risk of losing my scholarship. I don't know what I'm going to do. If I don't pull my grades, I don't know what I'm going to do.

And-

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and sometimes you look at these and you're like, It's not happening.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: Like, You cannot mathematically get good enough grades to pull your scholarship or like to get to the point where you need to keep your scholarship. Like it's just like I know you're not good at math but like really.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So I was just thinking as we were talking about the scholarships, another thing to look at when you are evaluating schools is the rate at which they fail people. And this is an issue more in the, you know, quote, unquote, lower ranking schools. But there are some schools who will admit a wide variety of students and then they kind of let you duke it out.

And then they flunk out huge percentage of their class. That's kind of how they do it. And I think that that some people that is a really, really bad environment to be in. And,

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: Or if you want that environment, you just need to be really honest about it. So, you know, again, it's a, it's important to like talk to people about the reputation of the different law schools, because you don't want to get there and then realize that's what's happening and then not be prepared to play that game.

Alison Monahan: And I think another thing that people can be really unrealistic about is their own prospects of transferring, you know, so we get a lot of like, oh, well, I'll just go to the school that's not so highly ranked, but, you know, it's in a decent location, and maybe they're giving me a little bit of money, but I'm sure I'm going to be able to transfer.

It's like you should, I mean, I always tell people you should not start at a law school that you are not willing to graduate from.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's a really good point.

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Alison Monahan: You know, because the reality is, you know, if you're at a school that a lot of people try to transfer out of, it's going to be extraordinarily competitive, and there's just really no way to say how exactly you're going to do.

Right. You know, I think you have to sort of plan for the average outcome at your school, assuming that you stay there the entire time, you know. So, what is the average graduate of the school making? What is the average graduate, you know, what do their job prospects look like? Where do they work? Assume that you're going to be that person.

But, you know, I think incoming law students, they did a funny survey where they said, you know, how many of you think you're going to be in the top half of the class? And it was like 90%. You know, how many think you're gonna be in the top 10%? It was like 50%. So I think people just have to sort of think about these cognitive biases and sort of catch yourself when you're thinking like, oh, well, you know, I've got a higher LSAT than average at this school, so I'm sure that I'm going to be at the top of the class.

That may be true, and it may not be true.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think you just can't bank on it going in.

Alison Monahan: Oh, exactly. It's like you cannot, you can't assume that you're going to be at the top of your law school class. Like, you know, you can do things to try to put yourself in that position and great, You It's really competitive and it's a little unpredictable.

And yeah, I mean, you know, you just have to be realistic about the cost of these things. Like, you know, whether you're going to lose your scholarship and how likely it is you're gonna be able to transfer and all these sort of things.

Lee Burgess: Oh, for sure. What about also like, Lots of life considerations, you know, people who are, who have families that are going to a law school, you know, it may be important for you to look at the time that they offer classes, you know, if that's gonna balance with-

Alison Monahan: Yeah, or like what type of housing is offered.

Lee Burgess: Right, what type of housing is offered.

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Alison Monahan: You know, do they have, like, you know, if you're going to school in a place with a high cost of living, like, does, and you have a family, does the school offer family housing?

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: You know, if not, like, where are you going to live? Right.

Lee Burgess: And are you going to have to commute?

Alison Monahan: You have to commute, exactly.

Lee Burgess: 90 minutes a day in the car can be really grueling when you're trying to keep up a law school schedule.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. And you know, people think like, oh, I'll study like by listening to tapes in the car. And it's like, you know, you're drained after an entire day of classes plus an hour and a half commute in the morning.

You're sitting in traffic. Like, you know, does this really make sense?

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Exactly. So you just have to, you know, play this all through. I think looking at the class schedules that are offered is really important too. You know, some schools, you really can't get through without taking night classes and at least once or twice.

And if you have certain family obligations or other personal life obligations, maybe you can't take night classes. You know, maybe getting home at 10 o'clock at night is not an option. And so you need to just Like really think it through. 'cause you don't wanna get into a position where it's like, well I need these bar classes to graduate, but why this year are they only offered at night? And then your school's gonna be like, 'cause they are.

Alison Monahan: Right. Like that's where they're always offered, you know?

Lee Burgess: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: We have an adjunct, you know, it's like when I took evidence, it's like we have an adjunct who teaches evidence this semester and you know, he's a, I think it was the US attorney or something during the day, and everybody knew if you wanted to take evidence your second semester, this is who you were gonna take it from.

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And it was gonna be from six to nine. Yep. That, the school is not apologizing. They're like, he's a fantastic professor. Everyone loves him, but this is when the class is offered. Sorry.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. So, you know, really-

Alison Monahan: It's the same thing. It's the same thing with like, you know, any sort of thing that if there's something really you're interested in and like it's a deciding factor for going to the school.

So maybe it's a clinic, you know, you're like, oh my gosh, like this is exactly the work I want to do and I have to get into this clinic. Well, you need to find out before you sign up how likely that is.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, a lot of these clinics are highly competitive, or you can only take them certain years, or, you know, after taking certain classes, You know, you just want to get a sense of like, if I want to take, I mean, or even just a clinic in general, if I want to take a clinic, how likely is that to happen?

Because at certain schools, it's pretty much guaranteed you can get like a clinic but not everywhere. Or like moot court or, you know, an externship or whatever, like just find out this information. Like don't assume that it's all going to work out.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I guess it's the bottom line.

Lee Burgess: I think that's so true.

Alison Monahan: And this is the same thing, you know, with costs. I'm thinking about like. A lot of schools have loan repayment options and a lot of these sound fantastic.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: When you look at the brochure and you talk to them, they're like, yeah, you know, it's so great. Like, we'll pay your loans back and you can have your, like, hippie job and blah, blah.

And you talk to people who are actually doing it, and they're like, that's not the way it works. You know, like, that's just not the reality of what, you know, of

what you're signing up to. Like, here are the downsides. Like, as soon as you get married, like, you lose your loan repayment, you have, you know, 1, 500 a month in loans when you're making 30, 000 a year.

Or, no, it doesn't actually cover this particular type of job. Or, you know, you have to submit, like, really onerous documentation. You know, it's all these things that. You know, the brochure version of law school is not necessarily the reality and it's really important to talk to people who are kind of In the position that you would like to be in and just find out what their experience has actually been like because frankly, a lot of them are pretty pissed off and they'll tell you.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, so true. Can we take a moment to talk about online or kind of alternative law schools?

Alison Monahan: Oh, yes, why don't we?

Lee Burgess: Okay, so we get a number of emails a year from students who are looking into online law schools. Is it kind of an alternative, to you know, the traditional setting usually because they want to work and go to law school at the same time or maybe they do have family obligations and they think that they can balance that way and hey, we run an online business and I offer online courses and it's not like we don't think the online platform can support, you know, a lot of educational can, you know, You're able to learn things from an online community, but if you're really looking at those school options, it is very important that you spend some time really researching, you know, how many of those students end up graduating, how many of those students end up passing the bar exam, how many of those students end up becoming employed, because although online law schools have been out there for a while, those numbers are not great, and they're still expensive.

Of course, they're not as expensive as some of the other law schools, but you're still, you know, shoveling out lots of money. You're probably not working as much. So that's costing you extra money It can take a lot longer than traditional law school experience and it's it's not necessarily the easy answer that it can look like when you first maybe go research it.

Alison Monahan: Right, I think the same thing applies to non ABA accredited schools, you know, it's I mean, again, like, we get these emails, like, should I go to this non accredited school? And it's kind of like, well, you know what, I mean, I'm not going to tell you what to do with your life, but if you can't get into an ABA accredited school, I'm thinking maybe you need to retake the LSAT or, you know,

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because the reality is, like, you know, and then, you know, people go to school for different reasons.

Like, if you just have an intellectual interest in law and you don't ever plan to practice, well, fine, you know, great. If somebody else is paying for it, that would, sure, who wouldn't want to do that? Interesting. But if you're paying for it, and you're expecting to actually get something out of it in the end, you know, you have to be, I think, really careful about what you're signing up to.

Lee Burgess: I think that's true. And again, you know, I think people forget to look at the end game. And for me, one of those statistics is bar passage. And, you know, we go-

Alison Monahan: You can't pass the bar, you cannot be a lawyer.

Lee Burgess: Right. I mean, if less than 50% Of the student body is passing the bar. Even at some ABA accredited schools, that is what you see right now in California especially, you know, you need to sit there and think, so the half of the people in your classroom will fail.

Alison Monahan: And who have gone to school and studied and tried hard and paid tons of money, they're still going to fail the bar.

Lee Burgess: And pass law school like they all graduated, you know? Yeah, exactly. So it's very important that you really, seriously think about that, and that doesn't mean that, you know, you can't go to a school with a low pass, bar pass rate and not succeed, of course, you know, they're also 50, half of the people pass, right, but you just need to be honest about, you know, weighing your options. And if you are somebody who's maybe struggled academically, traditionally, and you are saying, well, I really want to become a lawyer, but I can only go to this school, but, you know, 1 in 10 students, which I think is one of the last statistics I saw about online law schools, actually pass and get their license.

Are those good odds for me?

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: I mean,

Alison Monahan: I'm gonna go with no.

Lee Burgess: I think for a lot of people, the answer is no. Maybe not everybody, but for a lot of people, maybe it is no. So you just have to really ask yourself some very hard

questions. You know, if you're looking at an unaccredited law school where, you know, 30 percent of the student body, 40 percent of the student body passes the bar, are you willing to take that gamble?

You know, that you're going to be that part of the 30%.

Alison Monahan: Well, and some of it, you know, like in California, there are all these other hoops you have to jump through, too. Like, you know, if you're, you might have to take the baby bar after your first year, and it's like, look at the pass rates on the baby bar.

Like, they released this. You can see exactly who's passing, and the pass rates are low.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: That means you might do this for a year, and then you're not even allowed by the state to continue.

Lee Burgess: Right. Other things, you know, I think there are some really exciting things happening with the apprentice programs that some states are doing where you can become a lawyer without going to law school.

But again, it's very important that you really learn about what that journey looks like, you know, and there are, you know, for instance, in California, you have to take the baby bar, you still have to take the bar exam, you're pretty much responsible for preparing for that stuff all on your own, you know, you have to really own that experience.

And so as much as it might sound great to say, well, I'm not going to go to law school, I'm going to work, sure, that sounds great, but do you really know what that's going to be like, and have you talked to people who have done it, have you talked to people who have been successful doing it?

Alison Monahan: And who have been unsuccessful.

Lee Burgess: And who have been unsuccessful. And do you really understand what you're getting into?

Alison Monahan: Because I think a lot of people who are unsuccessful probably worked really hard, and they thought like, oh yeah, I've got this, and then they get into it and they're like, wow, this is so much harder than I realized.

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Lee Burgess: So, you know, like I, like we've been saying this whole time, a lot of it is just about being thoughtful, really spending time researching your options, weighing what's important to you, but making sure that you're making educated decisions, so when it's at all avoidable, you're not surprised by reality.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, this is, this is the time to use those supposed logical reasoning skills, reading comprehension skills, all these things that, you know, you've theoretically developed before you go to law school to really critically analyze what am I signing up to?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, do a risk analysis.

You're going to be a lawyer. Like, this is what you do. What are the risks? Can I live with those risks? Like, what are my odds? This is like the stuff that you need to do to be a lawyer anyway. So, you know, apply that same set of reasoning to deciding which law school to go to. And, you know, again, I mean, I don't want to sound too, like, down on the schools, but you have to be skeptical.

Yeah. You have to think about the incentives. You know, their incentive is to fill their class.

Lee Burgess: Absolutely.

Alison Monahan: And that does not necessarily align with your incentive, which is probably, if you're going to law school, to, you know, pass the bar, get a decently paid job, and be able to pay your loans back.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And, you know, sometimes people think, like, oh, I should just go to law school because, you know, I don't have anything else to do, or it'll make me, like, more adult or whatever, but the reality is you're better off working three years, like as a barista, or in retail and coming out of that with nothing than you are going to law school and not being able to pass a bar and having $150,000 in debt.

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: Like, be the barista. Yeah, like seriously.

Lee Burgess: Are we going to make that the title of this podcast? Be the barista.

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Alison Monahan: Be the barista. But I mean, really, like, you are actually in a better position at that point because you're not weighed down by this debt. Yeah. I mean, I just don't think people, a lot of people are really that realistic about the debt load that they're taking on.

And, you know, we see the other end of it where people are like, this is the worst decision I've ever made in my life.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Like, I can't pass the bar, I don't even want to be a lawyer, I have all this debt, it's not dischargeable, I could never get rid of it, like, what am I gonna do? Be the barista.

Lee Burgess: Be the barista.

Do your research and be the barista. That being said, you know, plenty of people can be happy in their law school choices. Just, like most things, just be honest about what you're getting into and know, you know, know what you're taking on.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. It's like, do not sign on the dotted line for those student loans until you really understand what you're doing.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: Well, with that, we're out of time.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, we're about out of time. If you have enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave us a review and a ranking on iTunes. We'd really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. We usually release episodes on Mondays.

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