Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Alison Monahan: Hello and welcome to the Law School Toolbox Podcast. Today our episode is for all those people getting ready to start law school who are wondering, what should I be doing to get ready? Do I have to ruin my whole summer or do I need to do nothing? We've got the answers. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan, that's me, and Lee Burgess.

Our goal is 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, Bar Exam Toolbox, the Catapult Career Conference, and the Trebuchet Legal Careers 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. You can always reach us via the contact form on LawSchoolToolbox.com, and we'd love to hear from you. With that, let's get started.

Lee Burgess: Welcome back. Today we're talking about what incoming law students should be doing or thinking about this summer to get ready. If you're heading to law school soon, this episode is for you. But first off, let's just get this out of the way. Alison, are you going to flunk out of law school if you ignore our advice and do nothing at all?

Alison Monahan: Well, I mean, I guess it's possible, but I tend to doubt it. I mean, you know, the reality is people need different levels of preparation to feel prepared for a new experience. And I think your goal going into law school should be to be as prepared as possible in every sense. So, you know, prepared for the academics, prepared for life, prepared emotionally, prepared physically.

And some people, you know, you might want to read some books and get ready, and other people, you might just want to sit on the beach, and that's totally fine. I mean, I think it probably wouldn't kill you to do something. This is a huge investment of time and money, and you want to make sure you're ready for it.

But I don't think you need to go overboard. I mean, what are your thoughts on this?

Lee Burgess: I agree, and I think everybody And it comes to the law school experience with a different set of skills. And, you know, whether or not you feel prepared is such a personal thing. And, you know, for me, I was working right before law school.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

So although I did take a vacation and I went to Costa Rica that summer I pretty much worked until a couple weeks before law school because I was trying to save money.

Alison Monahan: I did the same.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Luckily, when I gave notice, my boss was crazy and tried to fire me, so I didn't actually have to work those last two weeks.

It really helped.

Lee Burgess: That does really help.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I was moving across the country, and I mean, to be perfectly honest, that the fact that I ended up not having to work the last two weeks that I was planning on working was really probably the only thing that allowed me to show up in any sort of coherent, stable, like, calm form, because I had definitely underestimated how long it was going to take to move my entire life 3, 000 miles.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So I think no matter what, you just have to look at your situation and, you know, make a list of the things that you need to do that will help you feel prepared, because I don't think you want to be running into law school class, like, harried and freaked out by a change of living situation, or have no idea what's happening, or have not done the reading before class.

You know, and things like that.

Alison Monahan: No, I mean, one of my roommates who, she was a first year when I was a second year, and she got in, I think, you know, sort of admitted or something at the last minute and didn't have housing and she was literally couch surfing in New York for several, the first several weeks of class.

And then one day it kind of got dumped on our doorstep and you know, housing people had just called her and been like, Hey, you have a place to live now. You know, that was really chaotic for her. Not to say there's anything she necessarily could have done in that situation to make it better, but it was definitely, like, a very chaotic introduction to school.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and that's, I mean, law school and a change of career, especially if you're doing that, can be stressful enough. You don't need to add an unnecessary stress if it can be planned for.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, at the same time, you don't need to go overboard. I mean, some books will tell you that you need to sort of get, and pre-read entire supplements for like every possible class that could maybe be taught at your school, whether you're gonna take it or not take it.

I mean, frankly, that's a little absurd, I think. Yeah. You know, but again, like, if you know that that's something that's going to make you feel better, I don't think it's necessarily going to be that useful, but if you want to do it, go for it.

Lee Burgess: Go for it. All right, so if people are wondering, like, what are these lists that we're talking about, you know, this personal list of things you should consider or try and get done before law school, why don't we run down some of the things that we think you should maybe think about.

So let's just start with, like, life because I think getting your life set up is one of the most important things you can do before law school.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. And this is one of those where it depends a lot on your personal situation how soon you can do this. I mean, you definitely don't want to wait too long on any of these, but at the same time, you know, if you're listening to this episode when it comes out in April, And if you're not starting school until August, you know, you might not be able to figure out some of this stuff today, but that doesn't mean that you don't want to be thinking about it.

So, I mean, the biggest one for me is just the most obvious, where are you going to live?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's a big one.

Alison Monahan: And along those lines, like, are you going to have roommates? Are you going to live by yourself? You know, I mean, the reality is, a lot of schools are in places with really high housing costs these days and really tight rental markets, so, you know, and maybe your school provides housing, and that's awesome if they do, probably, but, you know, if you're on your own in a place like San Francisco, and you're like, hey, I'm going to, you know, whatever school, and I've got to find a place to live, That's going to be tough.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Lee Burgess: It is, especially if you're relocating because, you know, house hunting, it used to be that you could just roll into a city over a weekend, you know, see some places and figure it out. In some markets, I think San Francisco is one of them, it's really not possible to do that.

Alison Monahan: What is, I mean, honestly, like, I tried to do that when I went to grad school at Berkeley.

I had no idea. I was like, oh, I'm living in LA, I'll drive up for the weekend, I'll find a nice place to stay and I'll go home. In like March and I was starting and, you know, whatever it was, August. It was a nightmare. It was like, it was simply not possible. Like I had a totally unrealistic idea about what the rental market was like.

And as a result, I ended up having to live in a, an undergraduate student co op my first semester with like 200 people. I mean, it was like, it was unbelievably horrible. And you just don't want to be doing that.

Lee Burgess: No, no, you really don't. Like, if it's avoidable, you definitely don't want to be doing that.

So, I think it's really important to think ahead, you know, what can you afford? What neighborhoods do you want to live in? I think that's something else that happens when you move to a different city is you can start spending a lot of time on Craigslist, but if you don't know what neighborhoods are, you know, good, or not as good, or safe, or not as safe, depending on what you define as safe, not as safe.

Alison Monahan: Well, or like what your commute options are, you know, if you have public transit, are you going to have to drive, house parking?

Yep. You know, these are all things that you've got to, got to get some like on the ground information about, ideally.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, for sure. And if you have friends that live in the cities, you know, talk, start talking to them, see if you can go visit. Spend some time walking around. I always, every time I move to a new place, we always do the walking around at night test, you know?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, definitely. Because they're going to look really different during the daytime.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Lee Burgess: Exactly. And it's like, would I feel comfortable coming home by myself?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, or walking, you know, from like the nearest public transit stop to the place you're thinking of living at nine or ten o'clock at night, because you're going to be doing that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, on a regular basis.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I mean for me, you know, it's like I live near 16th and Mission Barton. I don't really feel that comfortable walking there at night.

Lee Burgess: It's not my favorite Bart stop.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, like, you know, I'd do it, but it wouldn't be my first choice.

Lee Burgess: Right, exactly. Exactly. So these are things that you definitely want to consider.

And if you are relocating to a new city and it is possible to spend some time there, I would just do that so you feel a bit more comfortable. You know, other things that you want to think about is like, what are you going to do for food? Are you going to live near a grocery store? You know, what's your food budget?

Do you want to live near takeout options? When I was in law school, I lived in a part of San Francisco that has really great cheap ethnic food, and I lived off great cheap ethnic food during law school.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely.

Lee Burgess: You know, and that was actually one of the things that I was excited about, about that neighborhood, is I could, you know, walk by a bunch of places where I could quickly grab food because I'm not a big cook, so.

Alison Monahan: Well, and you're just not gonna have a lot of time to do cooking.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's true.

Alison Monahan: And, you know, now you think like, oh, well, if I'm in a major city, I can just Instacart everything. It's like, that gets expensive in school. You know?

Lee Burgess: It does.

Alison Monahan: You're not a working professional at this point. That's who that's designed for.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Lee Burgess: That's true, but I will say I am obsessed with Instacart myself.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, see, for you it makes sense, but for me, I'm like, I live three blocks from like the place they're delivering from, so I'll just go to the grocery, right?

Lee Burgess: I know, very true. All right, so what about other life things, like where you might work out?

Some schools have gyms. My law school had a really nice gym that you could get a membership to, but you know, you probably want to take care of yourself and neither have a yoga studio if that's what you do, or CrossFit Gym, if that's what you do. So you want to do some research so you have these resources in place before you start school.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think, you know, it just makes sense if you're choosing between different places to live to really think about your creature comforts. You know, it might seem absurd to be like, well, I'm going to move here because there's a nearby yoga studio. But if that's something you like to do, That's going to improve your quality of life.

You're going to be more likely to go. And the same thing, you know, Are you in a religious organization? You know, is there a relevant house of worship nearby?

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: You know, how are you gonna get there? That sort of thing. I mean, I think the other like really major issue in terms of financially and just practically is are you gonna need a car?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that that's very true. Because cars can become huge headaches if you really don't need them.

Alison Monahan: Right. Or if you do need them, it can be a headache if it's not reliable.

Lee Burgess: Exactly, exactly. And depending on what city you are planning on locating yourself or where in that city parking is a huge problem.

Alison Monahan: Oh God. And expensive.

Lee Burgess: Expensive parking tickets.

Alison Monahan: Towing.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Lee Burgess: I know, exactly. I did get my car towed once in law school from a McDonald's parking lot. Oh God. And that was unfortunate.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I got mine, I got mine towed in Berkeley for a football game.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, but, and it had our my friend and I had our laptop bags in the trunk.

Alison Monahan: Oh, God.

Lee Burgess: And it was not very far out from final exams. And we were both losing our minds when we walked back and realized, like, my car was gone.

Alison Monahan: Wow.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you don't want that to happen.

Lee Burgess: No, no. So, everything was fine, but still, we were both freaking out.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and the thing is, if you have a car and you need to rely on it, you need to make sure that car is reliable.

You know, we hear a lot of stories about people who sort of start this downward spiral midway through the first semester because, like, well, my car broke down and then I couldn't get to class and then I stopped going and then, like, you know, that needs to not happen. You know, whether it's like redundancy and like, are there people you can carpool with?

Is there some other transit option? You know, a lot of places in the country, it's really difficult if you can't drive.

Lee Burgess: It's very true. The other thing to think about, I think we mentioned it a little bit with public transit, is if you're going to be a commuter student, make sure you really appreciate what that's going to be like.

Because I think I had some friends who commuted. Into San Francisco for a variety of reasons, and the hours spent commuting really started to weigh on them, you know, because your days can get very long in law school, and then if you spend another hour each way in the car or on the train, some people don't mind commuting.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

I even saw an article, I think it was on the New York Times or in the Atlantic, about how some people actually relish the commute.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I saw that too.

Lee Burgess: Did you see that? But I am not one of those people myself, but If you're not one of those people, you have to really make sure that that's not going to make life even harder.

If that's the situation you're in, then it's a situation you're in, but if you have choices you can make, make sure you're just thoughtful about those choices.

Alison Monahan: Well and some of it depends on the time of day. Like, I don't mind, you know, when I was living in New York for law school. I didn't and I didn't have to commute daily.

But, you know, if I had to commute some place like a job or something, it was okay if it was off hours. But if you're talking because then you then you put on your iPhone or your iPad or whatever your, music basically. Put in your headphones, you know, you get out your book or your magazine and you read for a half an hour or 45 minutes and you get to the other end.

But if you're dealing with like rush hour, commute hours, totally different scenario. Like you're not going to get anything done.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's true. Alright, so getting to school, big deal, I would spend some time getting there.

Alison Monahan: Getting there reliably, getting there at the time of day you need to be there.

You know, just things about like, well, if you're going to be on campus all day and you're commuting, where are you going to eat? Where are you going to bring stuff with you? You know, these are the things that it might seem silly to think about now, but you're not going to have time to think about them, you know, the third week of class when suddenly you realize you've been eating nothing but pizza for three weeks.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and actually, that is something I didn't really plan for in law school when I got there was the fact that it was kind of like high school like I needed to bring a lunch, sometimes I would actually have to bring lunch and dinner if I was at school, if I had a night class or something, I would end up being at school the entire day, and you can only eat so many noodle bowls or whatever we had and

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

little we had this is this little shop as part of our law school that did not have great food options, and then you realize you're spending 10 or 15 on this noodle bowl that was awful and made you feel bad, but yeah, I mean you need to really think about that.

And so planning, the fact that I had to bring multiple meals with me to school every day was like an additional level of planning I had not prepared for.

Alison Monahan: Well, and a lot of people don't know how to cook. Yeah. You know, like one thing you might wanna do this summer if you know that like you literally don't know how to boil pasta.

Is you might actually want to spend some time, like, coming up with some recipes and really learning how to cook basic stuff so that you can prepare food for yourself and keep yourself alive.

Lee Burgess: I think actually one of our tutors wrote a great blog post that we'll put in the show notes about the, his favorite recipes with a slow cooker and how the slow cooker changed his life, yes, because he was able to kind of cook and I am a big slow cooker fan myself, but you can cook a lot of food and it's very low maintenance and part of that is having to plan ahead or cook on the weekends so you have, you know, multiple meals. It can get a little boring but it's definitely better than eating pizza or take out every single meal.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, any of these sort of, like, life tasks that you would think that grown ups should know how to do by now, but, like, a lot of people don't know how to do laundry. You know, it's like, okay, maybe you can send your laundry out, but, like, you probably, you know, you might want to go home and ask your parents, like, hey, can you show me how you do laundry?

I think you really need to know how to do this.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, yeah.

Alison Monahan: I mean, it sounds incredible, but, you know, like, you can't just buy new clothes all the time.

Lee Burgess: No, and I think, actually, that leads to another point, which is, if you haven't sat down and really worked on your budget, Yeah. I think that is something to do over the summer.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

You know, what, how much money are you getting from financial aid, or if you still have, you know, savings, or whatever you're living off of. Take some time to really think about how your lifestyle either is gonna change, or not change, because, I know for me, I was a working professional and you were too before law school, and then all of a sudden, you know, things have to roll back.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, suddenly it's not like, oh, well, you know, no big deal, like, I'll just take a taxi to go out to this fancy dinner because I feel like, good, and then we'll go to like, you know, a really, a good movie and then like go to a bar. It's suddenly like, oh, we'll spend like 5 at happy hour buying drinks.

Lee Burgess: Exactly.

So I think, you know, with all of this stuff about, you know, you need to have a budget before you find a place to live, you need to have a budget before you make decisions about your car, you need to figure out your budget so you can think about food, all of that kind of stuff. It really goes back to sitting down maybe with an Excel spreadsheet and trying to run these numbers.

I hate doing stuff like that, I always have, but anytime you don't do it, there are consequences.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, on this note, what about things people really need to buy? I mean, I know, you know, it's like really tempting to be like, okay, I've got to buy all this perfect stuff. So I'll be a perfect law student.

Like what's really critical?

Lee Burgess: You know, I think less than you think. I think there's something about our culture. I noticed this when I had a baby that we love to just buy stuff for milestones, you know, and I found, I totally found this out when you were registering for a baby shower because I bought all our friends bought all sorts of stuff that I didn't even one know if I would need and then sometimes I really didn't need.

Alison Monahan: Sometimes you're like, I don't even know what this is.

Lee Burgess: Or I don't know what this is, you know, and like my favorite gift really came from mom friends who kind of put together gifts and were like, this is my favorite of this that I used. And I was like, that's awesome, you know, thank you. They're like, this is what saved me.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

But yeah, you're just on Amazon or whatever, making some crazy registry with all these details of stuff that sometimes you don't need for like two years. That was the other thing. Oh, you should buy this car seat you're not going to need for another couple of years. No, I don't want to store that in the garage.

Like, I'll buy the car seat when we need it.

Alison Monahan: Speaking of, it's really too bad there aren't registries for like, I'm starting law school.

Lee Burgess: I know, that would be good. Well, I guess you could have an Amazon wish list.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's true.

Lee Burgess: Which maybe would be, if you have some, maybe birthdays or family holidays or something like that leading up to law school, maybe an Amazon wish list is a good idea to share with your family about the things you really need.

So, going, leaving my rant about how much junk you can, like, collect during your planning on having a child, when you're in law school, I think you want to set up your home to be comfortable. So, you know, sleep is pretty important in law school, so it's pretty important to have a decent bed.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, but the reality is you might not end up having to buy that bed.

I mean, I think I lived in Columbia Housing and I'm pretty sure they gave you a bed. I'm not sure if it was the most comfortable bed ever. I think some people replaced it, but I think I'm pretty sure I just slept in it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, so if you need one though, you know, it's a good thing to budget for. You're going to move to a new place that you need a bed.

And then you're going to probably just need the basics of technology, but I don't think you need to go and buy, you know, a whole new set of technology. I mean, of course, you're going to need some sort of reliable computer and you'll probably need some sort of printer. I mean, a scanner might be nice, but now with your phone, I don't know if you really need a scanner anymore.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think I'd probably have a printer. I think a scanner is like a nice to have item, but I don't think it's totally critical.

Lee Burgess: I think with computers, one thing that people forget is they think that they need a brand new computer to start law school.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: I would actually If you're planning on using your computer for the bar, there's nothing wrong with like, waiting until maybe your second year or so to get a new computer because what you don't want is an older computer for the bar.

Alison Monahan: Right, and you want to make sure too that when you're going to use it on the bar, or even on law school exams, that it's a computer that will work with the exam software that you're using.

Lee Burgess: Yes, yes. Because that does not go well when exam software crashes. See our other podcasts on disasters.

Alison Monahan: Or just go and google exam soft bar exam and you'll find pretty much everything you need to know.

Lee Burgess: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: I mean, I think they've gotten better about that now. I think it works with more different types of computers, but you know, if you are like a technology geek and you want to go and buy a Linux Box, it's like, well, am I gonna be able to use that on my exams?

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: Not saying you're not, but you wanna confirm that before you go out and spend several thousand dollars.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. So I think the important thing is you need a, a computer that is reliable, that will work,

Alison Monahan: You need a laptop.

Lee Burgess: You need a laptop. It doesn't have to be, like the brand new sparkly laptop, it just needs to be like a working laptop.

Alison Monahan: And well, and I think more and more as people are, it means more stuff goes into the cloud, it means you actually need less processing power on your, on your actual laptop.

Lee Burgess: Mm. Great technology tip from somebody who understands more about that than I do.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Alison Monahan: Yeah, basically you don't need to go out and buy like a really high performance machine if you're going to be storing everything in Dropbox and like maybe using Google Docs or something like it's not on your machine anyway.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that makes sense. So what about other stuff? I guess you need to probably have some nice clothes to look like a lawyer or a law student when you go out to networking events or interviews.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think at least at a minimum like one or two outfits that you can look presentable in, you know, if you need to do an interview, you know, we've talked about this before, but you need at least one interview outfit.

I don't, again, I don't think you need to go crazy on this. You don't need to dress up every day of school, like people will basically be rolling it in their pajamas, query whether that's a great idea, but, you know, like basically, nice ish casual clothes will get you through most of law school, but I think it does make sense to make sure you have at least one set of like, okay, I could go out with professional people and feel comfortable in this outfit.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I agree. It's part of playing the part.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and if any of you are coming straight out of undergrad, like, you might not have that.

Lee Burgess: That's true.

Alison Monahan: So, you know, take your parents shopping. If they'll take you shopping, be like, hey, okay, I want to look like a professional and they'll probably be pretty happy about that.

Lee Burgess: That's true.

Alison Monahan: Like, oh, my baby's growing up.

Lee Burgess: I know, it's true. And actually, one of the most popular posts that we have on our, one of our websites is about what bag to take to law school.

Alison Monahan: Like, oh, yeah, well, this is a pretty old topic. Like, do you want to be the person with a wheelie bag?

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I don't know. I just came from the chiropractor, so maybe.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Alison Monahan: No, I was gonna say, honestly, it makes a lot of sense. I mean, I could never bring myself to do it, but if you are really, because, I mean, this is sort of like the high school thing. It's like, you're probably gonna have a locker, and you're gonna be wheeling around these, you're gonna be carrying these massive textbooks around.

It actually gets really heavy.

Lee Burgess: It does.

Alison Monahan: I mean, add in a laptop, like, maybe a couple of textbooks, a notepad food, water, I mean, you know, some gym clothes or whatever, like, you're carrying a ton of stuff around, so you've got to really think through like how am I actually going to carry this?

Lee Burgess: It's true. And if you don't drive, especially if you take public transit or you're walking, I think it's, it's really important to consider all of the stuff.

And I carried so much junk around with me in Law School. It was really unreal.

Alison Monahan: See, my apartment was only a block away, so I'd actually get back between classes just because I didn't want to carry too many books.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I did drive to school only because this goes to the researching about the location. I had to take two buses to get there.

Which, if you're,

Alison Monahan: Not happening.

Lee Burgess: Not happening in San Francisco. And I had to walk up a gigantic hill. And I didn't fully appreciate the amount of junk, and the walk was wonderful, as long as I didn't carry anything with me, so I ended up driving and paying a lot of parking tickets.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, well, you do what you gotta do.

Lee Burgess: You do what you gotta do. I called it the San Francisco tax. I still call it the San Francisco tax.

Alison Monahan: It is a tax. It really is.

Lee Burgess: Yep.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Alison Monahan: Alright, well, I think, you know, I think the takeaway on what to buy is that you probably don't need to go out and spend a ton of money right now. And if you do want to spend a ton of money, it's worth at least investigating things like your laptop, like, am I really going to be able to use this, that kind of thing, because you don't want to end up in a situation where it's a week before exams and you're struggling to borrow a laptop that actually works with ExamSoft.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it can be really, you don't want any more drama around exams.

Alison Monahan: Speaking of drama, drama, what else can we do this summer to to avoid problems later? How about getting your relationships in order?

Lee Burgess: Oh yes, getting your relationships in order. You know, my first few weeks of law school there was a professor who used to do this lecture that became very notorious, and during the lecture he would talk about how many relationships would break up over thanksgiving.

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: And, it was really morbid and really negative but I did have a number of friends who ended up with significant other drama that was very distracting that first year of law school because law school is so distracting and makes you so selfish.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, mine made it until Christmas break.

That was a long distance one and we held on until Christmas break. I spent the winter break, you know, together with this person and then dumped him the first week of January.

Lee Burgess: Very efficient.

Alison Monahan: It's just like, you know, this sounds horrible, but honestly, like if things are heading in in a bad direction. It's better to end it now.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I was single when I started law school. I had ended something before I decided to go to law school, and, it was somewhat freeing to just worry about myself.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, for you, it was just like I had to talk to him every day. And it was just like, it was, I mean, you come to visit and then have to take the weekend off. I mean, this sounds horrible, but it is. I mean, you really become very selfish and

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

it's really difficult, you know, it's, you know, great if you can keep your relationship together with your significant other and have that support system.

But if it's not a good relationship. It's way better to be on your own.

Lee Burgess: And if it is a good relationship, I think you need to set boundaries and talk about it going into it. Especially if that person doesn't have any point of reference about the law school experience. We talk about this with the bar exam a lot too.

You know, you have to set your significant others up for success. You know, and in family members too, you know, about the workload and your availability and, you know, the amount of time and energy you can spend on things kind of outside of yourself.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely and I think it's totally fair for your significant other to say, look I want to see you sometimes, like we need to plan this in our schedule every week.

But they have to be realistic too that, you know, that might mean half a day or one day on the weekend, it probably doesn't mean the entire weekend plus every night. And it can be really hard, I mean, particularly if you have kids, or even pets, not to equate the two, but you know, like, who's going to take care of these people and things, like, you know, animals when you're not there?

These are things that you really have to think carefully about, you know, boundaries with everybody, you know, with your parents or whoever, you know, it's not even too early to start thinking about Thanksgiving holiday, because Thanksgiving, you know, it's one of those times where everything tends to blow up.

It's right before exams, you're tired, you're really stressed out, and suddenly your parents are like, oh yeah, why don't you fly across the country for our traditional Thanksgiving dinner and spend the four days, you know, around that time here? Like, what do you mean you can't come for Thanksgiving? Like, how, you know, we need you to be there.

You're part of the family.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Better to deal with that now.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's very true, especially if you can't, like, drive. I was lucky that I could just drive home for a few days and come back. But if you're flying long distances and dealing with time change and then you could get sick from the plane and weather delays and it can be really complicated.

It's good to set those expectations early.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. Which, you know, is never fun, but better to do it now.

Lee Burgess: No, and I think what you said about, you know, kids, partners, pets, you know, all of, and if you help out with your family or a family business or you help out with a grandparent or any time, any of these things that, these relationships that involve somebody or something relying on you.

I think it's very important that you pull in your village and make sure, you know, that you ask for help and you come up with a solution that's going to work for everybody because the reality is you're just not going to be as available if you want to dedicate yourself to law school as much as you probably do going into it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and, you know, I think you can find those networks in law school or outside of law school. I mean, if you have a kid, presumably there's often, like, parents, you know, parents in law school type of groups. And, like, maybe you can trade off babysitting where, like, one of you takes five kids to the park or whatever.

Right. You know, the other four people get to study for the afternoon. But yeah, I think you've got to start asking for help.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, for sure. I also think it's important, though, not to lose your out of law school network.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely.

Lee Burgess: Because I was lucky that I had friends in the city I was going to law school in, and I really liked hanging out with them because they weren't crazy.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and they didn't actually care about whatever you were learning in torts. They're like could you please stop talking about this? Like, I don't care.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: This is not actually important to anyone but you.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Lee Burgess: Yep.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and you've got to spend some time with them over the summer so that they'll actually talk to you when you become a really boring law student.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. Like, do something fun. Take that vacation with some friends.

Alison Monahan: Exactly.

Lee Burgess: What about leaving a job? I know we were both just talking about how you and I both finished up jobs right before law school. I mean, I think if at all possible you wanna leave on good terms because these people will still be references for you.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I mean, if nothing else, you're gonna have to put this on the bar application probably.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, they, word of warning, they make you list everything about all of your jobs. So this is actually a good example of when you might wanna go ahead and make a list of like, who is your supervisor? How do you contact that person?

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: You know, what is the phone number of like the company, main office that you work for? Because you're gonna need this three or four years down the road.

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: But yeah, I mean, you wanna be, you know, you wanna try to leave on good terms. You might need a reference if nothing else. You know, you wanna like confirm they need to confirm the dates that you've worked there probably.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: So yeah, you don't, ideally don't want to leave in like a blaze of glory, like burning your bridges.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly, exactly. So what about, I don't know, can we shift to some academic stuff? Because that's one of the things you talked about in the beginning.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. There's one I just want to make one other point about something you might consider doing over the summer that can be helpful, and that's just getting rid of a lot of these like nagging appointments that you need to do.

Things like eye doctor. you know, regular doctor dentist, any of these things that you need to do like every six months or so, just go ahead and do them now. Like you don't want to be dealing with finding a new doctor or an eye doctor or whatever. So that's just one thing like definitely put on your calendar.

Schedule all those appointments over the summer. But yeah, now I think we can move about academics.

Lee Burgess: Especially if your health insurance might change.

Alison Monahan: Yes, excellent point, because you're probably going to have crappier health insurance if you're employed now and you're going to be a student.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, so yeah, use all of those resources, that health savings account, or is that what it's called?

The HSA?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, the HSA or the FSA if you're working, I think it is.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, so anyway, but yeah, good to think about. Okay, so academics, there's a huge market of stuff out there for people getting ready for law school. So, I guess we can just talk through what some of the options are. I mean, there are definitely a lot of books.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, there are books.

Lee Burgess: Do you think books are worth reading?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think, I mean, you want to understand what you're getting into. To be honest, I mean, I've read basically all of the books out there. When I was thinking about writing a book myself, I can't say that I absolutely, like, swear by any of them, but I think some of them are very good.

I think even though it's a little out of date, I think Law School Confidential is still pretty good for just the kind of overview if you're at a top school. If not, you might be offended by it. Yeah, one of our friends let's see, what was that one

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

called? I can't remember. We'll find it. Yeah, I mean, there are a couple of newer ones that have come out.

I think this is one of the things where you can kind of go to Amazon and just sort of search and see what other people are finding helpful. I mean, there's the whole genre of, like, the Planet Law School books, which is the, like, you should just not pay attention in class and just read supplements, you know, interesting point of view.

You might consider, you know, borrowing it from the library. I mean, actually, if you go to a public library, they will have an entire section of books that are sort of, like, how to do law school. I would recommend just going to your public library and, like, flipping through those books and checking some of them out.

I don't think you need to own most of them.

Lee Burgess: I think that's true, and I think it's very important to walk that line between getting some information and then, you know, getting fearful or really intimidated by this process. Because I do think some of the books can be anxiety inducing for some folks, you know?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, some of them are just, frankly, crazy.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and so it's good to just flip through them. And if it's not jiving with what you feel like is gonna be how you want to approach law school, then lay the book down and move on.

Alison Monahan: And the same thing with movies. You know, people wanna watch all these movies about law school.

Some of them, again, depending on your personality, you might love the paper chase or you might find it terrifying.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: I think I watched with my roommates, like right before exams, watched about 10 minutes of it, and we're like both, you know, everybody's having an anxiety attack. Yeah. Like, maybe we should turn this off.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I mean, and I think the same thing I read. 1L and The Paper Chase, The Summer Before Law School, and it is anxiety inducing.

Alison Monahan: Oh, see, I really liked 1L, actually.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Lee Burgess: I did like it, but I found it anxiety inducing a little bit.

Alison Monahan: It is, but also 1L is like a book from the 70s, about like the law school experience, you know, at Harvard or Yale or wherever it was.

Lee Burgess: So it's Paper Chase, right?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, so you know, these are like, take them with a grain of salt. I mean, they're interesting, like cultural artifacts, and some of it's probably relevant, but, you know, you gotta take it with a grain of salt.

Lee Burgess: You know, my contracts professor wrote The Paper Chase.

Alison Monahan: I know. You told me that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. He was nothing like any of the characters in the book, or the professors in the book, but we always just find that funny.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, everybody has their opinion, you know, and like there are lots of professors who've written like really specific books on things like how to read cases and stuff like that, which, you know, if you've never read a case, it might be useful to sort of sit down and look through those, but, you know, like, if you pick up Getting to Maybe, for example, and try to read that before you've ever set foot in a law school classroom, like, even at the end of my 1L year, that book was totally confusing to me.

I mean, now I think it has some useful advice, like, years later, but just, people get really overwhelmed with like, oh my god, I don't understand this book. It's like, I'm gonna flunk out before I've even shown up, and I just don't think that's helpful.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think so. I did do a law related movie marathon kind of summer, though.

I did, like, oh gosh, I'm just, which, I was like, Erin Brogovich, and the other one, is it Michael Connelly? What's the one with?

Alison Monahan: Oh Michael Clayton.

Lee Burgess: Michael Clayton.

Alison Monahan: Something, that's actually, I like that movie.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Lee Burgess: I did too, I did too. So, you know-

Alison Monahan: The one with Elle Woods, love that one.

Lee Burgess: Oh yeah, Legally Blonde.

And then there's the John Travolta one about the toxic-

Alison Monahan: Yeah, there are a bunch of John Grisham novels that have been made into books, like The Firm.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Or other ones.

Lee Burgess: So it's gonna be kind of fun, you know, just to kind of get in the zone, but realize that they're for fun and nothing else.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Like they have, it's like watching, you know, your friends, once you go to law school, be like, oh, do you watch like, you know the Good Wife or Suits or whatever? Like, is it realistic? You're like, no. No. Who goes to trial in a week?

Lee Burgess: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: Like, are you joking?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I know. I enjoy Suits, but wow, is that completely unrealistic.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I just stopped watching The Good Wife because it just drove me so nuts. They're like, yeah, we have a new client.

We're going to trial in a week.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: I was like, god I want to kill myself. Like, this is putting such a bad image on people's heads of what lawyers really do.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, yeah. And then, of course, there are pre law programs, right? These are courses you can take over the summer that can help you get ready for law school.

So we probably have to have a disclaimer that, that we have one of these.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Alison Monahan: Yes, we do indeed have one of these courses. We will not promise you that it will get you straight A's unlike some other courses, but yeah, we run a program called Start Law School Right. We happen to think it's actually a very useful introduction to law school.

It gives you Some videos, and then you actually do assignments and get feedback on them which is sort of the way that we think it's best to kind of prepare for school is actually get to try something and then get feedback on it. So, if you're interested, you can check that out. We'll put it in the show notes.

We also have a free webinar series that we're running, kind of like the podcast, but a little more focused for pre laws that you can sign up for for free. I will put that in there too. I mean, there are other courses. There's Law Preview, for example, where you can go and sit on campus for a week if that appeals to you.

Lee Burgess: Isn't Lose another one? Am I saying it right?

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, Lose. I forgot about Lose. Yeah, so Lose is kind of a, do they still sell CDs or is it downloadable now?

Lee Burgess: You know, the last time I checked it was CDs, but that doesn't mean anything.

Alison Monahan: So they have like in person seminars and also some sort of like pre prepared component, whether it's downloads at this point or CDs, strategies.

Again, like, all these are potentially useful for certain people. I would say talk to people, you know, who've done it, if you can, but, I mean, they're not going to kill you, probably. They might be a waste of money. They might not be. But, you know, you don't have to do this stuff. It could just be helpful.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And again, I think it's what kind of a person you are. I think if you think going through a program will reduce your anxiety and make you feel more in control going into school, then it could be a very good use of your time. But like most things in the legal education related world, in the bar prep world, there is a variety of options at a variety of price points.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely.

Lee Burgess: And be very critical of whether or not a given tool at a given price point is going to give you that amount of value.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Alison Monahan: Yeah, because obviously, you know, people are like, oh yeah, this will change your life. It'll make you a straight A student. And the reality is that's not gonna happen.

You know? Right. If you're gonna be a straight A student, you're probably gonna be a straight A student anyway. And if you're not, you're not. And you know, we're talking about like shifting, shifting confidence and also shifting a little bit. Like, it's probably, if you're not willing to put in the work to be a straight A student, going to a program is not going to make you a straight A student.

Lee Burgess: Yep, I agree.

Alison Monahan: That's just the reality of it. There's nothing that, nothing anyone can tell you in a week or a month or whatever that's going to magically transform you into the perfect law student. Like, you have to do the work.

Lee Burgess: Agreed, agreed. What about, like, case books and supplements?

Alison Monahan: Well, some people are like, should I buy the casebooks and start reading?

Answer, no.

Lee Burgess: No, please do not do that.

Alison Monahan: That is stupid. You don't know what you're going to be assigned. Like, you have no idea. That is a complete, we can, if we can say one thing for sure, we can say buying your casebooks and doing the reading now is a total waste of time.

Yep.

Supplements, on the other hand, you know, I think, like, maybe it can't hurt to have, like, an overview of a class, but it's totally unnecessary.

Lee Burgess: And you just don't have enough information about what your professor is going to cover. You know, I think, you know, you'd pick up a supplement on Civil Procedure, our favorites, one of our favorites being Examples and Explanations by Professor Glannon. And you could read that cover to cover, but your professor may cover 45 percent of that book in your class.

Alison Monahan: I mean, if you find it inherently interesting and like you want to read it, great, but it's totally not necessary.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

I mean, I think your time would actually be better spent picking up a really difficult book and reading that. You know, start reading The Russians or something over the summer, because you are going to be doing a lot of hard reading. And, you know, most people probably haven't really sat down and read for three or four hours a day, like, dense materials, you know, pick your favorite philosopher, like, you know, I don't care, read Foucault, whatever it is, you know, something that's, like, really difficult.

Lee Burgess: Yep.

Alison Monahan: And sit down and read it for three or four hours every day. And see how that goes.

Lee Burgess: Yep, that's a really good, that's a really good advice because I think it is a hard shift when to train yourself to sit down and read for long periods of time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's, I mean, that's I think for most people the biggest challenge, one of the biggest challenges of starting law school is just like the time commitment to dense reading is not something that people are used to.

Lee Burgess: So what about your legal career? I mean, do you, should you start worrying about that now?

Alison Monahan: Well, I don't think people need to start worrying. I don't think they need to start worrying about anything, but I think you can start planning and thinking about it. You know, this last summer before law school is a great opportunity to do some informational interviews with lawyers.

I have on the girls guide a very detailed guide to informational interviews that you might want to check out. But, you know, think about it. This is a great time to send an email to some people being like, Hey, I'm getting ready to start law school. I'm really interested in the area you're practicing in, could I take you to coffee?

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And also just sort of think through, like, what you want out of law school. Because once you get there, a lot of other people are going to be telling you what you should want. And if that's not what you actually think you want, then, you know, you need to get clear about what it is that you're looking for.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

Lee Burgess: Right. Exactly. So I think the more you can network and begin to build your community, that's great. But don't go spend all your time thinking, oh, I have to meet every lawyer that I can.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. No, absolutely. I mean, this summer, everything you do, you should approach with like a relaxed viewpoint.

None of this is going to make or break you. These are just things that, well, except maybe not having a place to live, that can make or break you. That's true. But as long as you, this is why we talked about the life stuff first, because it's actually a lot more important. You can figure the other stuff out later.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And the other thing I think, you know, if you can, if it's feasible, take some time and take a vacation and relax, because you're going to be working really hard, and if you go in already stressed out, it's just probably not going to go that well.

Lee Burgess: Agreed. Agreed.

Alison Monahan: I don't think I did that. I was crazy. I was just like, I'm going to work up until, like, the day before I leave, and then I'll just, like, pack my entire house, fly across the country, and everything will be great.

Yeah, don't do that.

Lee Burgess: Don't do that. Yeah, I, I was a little more realistic and gave myself a little bit more cushion, but.

Alison Monahan: Well, I've never been one who's great at you know, being realistic about things like that.

Lee Burgess: You always pack, like, minutes before you have to leave for the airport.

Alison Monahan: I know. It's really true.

Well, I've, I've actually started packing the night before, and I've realized the reason I was always so stressed out in the morning is because it literally takes me, like, three hours to pack.

And I always allocated, like, maybe an hour. So, of course, I was always really stressed out in the morning because I needed three times that much time.

Episode 40: Preparing for Your First Semester of Law School

So, just be realistic, you know, start earlier than you think you need to with this life stuff, because that is the kind of thing that can just set you really on the wrong path and, like, ruin your experience from day one, and that's just not a great place to be in.

Lee Burgess: Yep. Alright, well, we hope this list has helped you start to frame all that you needed to do over the summer, but make sure that you do something fun and, you know, put your feet up and relax, because you're going to be plenty busy in the fall.

And with that, we are out of time. If you've enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating on iTunes. We'd really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. We usually release episodes on Mondays. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to us at Lee@LawSchoolToolbox.com or Alison@LawSchoolToolbox.com. Or you can always contact us via our website contact form at LawSchoolToolbox.com. Thanks for listening and we'll talk soon.