Episode 56: Getting off to a Smart Start in Law School

Lee Burgess: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're discussing how to study smart in law school and make the most of your time. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan and Lee Burgess, that's me. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be.

We're the co-creators of the Law School Toolbox, the Bar Exam Toolbox, and the Catapult Conference. Allison also runs the Girl 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 reach us via the contact form on LawSchoolToolbox.com, and we'd love to hear from you.

And with that, let's get started.

Alison Monahan: Welcome back. Today we're talking about how to. study smart in law school so you can stay on top of your workload and do as well as possible academically. So let's get right down to it. We talk to a lot of incoming 1Ls, and one of the questions we get over and over is how they're going to handle the large workload in law school.

I mean, it can be really intimidating to start law school, especially if you've never had a job that really requires you to work a lot of hours. So I know you worked before law school. How do you think having a job before you went to law school changed how you approached the law school experience?

Lee Burgess: Well, I think it really made me approach law school like a job, which I think is actually the easiest way to approach law school, because I was already working long hours and been used to sitting at a desk doing tons of computer work. I was used to having, you know, a work calendar and a tight schedule of meetings and projects and then I had to stick to it. I was used to having hours that I worked and hours that I didn't, so when I was done studying, I, I really knew that I wanted to be done and kind of check out, so there wasn't a lot of, you know, bleed over between study and non study time and I think I was used to being accountable for high quality of work.

I mean, my, I was a consultant, and my bosses expected a level of work to come from me that my clients did, and if I didn't, I was gonna be in trouble. So I was already used to you know, having to have an attention to detail and things like that because I'd worked in a professional environment. What about you? You also worked before school.

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Alison Monahan: I did. I mean, mine was a little different because I was a programmer and that was definitely a little bit more self directed. I mean, certainly I was expected to produce things, but there was, it wasn't the same sort of like intense kind of supervision type atmosphere, like always on the go, you know, like you've got this deadline and that deadline.

Mine was much more like, oh, you have, you know, two weeks to do this project or like three months to do this project. Like go do it. Which in a way I guess was useful for law school because at least I was used to structuring my own time, I was used to, you know, doing things like on a daily basis where there was not a lot of supervision.

But I do think just having, you know, having some sort of work experience, I think does give people probably a level of maturity that maybe if you're coming straight out of undergrad, you might not necessarily have in terms of being accountable for your work product.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's definitely true.

You know, for students that do come straight out from undergrad, I guess what are some of the challenges they face, you know, that makes it a little bit more difficult than somebody who, you know, has worked in the past?

Alison Monahan: Well, I think most people are just really taken aback by the intensity of the workload.

You know, not everyone. I mean, some people still have a challenging undergraduate education, but I think more and more that's not necessarily the case in the U.S. you know, we've got lots of great inflation and people may not really have to like work as hard as they might have 20 years ago to get an A, you know, when some of like half the grades at Harvard are an A, whereas, you know, a generation ago, maybe 10 percent of people were getting an A. So I think, you know, people are just facing, they're facing a competition level that's higher than what they're used to. But they're also just facing a lot of work, you know, I think about law school. I think that's surprising to people, is, it's kind of a slog. You know, it's like every day, every day of the week, you basically have to get up and you have to devote X number of hours to doing your reading. And that's just not something I think a lot of people have that much experience with. You know, so they might be able to procrastinate a lot in undergrad and like cram the night before the test and still do perfectly well, but that's really a recipe for disaster when you get to law school.

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Lee Burgess: Yeah. And I think I talked to students who often say, like, well, I'm just a procrastinator. That's like, okay.

Alison Monahan: That is who I am. And it's like, well, it's time to change that. Like, I, I'm a procrastinator too, but I have developed techniques that kind of help me deal with that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I mean, that's just not an excuse.

And the reality is that type of work mentality is not going to serve you well. You have to stay on top of your game. I mean, there's just no, no real other option. There are definitely plenty of tools that you can use to stay on top of your game, and we're going to talk about more of those in a few minutes, but you know, if you don't appreciate what a long workday feels like, now's a good time to get started.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think even, you know, when people move from law school into an actual legal work environment, again, it's a shock to the system. So like, you might think you're working really hard in law school, but try sitting in an office for 12 to 14 hours a day, every day, actually doing work that entire time.

Lee Burgess: And, oh, keeping your time. That is something I think that we actually talk to law students a lot about, about managing your workload, because I think it's It's so easy to think that you're working all the time, and then you realize you actually aren't. So one of the things that we recommend is actually tracking your time, like you would if you were at work, to find out how many hours you're actually working.

I think most people would be, like, hard pressed, or most people would not guess how hard it is to actually do eight solid hours of work during a day.

Alison Monahan: Oh, I don't even come close to that on most days, I know.

Lee Burgess: I know. Because you can't count things like reading the New York Times, which I'm glad Alison does because she sends me really valuable articles that she goes through the New York Times app in the morning.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, but I probably spend like at least an hour to a day on that. If you like sit down and think about every single time I open up, you know, on my phone, I open up Facebook or I open up this or I open up Twitter or open up Instagram.

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Granted, Instagram is not even arguably work related. The other ones at least arguably are work related, just maybe I'll find something for social media.

But the point is, you know, everyone does this, but I can't, you know, if I'm trying to focus on actually doing something or learning something, that is not time I get to count towards that goal.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. And you know, I used to recommend that students just have to keep hours on paper to try and figure out where all their time goes, but now you know, thank you internet.

There's a, an app or a solution for everything. And a lot of the timekeeping apps that people use in their jobs such as Toggl is one of them that, that we have played around with.

Alison Monahan: T O G G L

Lee Burgess: Yes. It's free, then you can just set it up and you can actually use timers on your phone, on your desktop and start logging how you're spending your time in a day.

And I think it might be really interesting to do that for a week or two and then run a report about what's going on. Like how many hours did you really. How many hours did you actually read? You know, how many hours did you actually breathe? How many hours did you actually do outlining? How many hours did you hang out in the library and not get any work done?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think the thing about the timer is if you can be very diligent about that, you know, you're sitting in a library and you're like, okay, I'm ready to start reading this case, you start your timer. And then, suddenly, you get a message on your phone, somebody wants to like, you know, at that point, you stop your timer.

And then you restart it when you actually sit back down to do your work. And I think you'll see, you know, just how disruptive these interruptions can be. And I think, you know, people can try and then you can start experimenting. So you're saying, okay, like, I see that this is an issue. It's distracting me, you know, I'm supposedly working for an hour, but it really turns out I'm only spending 35 minutes because I'm taking all these breaks.

You know, that's when you're like, okay, well, maybe I'll try the circles technique, which is my favorite, you know, where you basically draw a circle and if you

spend 50 minutes, you get to colored in, but you have to spend it continuously. And so you can start to sort of see like, okay, what are some changes?

You know, what are some things I can play with that might make me more efficient so that if I'm in the library, I'm reading. And if I'm not, then, you know, in my 10 minute break every hour, that's when I can respond to these messages. And you kind of have to train other people to, you know. If you have a significant others or parents or children or whatever it is, you know, if they have an expectation that you're going to respond immediately and you do all the time, that's something that ultimately can be very disruptive.

I think learning to set those boundaries of like, these are the times where I'm not going to be responsive.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: So that people don't flip out.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: They think you're dead because you didn't answer your WhatsApp message.

Lee Burgess: Right. It's very true. And that is definitely something that's changing in our current, you know, I don't know, our world, our internet, our, like, must have immediate gratification for everything we do world.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, well, I think more and more, I think people are starting to push back on this.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: We've talked before about Cal Newport, who's done a couple of interesting books, and his most recent book is called Deep Work. And I actually haven't read it, but I kind of, you know, I read his blog, so I feel like I get the gist of it.

You know, his point is like, the people who are really producing like amazing things in the world are probably not the people with the biggest social media following because, you know, they're not checking their email 14 times an hour. They're not on Twitter 42 times a day because that's a distraction from their actual work.

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Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's very true. And I think, you know, if you're listening to this near the time that we're recording it, I think this fall is going to be very challenging specifically because of what's been happening in the world. I can't even imagine being in law school during this type of an election cycle because I'll be honest, I have to put restrictions on how much I can be on social media because things make me angry.

I get really like-

Alison Monahan: Or crazy or depressed.

Lee Burgess: Or, you know, I get really sucked in and then I end up reading, you know, six articles about something that I already know about just, you know, and then all of a sudden you've wasted an hour getting all fired up about something that you can't do anything about in the moment.

And so it is, it's really hard. You have to practice these ways of kind of coping with what's going on in the world. And it was interesting cause I was reading, well, I'd seen it on my social media and I was reading this parenting blog where they were talking about how to explain horrible things happening in the world to your kids.

And it's a way to take this to a downer place, Lee. You're welcome.

Alison Monahan: Thanks.

Lee Burgess: You're welcome. But anyway, one of the interesting things they were talking about was, you know, it's really important that, You know, you don't let your kids watch the news over and over and over again because they think the event has happened over and over and over again.

They don't know.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's like re traumatizing.

Lee Burgess: It's like re traumatizing or don't let them read about it over and over and over again or don't talk about it, you know, in this, in the way that it's happened over and over again. And then I started thinking about myself as a grown up and I'm like, why am I watching this over and over?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. No, I think, you know, I think it's so tempting to think we have to like, you know, be involved. It was actually very intriguing that, so this airport bombing in Turkey recently happened.

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Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: And apparent, I read this New York Times article, and in the article they basically made a mention that the Turkish government had forbidden news organizations from publishing photos.

Lee Burgess: Hmm.

Alison Monahan: They published 'em anyway.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: But it was this sort of interest, think of, you're kind of like, well, on the one hand, you know, that seems repressive or whatever, but then they're like, why, like, why do we need to look at these things? Like, is this really. Like, is this helping anyone? Yeah. And I think, you know, particularly when you're studying law, and I think this election cycle for sure is going to be challenging.

So just so many distractions and people are going to be getting like very up in arms in class and like arguing about things. And, you know, it's hard to manage your time, but it's also hard to manage your emotions. And your focus and your attention. And I think, you know, thinking about, like, what's important to you to focus on is so critical.

And, you know, one of the ways you can do that, in a sense, is really by structuring your time. And that might sound really boring and, like, tedious, but I think it's actually kind of freeing, you know, just sit down with your calendar. And you should probably do this, like, you know, at the beginning of the month, at the beginning of each week, and then at least at some point probably in the evening, but to just say, like, okay, what am I doing?

You know, what am I spending my time on?

Lee Burgess: And it's, and you got to keep re evaluating this, because throughout the semester, these pockets of times may shift. I mean, it's something we've talked about in the podcast and things like that. As you move through the semester, you're going to need more time for things like outlining.

You're going to need more time for things like working on resumes, you know, whatever it might be, but you do have to kind of have a plan and I I really think taking going on a bit of a digital diet for the stuff that's happening in the world maybe the only way that you can stay on task, because I think right now it just

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feels really difficult for all of us to be able to turn off what's going on in the outside world and focus on what needs to get done.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and that's actually one of the points that this person, Cal Newport, made in a recent blog post. He's like, you know, I think about the professors I had at MIT and now in retrospect, he's like, I think, I just think I realized all of them left for the summer. They left campus and basically went to some cabin in the woods in Vermont and that's when they did their real work.

So it's kind of like you have to remove yourself in a sense from the day to day to really be able to focus on learning something new or creating something new.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and I think that space is really where creativity comes from, you know, or learning or learning, like, you know, you have, you can't learn while you're being bombarded with images or words or messages or whatever might be going on.

Alison Monahan: Well, and one thing I'm realizing, like trying to learn Spanish, is this is not enough for me just to show up to class and or to show up to, you know, I have a private tutor. So you might think, like, oh, you could just go to your tutoring session and like, he'll teach you Spanish. But I'm realizing like that doesn't really work.

And it's the same thing in law school. Like you can't just show up to class and be like, okay, I'm good.

Lee Burgess: Teach me.

Alison Monahan: Like you have, yeah, teach me. Like you really have to, you have to take this information and make it your own. Like, you know, if I'm really serious, like I need to be devoting say another hour a day to studying on my own and like really consolidating this information for myself, because just going to class or even just doing the reading, going to class is not really enough.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's true. And so if someone is a law, getting ready to start law school, and they're taking in all of this and starting to kind of, freak out about what we're telling them they have to do, what do you think is kind of the normal amount of time that a student needs to start thinking about that they're going to, you know, spend on saying like reading a single case or preparing for a single class. I mean, you know, if a student is looking towards the future and they're trying to imagine what their days are going to look like, what do you think they're going to end up really doing?

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Alison Monahan: I mean, I found for me, on average, and of course it depends a little bit on the class, and like how difficult and dense the cases are, I found that on average, I could typically only read about 10 pages an hour.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And, I mean, if I'm reading a novel, I can read a 300 page novel in like a few hours. So, you know, this is like drastically slower than my normal reading pace.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and I think that a lot of Folks go to law school find they are fast readers and that's the same thing for me. I mean if I was really Into something, especially in the beginning when it's like every other word seems like something you have to think about.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. You have no idea like, what's going on.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And you know, I think you really do have to give yourself time to kinda wade through it because it will get faster and easier, but it's gonna take some time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I never found it like got that much. It's never like I was reading 30 pages an hour by the end of school.

It's like, you know, maybe you went from 10 to 15, or maybe if it was like really easy cases, you might be able to do 20 pages, but like, you're not going to be reading a lot per hour. And, you know, typical class, you might be assigned 20 pages of reading or 30 pages of reading.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, and it's, it's definitely, you know, one thing that you have to think about is when you get those reading assignments in those early weeks, even if you get reading assignments maybe before even classes start, because a lot of law schools will have you read in order to get to class, get to your first class.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: You know, start looking at those numbers.

Alison Monahan: Which people, yeah, people don't expect, they think you'll just show up and like chat about, you know, what's going to happen in the classes. That's not what happens.

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Lee Burgess: No.

Alison Monahan: You're going to have a pre, typically you're going to have cases to read beforehand and you will discuss them on the first day.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. So you really, oh go ahead.

Alison Monahan: I was just going to say I think this is something that people should really start tracking too. It's like, you know, track how long it's taking. If you're only reading five pages an hour, for example, like maybe you need to get some help from someone about how to be faster because at that pace, you're never going to be able to do the reading.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and it's not to say if you're a slow reader you shouldn't go to law school. It's just about making it work for you and I think that's what's, what's kind of important. It's like taking your skill set and what is realistic for you to do and then how to study the most effectively for your skill set, you know, so if you're-

Alison Monahan: Yeah and-

Lee Burgess: So, for instance, I was just talking to someone who struggles with attention deficit issues, and it's like, if you have an attention deficit issue, it is probably unrealistic for you to sit down, well, it's unrealistic for most of us, but to sit down for three hours without getting up and having effective work get done, that's not, it's probably,

Alison Monahan: It's not going to happen,

Lee Burgess: And so it's like, well, you can fight that and spend, you know, two of those three hours, distracted and having a hard time focusing, Or, you could take breaks every 45 minutes, or an hour, or whatever you need to do so, you can actually productively move forward. That is studying smart, in my opinion. It's acknowledging what your own strengths and weaknesses are, And then accommodating for them.

What is not studying smart, is by saying, Well, I have 8 hours of work to do, so I better do, Go to the library from, you know, eight to five with an hour for lunch, and then that'll be good to go, because that's not the realistic way that most of us are going to be able to get stuff done.

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Alison Monahan: No, I think everybody's got to think about their own, you know, the times in the day when they're the freshest and can focus the most easily, and that, you know, that varies a lot for different people.

I'm not very focused in the morning. I know that about myself. So, you know, I tended to do my reading after dinner, but for a lot of people sitting down for three hours from seven until 10 every night and doing your reading would be completely impossible. So you should not try to do it then. Like you, if you're someone, if you told me I had to get up at six in the morning and read from six to nine, I would be like, you've got to be joking.

I could never do that.

Lee Burgess: Me too. I just, I really.

Alison Monahan: But a lot of people do.

Lee Burgess: A lot of people do. I mean, I had friends who did that, who they did all their reading first thing in the morning. Those are like the same people who were on the track team in high school or college.

Alison Monahan: I was gonna say, they run marathons.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and they get up at like 5 for fun.

Alison Monahan: Or go rowing.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, sorry guys, that's not what I do for fun.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I'm more of like a late night and a yoga person. But, you know, like, I mean that's sort of the advantage of law school is to a large extent you can really structure your schedule yourself other than when you need to show up to class or whatever other demands you have.

Lee Burgess: Yep.

Alison Monahan: But, you know, really, and there are a lot of, I was going to say earlier, there are actually books on like, you know, how to read cases that try to give you different techniques and things that if you're struggling you know, you can basically get this, you know, there are resources out there that you could consult. Because ideally, and this is something we haven't really mentioned, but you ideally you want to read these cases once, like you don't have time to be rereading it.

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Lee Burgess: Very true, and a lot of students think that that's the key. Not the key, not the key.

Alison Monahan: No, definitely not the best use of time. I mean, you know, there's some techniques where like you kind of skim the case in five minutes and get the sense and then you read it. That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about sitting down and spending, you know, an hour reading a case and then spending the same 45 minutes reading the same case.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, yeah, that's not a good time. No. Like if you don't understand what's going on or you have fundamental struggles that keep happening over and over again, then you want to problem solve, go to Academic Support, find out what's going on. You know, and I think it's it's really important as well to look for struggles that might be true speed bumps.

You know, if you're, you know, a lot of people find out they have learning issues in law school.

Alison Monahan: Yep.

Lee Burgess: Because it's such a pressure cooker. And-

Alison Monahan: And because the work's harder.

Lee Burgess: And the work is a lot harder. And so I think you know, if you're really struggling, you have to go to someone and ask for help because, to, in order to like, create a level playing field for yourself, if you need accommodations, if you need note taking help, if you need something, your school will likely help you get access to those things, but the first step is getting diagnosed or like, talking about whether or not you have a problem.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, they're pretty much required to help you. And so you can present that like, this is a legitimate problem and something needs to be done about it. And typically I think, you know, they're usually pretty receptive. Like you're probably not the first person who's come in and said like that you have ADHD.

Lee Burgess: Right. And I would also recommend that. You know, you don't necessarily wait if you're starting to get worried until exam time because a lot of times I what I've seen is that those diagnoses for things come after some really disappointing grades. And that's unfortunate because you can never like redo those classes, you know, maybe things get better afterwards, but you can't redo them.

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So if you're struggling or if your, you know, legal writing midterm is all over the place and you're, you can't understand what could have happened, and you're going to your professor and you're kind of going around and around and around, maybe it's worth it to go to academic support and say, I don't even understand how this happened, like, I'm really struggling, like, can you tell me what you think is going on?

And they might say, sounds like you might be struggling with certain things, let me send you to the person, you know, It was always at the undergrad campus. They had the disability services, but to go talk to the people who are experts in this and see if it makes sense to do some testing or whatever it might be.

I mean, you just, you don't, it's, it's not showing a weakness. It's just being realistic about, I mean, we all come with a certain set of skills and, weaknesses and strengths and it's just making, you know, making it so you can be successful.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's nothing, you know, everybody has their pros and cons and as you get more into this, I mean, I would say most people are probably gonna struggle with something in law school that has never really come up for them before.

Whether that is, you know, like an emotional thing, like you're feeling depressed in a way you never had before, or stress, like really stressed or like, you know, test anxiety issues tend to pop up a lot more or these sort of things where, like, you do have some sort of learning differences that have not been necessarily been a serious problem or have not been diagnosed, but they're there, and as the workload gets heavier, more and more things start to come out, but just because you're, you know, you're under, you're, you're being, like, transformed by this experience.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, yeah, exactly. And And just don't wait to ask for help. It's just, that's the thing that I think is so sad when somebody says, well, I got diagnosed for something my third year. Well, you can't go back and redo those other two years, you know?

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And it's not even just, you know, like there are these learning differences issues, but you know, it's help for everything.

Like if you're experiencing a lot of stress, you know, there are different things you can do. You know, do you need to sign up for like a meditation class or take a yoga workshop or join a running group? Or maybe you just need to schedule a massage like every few weeks, you know, whatever these things are,

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acupuncture, like whatever it is that like does it for you, these are valid things to be spending your time on.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. All right. So what about accountability? Because we talk to students a lot about accountability and their need and craving accountability in law school, when law school doesn't have a lot of inherent accountability, you basically have most classes don't even have a midterm. You may have a midterm, but you basically have a final exam.

You don't really turn in assignments along the way, and it's really up to you to manage your workload, to stay on top of your stuff, and you know, be ready for the exam. So, Alison, what are some ways that students can create accountability for themselves?

Alison Monahan: Well, I think the first thing to realize is that they do need to create it for themselves.

You know, that no one, no one's going to do it for them.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: It's, it's not going to be, like, professor or whoever, is checking in on you every other day to make sure you're doing your work. That's not the way this works. So, I mean, depending on your own level of self motivation, you know, it might be sufficient for people to use different systems to create accountability.

So I know Arielle, one of our tutors did a post recently about using apps to kind of create this reward system for yourself. So, you know, if you do or don't do certain things, you get, you know, points or demerits or whatever it is.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think it's like you get, you can get financial benefits. Even there was one that you would have a pocket of money that if you met all your goals, the money would go to a charity you support.

And if you didn't meet all your goals, it went to a charity you didn't support.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. So this is kind of like the gold star method. You know, find ways to give yourself gold stars, whether it's if I, you know, if I actually sit down and do the three hours of work on my outline this weekend that I'm planning to do, then I can go have an ice cream afterwards, or I can, you know, go to the museum for the rest of the afternoon, whatever it is, you know, you can kind of create that for yourself, but you can also use other people.

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So, you know, maybe it's a study group, as long as you're not just wasting time, like gossiping but that can be a good way to create accountability. If you essentially assign each other tasks and then you come back to see if you did them, or even just like a study buddy, maybe it's one person. I mean, some people use their parents.

Lee Burgess: That's true, they do.

Alison Monahan: Or your significant other. If they're receptive to this idea I've even heard of people like studying with their children so that at least like, you know, the kids are doing their homework and you're doing your homework. I don't know. What are some other ideas?

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I mean, I think I think the, one of the great ways to use a study group is to plan taking practice exams together, or doing feedback together, coming together, just sitting all in a room and doing an assignment together, you know, just to create that sort of structure around it.

I also think, you know, professors sometimes will talk to you about a practice assignment or a hypo that they've presented out in class, and you can make an appointment with professors oftentimes. And that's another great way to create accountability, because you don't want to go to the professor if you have nothing to talk about.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. And sometimes, I mean, for some people, like, even just putting it, putting that on their calendar at a certain time, whether it's like, you know, I'm going to go to this office hour at a certain time, or even just putting, you know, this is the hour I'm going to work on this particular thing.

Just seeing that on your calendar is, you're so much more likely to do it than you are if you're just like, oh yeah, this week I'd like to take some practice tests.

Lee Burgess: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: That's not gonna help. You've gotta be like, okay, on Wednesday night at 7:00 PM between 7:00 and 8:00, I'm gonna take this particular test and this particular class.

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: And you know, you because. Some of this, you've got to plan beforehand. So you've got to figure out like, well, what am I going to, what, like, what tests am I

going to take? Do I have that? Do I have the answer? I mean, another option obviously is you can get a tutor because they're really great for creating accountability.

So if you're in a position where you're like, I want to do some hypos, but I don't have any, and I don't know where to get them. And I don't feel like I have time to deal with this. You know, your tutor for, If we were 1L classes, it's going to be like, Hey, sure. You want to do a hypo and personal jurisdiction in CivPro?

Here it is. You know, why don't you get it back to me by this date?

Lee Burgess: Yes. But I think, you know, obviously we think that's effective. We run a tutoring company, but I think the interesting thing that we still run into is this idea of folks wanting someone else To be accountable for them, you know? And like we've been saying, it's really up to you.

You know, if you're a procrastinator, if you're somebody who doesn't like to get things done, you just need to know that about yourself and do whatever you can to overcome that, because. I mean, I've created all sorts of accountability structures for a variety of students struggling with a variety of problems, and sometimes they won't even respond to the accountability structures we've set up.

Like, at that point, what do we do?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, at some point, I think the key is, like, you're a grown up. This is actually, like, the problem is your problem, and other people can help you. But, you know, even if your parents are calling you every morning to make sure that you're getting up out of bed or whatever, like, you can decide not to answer the phone.

Lee Burgess: Mm hmm. Yeah, it's very true. So it is important to just remember that you have to own this experience, and in the end, it's, you know, you're the only person in the exam room, you're the only person sitting for the bar exam, you're the person who's getting the law degree, like, you know, these issues of focus and getting stuff done don't, like, go away when you go to work.

So it's, it's important to figure out how to manage them now.

Alison Monahan: Right, I think that's a key point. Like, please. A lot of the stuff is like practical structure. Like, you know, maybe you're listening to this and you're just like in

despair because you're like, I just can't do any of this. Like I'm such a procrastinator.

Like I just, but these are skills, you know, like some people are naturally more organized and better at getting stuff done, but anyone can learn this. And you know, it's, like I said, it's really simple stuff. Like just the idea of like putting, like, what are you putting on your calendar? You know, are you putting deep work on your calendar?

Well, that's step one. Okay. Deep work on Saturday, you know, afternoon. But that's not necessarily enough. It's like, well, plan ahead for what you're going to do there, you know, and get specific, like, okay, it is fine. You might block out every Saturday afternoon for the whole semester. And know that that's when you're gonna do something.

But then when you're planning your week, you wanna sit down and be like, okay, like, let me think about where I am in my classes. Okay. In contracts, you know, I wanna outline this topic area, so that goes in your calendar. You know, these sort of things are not rocket science.

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm. yeah, exactly. So what about students who are really dealing with more specific life situations?

Maybe they're are moms, or single moms or single parents. They might have family responsibility. You're caring for a parent or another loved one. You have a sick pet who needs a lot of attention. You have other responsibilities. You're a breadwinner in your household, whatever it might be I think that if you've got something else, so law school is not maybe your primary responsibility or is just part of a handful of responsibilities, you might have to get creative to really manage your time and make the most of your study time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I mean, I think it's just, you know, it's sort of like the exponential version of what everyone else has to do too, just because you have more, I mean, you know, law school is hard, but if you're like, oh yeah, like this is all I have to do. And, I don't have a job and I don't have anything else. Like I have 24 hours a day that I can plan as I please, like, obviously in some ways that's going to be easier than someone who is working, say they're going to school, you know, part time and working full time. Like, that's a real time management challenge.

Or, you know, they have these other demands, like they're caring for a kid, or caring for parents, or whatever it is.

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I mean, it's just sort of more of the same, like you just have to get more serious about managing your time, I think.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and I think when I talk to folks who are feeling really strained, it's really about getting the most out of every minute that you do it. And I think the biggest mistake I think a lot of people make is they try and squeeze in a few more minutes of studying around some sort of like chaos in their life.

You know, so it's like, well, I was trying to study, but my kid was running in and out every minute. It's like, well, then, that's, then you shouldn't just be trying to study that time. Because that setting didn't actually create any value because you're interrupted all of the time. You'd be much better off setting 30 minutes but have it be 30 dedicated minutes than an hour broken up and interrupted every 10 minutes, in my opinion.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I agree. I think it's about single tasking and everyone wants to think they can multitask, but the reality is were basically all terrible at multitasking. You know, and I think, I mean, you know, this is a really difficult scenario because, you know, the easy answer is like, well, you just need to get some help, but easier said than easier said than done.

But there may be ways you can get creative. I mean, I think a really thinking about where you can get that help is super valuable because there may be sort of obvious places that you just haven't really like thought to ask or thought to look. Or, you know, and I think. Like really having, trying to build some sort of community, whether it's in school or out of school, you know, if you are a single parent or any sort of parent and there are other people who are in that situation in your class, you know, maybe you can do creative things like, you know, you rotate days of childcare so that you take all the kids to the park one afternoon and everyone else in the group gets to study and that's a good break for you, and it's focused on like, you know, doing something that's not law related. And then the rest of the time, your kid goes away while you get to study.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. And and I think getting creative with that support, both inside and outside of the legal community, or your law school community, is really important.

And maybe even trying to find mentors through some of the mentorship programs that maybe will have students that are in similar situations to you, because there are all sorts of, like, life hacks that you can come up with to help,

you know, solutions. Even, you know, asking friends on Facebook for creative solutions for things.

It's always amazing to me, like, like the breadth of knowledge people have around random things that could be really useful. And I know in my own experience, even I joined some really amazing, helpful, like Facebook groups around like being a breastfeeding mom and pumping. And if you have gone through that experience or ever thinking about going through that experience, it is like, you need a lot of tips and tricks and, and hacks to, to make it. And I'm on another mama group email listserv that they were like, oh, you know, check this out because the tips can be pretty amazing. And I'm actually pretty amazed at the amount of time women will spend anonymously, basically, helping other women with problems that come up.

And I think that that's one of the really cool things that the internet does. And so finding those communities, whether it be you know, a faith based organization that you might be a part of, whether or not it's mama groups or your children's school or whatever it might be, reaching out and trying to learn how other people have survived this and made the most of it, because we can really learn from each other and the experiences the others have gone before us to make our lives easier.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, whatever it is that you're struggling with in law school, I can pretty much guarantee you there are people out there who have gotten through the same thing.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, whether it's like, I can't focus, you know, you might think that you have the world's most creative problems, but you know, we run a Facebook group and we run a workshop for Start Law School Right, which you can join, we'll put the link in the show notes, but, you know, and we ask people when they sign up, like, what is the thing that you're most concerned about? And I'm sure each one of them thinks they're the only person who's ever thought they would have this problem, but, you know, we have a Trello board, and we're like, yep, that's in this category, and that's in this category, and that's in this category.

You know, these things are not, you're not the first person.

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Lee Burgess: And I think it's actually comforting when you find that out. I think that oftentimes frustration when things get rough can be because you feel like you're alone, and you're the only person who's having to struggle with these things.

Alison Monahan: Everyone else in school totally has everything together, and you're the one who doesn't know what you're doing.

Lee Burgess: No, that is absolutely not true. But it can be hard to find your community and find the people you can be honest with about that. And so sometimes you have to get a little creative, but, you know, once you do find your space you know, asking for advice, getting creative with solutions, trying things out.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. You can hopefully find a way to balance and maximize your time. But just remember, I mean, we can't do absolutely every little thing that we may want to do in our lives on a daily basis. And so you're going to have to make choices and trade offs and you just have to, you know, do your best to give school the attention it needs while whatever else you have going on in your life, even if it's just doing massive amounts of yoga to cope with stress, gets done, too.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, one of the things I was just thinking is like, it's actually okay to If you need to, just be an average law student. You know, like we put, everybody puts so much pressure on themselves. Like, I have to be at the top of the class. And like, great, you know, that's a great goal. But if that's completely ruining the rest of your life and driving you insane and making it so that you can't cope with life, that's not really productive.

You know, like take a little bit of pressure off and just try to step back. I mean, it's hard because lots of perfectionists go to law school, but in the end, law school is just a means to an end, you know? Presumably you're here because you actually want to be a lawyer, hopefully but there are plenty of lawyers who just got through law school.

I mean, I saw something the other day from someone who went to Yale with like Bill and Hillary Clinton and he was sort of joking like, you know, Hillary was the one who had her hand up first and she knew all the answers, but Bill never even showed up to class.

You know, like, he was president, like, you know, he got through, he graduated, he passed the bar, he became a lawyer, and then he was president.

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Like, you don't, you don't have to be the number one student in your class to have a perfectly respectable law school career.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. And again, I think it goes back to something we talked about way in the beginning when we first started doing this podcast was about authenticity, you know, and defining your own definitions of success and figuring out like how you're going to get through because I think there is something where a lot of people say, well, I will just drive myself into the ground for three years.

Alison Monahan: I'll just study all the time.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And then it's just like, that's not even going to work.

Lee Burgess: It's not, yeah. It's definitely like, not going to work. But then I also think it's it's also like still multiple years of your life. Like, life is happening while you're in law school.

Alison Monahan: Definitely. Yeah, I mean if you're, if you have, you know, very good friends or family members and they have a kid and you don't visit the kid because you're studying 24 hours a day for three years, that's probably not good.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, because you don't get to have that time back, you know, and I think there is a way that you can do like be a whole person and be a law student if you are smart about it, but just don't feel like you're signing up, you know, on this path where it's like, I, you know, of course, I mean, we talk about like, you need to set expectations with family and friends, but they're setting expectations.

And then there's saying, I will not, you know, see you or your children for three years.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, or like someone's on their deathbed and you can't go visit. Yeah, that's not reasonable.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And it's not necessary.

Lee Burgess: Yep. Exactly. So anyway, I think that's about all we have time for talking about time management.

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Balancing your time.

Alison Monahan: Get back to work.

Lee Burgess: Get back to work. Okay, if you 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 in the future. Our new episodes usually come out on Mondays.

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