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The Non-Traditional Young Lawyer

by Amit Mukherjee

Law school and the practice of law are demanding endeavors that present unique challenges and rewards for non-traditional students. Real world experience prior to law school can be helpful in navigating through an unfamiliar and rigorous program, but many unique challenges exist as well for those students considered to be “non-traditional.” Although my experience may or may not have been representative of the average non-traditional student, I found that there were many commonalities for those students several years older than the traditional student.

Most law school applicants are under the age of 25. With law schools increasingly prioritizing diversity in their schools, being a non-traditional law student with unique perspectives and diverse experiences is becoming more attractive than ever to many schools.¹ At many law schools around the country, associations focusing on needs of non-traditional students are gaining popularity. Groups like OWLS (Older, Wiser, Law Students) and PALS (Parents Attending Law School) are drawing interest amongst a previously underrepresented demographic. These groups are advocating for and fostering a new range of resources such as lactation rooms, childcare, and support groups.² This trend seems likely to continue, as 50% of students fall into the broad category of “non-traditional.”³ Within the 1L class of 2026 at Harvard Law School, 21% of the student body is identified as being four or more years out of college.⁴

It is important to remember that the term “non-traditional student” does not represent a homogenous group. Different stages of life present different obstacles and advantages in many facets of society, and law school is no exception. The path to law school may be vastly different for everyone and factors such as marital status, age, economics, and educational or vocational background greatly influence one’s experience in law school as a non-traditional student. I found myself gravitating toward others with similar experiences (as many students do), but it can be particularly isolating to those who are more likely to be in social circles with the parents of students than with the students themselves.

Challenges for Non-Traditional Students in Law School and Beyond

1. (Re)adaption to Academic Life

Older students often find themselves adjusting to the demands of academic life after years away from formal education. After many years in the work force or after raising children, the pace, intensity, and expectations of law school can be overwhelming. Time management and efficiency in working and studying is essential. In some cases, non-traditional students may be much older and have health issues that present barriers to learning that may not be fully appreciated by peers or even professors.

2. Balancing School, Work, and Family Commitments

Law school is challenging at any age. However, many older law students juggle multiple responsibilities, including marital, family, and personal obligations. I witnessed young mothers and older students with multiple children struggle to find time to study or to prepare for other extracurricular commitments while striving to maintain equilibrium in their lives and provide a sense of normalcy for the children and/or significant other depending on them. Law school can also be a significant financial burden. When a decision is made to commit to law school, families often must defer investments and earning potential in a prime phase of life which may have consequences not felt by younger classmates. Expenses of children including childcare, school expenses, or medical expenses may also require non-

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traditional students to reallocate resources on the fly. Though socioeconomic disparities exist amongst and between students of all age groups, the psychological impact of weighing the costs of various bar preparation courses against the cost of piano lessons or braces can make any parent question the decision to attend law school.

3. Bridging the Generational Gap

Perhaps the most unanticipated but profound challenge for many non-traditional students is in the interaction with younger classmates. Collaboration is of paramount importance in law school, as participation in extracurriculars and networking activities can have strong impacts on not only one's success in law school, but also in one's practice several years after it. Many traditional students may take for granted the ability to seamlessly identify with the lifestyles, social norms, and experiences of those in the same age group. Many may have attended college or even high school together and naturally gravitate towards one another in the formation of study groups. The onus is often on the non-traditional student to help bridge the gap so that they may have the opportunity to be actively engaged and maximize their educational experience. However, this challenge may also be the most rewarding, as learning from the diverse perspectives of younger peers can allow one to have engaging discussions with an open mind and appreciate the insights of peers previously unrepresented in one's social circle.

Benefits to the Study and Practice of Law as a Non-Traditional Student

1. Experience and Skill Development

Non-traditional students may often have several years of real-world exposure to the practical applications of law. While the typical first year curriculum focuses heavily on theory, a non-traditional student may have more practical exposure to the subjects discussed, which aids in the successful assimilation of the information presented. Older students often have work and life experiences to draw upon which provide a solid baseline for understanding certain legal topics, whereas younger students, who haven't yet encountered these life milestones, may struggle to understand the nuances of law alongside learning the foundational concepts.

2. Stronger established networks


Non-traditional students are often well-connected through work and social circles. Their age often aligns them more closely with professors or partners at established firms, making it easier to build meaningful connections. A strong network is an asset in the development and acquisition of new business for a firm and may provide a non-traditional student with a competitive advantage over a traditional student in the hiring process. Networking provides a platform for legal discourse and the exchange of ideas, which in turn allows one to stay informed

about industry trends and changes in the law and legal technology. For a student or young attorney in a different age group than most of her peers, these strong networks can help flatten the learning curve that is so steep directly out of law school.

3. Confidence and Perspective

In many cases, a non-traditional law student or new attorney will have come to the practice of law with varied relevant experiences. In my law school experience alone, I met several individuals with decades of experience in diverse fields such as law enforcement, education, military, real estate, sales, and many others. Several other students had completed various Master's or PhD programs. These types of experiences provide confidence in the face of a new pursuit that other students may not have. Successes and failures in previous roles can help a non-traditional student weather storms more easily than another with more limited experience.

Interdisciplinary insights also allow students to view the study of law through a different lens, revealing novel connections.

Law schools around the country, and the individual classes within them, have very different cultures. Certainly, the experience of non-traditional students will vary greatly across the country and across classes. Firms throughout the state and country also have different and unique cultures, which place different pressures on a new attorney. In some firms, it may be easier and more desirable to be a younger more traditional attorney. In others, non-traditional attorneys are sought after for various reasons. Everyone, no matter their age or experience, has their own unique reasons to attend law school. For me, the process of leaving a relatively comfortable life to embark on the strenuous journey through law school and into associate life has been worth it several times over. My experiences have taught me perspective and prioritization. I have been able to be differentially discerning in my choices and able to identify and avoid toxic or disadvantageous environments. Most importantly, I have found that having had the opportunity to go to law school with brilliant and idealistic young students while socializing with wise and experienced attorneys has allowed people like me to apply a tempered and balanced approach to the practice of law in my "young" career. 

Endnotes

- <https://www.juriseducation.com/blog/how-old-is-too-old-for-law-school#:~:text=The%20average%20age%20of%20law%20students%20is%2025%20or%20younger,students%20are%2030%20or%20older.>
- <https://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/law-admissions-lowdown/articles/advice-for-older-law-school-applicants-to-consider#:~:text=However%20meandering%20the%20path%20that,and%20higher%20clarity%20of%20purpose.>
- <https://jedadvising.com/am-i-a-non-traditional-law-student/#:~:text=So%2C%20while%20fifty%20percent%20of,of%20students%20who%20did%20not.>
- [https://hls.harvard.edu/jdadmissions/apply-to-harvard-law-school/jdapplicants/hls-profile-and-facts/.](https://hls.harvard.edu/jdadmissions/apply-to-harvard-law-school/jdapplicants/hls-profile-and-facts/)