

JD NEXT

FROM ASPEN

1L Reality Check:

New Data on the First Year of Law School
and How Entering Law Students Can Prepare
for the Experience.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The transition from pre-law to the first year of law school (1L) is a defining moment for aspiring attorneys, one largely misunderstood by applicants seeking to enter the profession. JD-Next's nationwide survey of 1L students who recently completed the fall semester in December 2025 offers a nuanced portrait of the 1L experience, providing prospective students with actionable insights into the academic challenges, unexpected pressures, and personal adjustments that shape law school life.

This white paper helps applicants move beyond assumptions and personal anecdotes by providing a clear, evidence-based picture of law school realities to improve readiness, resilience, and the likelihood of success. With this knowledge, applicants can set realistic expectations, make informed decisions about preparation, and approach the transition to law school thoughtfully and with confidence.

Key findings include:

- ✓ A persistent gap between pre-law expectations and the lived reality of 1L, especially around workload, stress, and the pace of learning.
- ✓ The significant impact of 1L on wellness, social life, and personal relationships.
- ✓ The stresses experienced by introducing BigLaw recruiting into the earliest months of law school.
- ✓ The influence that students' ages, backgrounds, and work experiences have on their adjustment to law school and longer-term career outlook.

Note to Pre-Law Advisors, Admissions Consultants, and Law School Admissions Officers:

This white paper is intended as a resource to be widely shared. We encourage you to share these findings and practical tips with pre-law advisees and law school applicants, allowing them to approach law school with informed expectations and a clear understanding of the challenges ahead.



INTRODUCTION

The first semester of law school is challenging, life-changing, and, for many, different from any academic experience they've had before. However, the reality of 1L often differs significantly from what incoming students expect. Recognizing this gap is crucial for those who support students entering law school: undergraduate pre-law advisors, law school admissions consultants, and even law school admissions officers.

JD-Next is committed to improving access and success in legal education. To that end, we surveyed 1L students nationwide at the end of their fall semester in December 2025; in total, more than 900 students responded. This white paper synthesizes the findings, highlights trends and challenges, and offers practical advice for those planning to attend law school.

ABOUT JD-NEXT

JD-Next is a validated, research-backed admissions assessment designed to give law schools a clearer, more predictive view of 1L success. Accepted by nearly 70 ABA-accredited law schools as a valid and reliable admissions test, JD-Next offers institutions a data-driven way to enhance holistic review while expanding the pool of promising applicants. Law schools may use JD-Next in place of the LSAT, or as an application addendum that offers deeper insight into student readiness.

Beyond admissions, JD-Next strengthens the law school pipeline by providing a self-paced, 1L-style learning experience and assessment that helps applicants build foundational skills aligned with the law school pedagogy. The exam has been shown to produce minimal score disparities for underrepresented groups, advancing equity while helping schools identify high-potential candidates who may thrive academically but struggle with traditional standardized tests. By offering both a predictive admissions signal and a readiness-building course experience, JD-Next serves students, advisors, and institutions seeking more fair, effective, and evidence-based pathways into legal education.

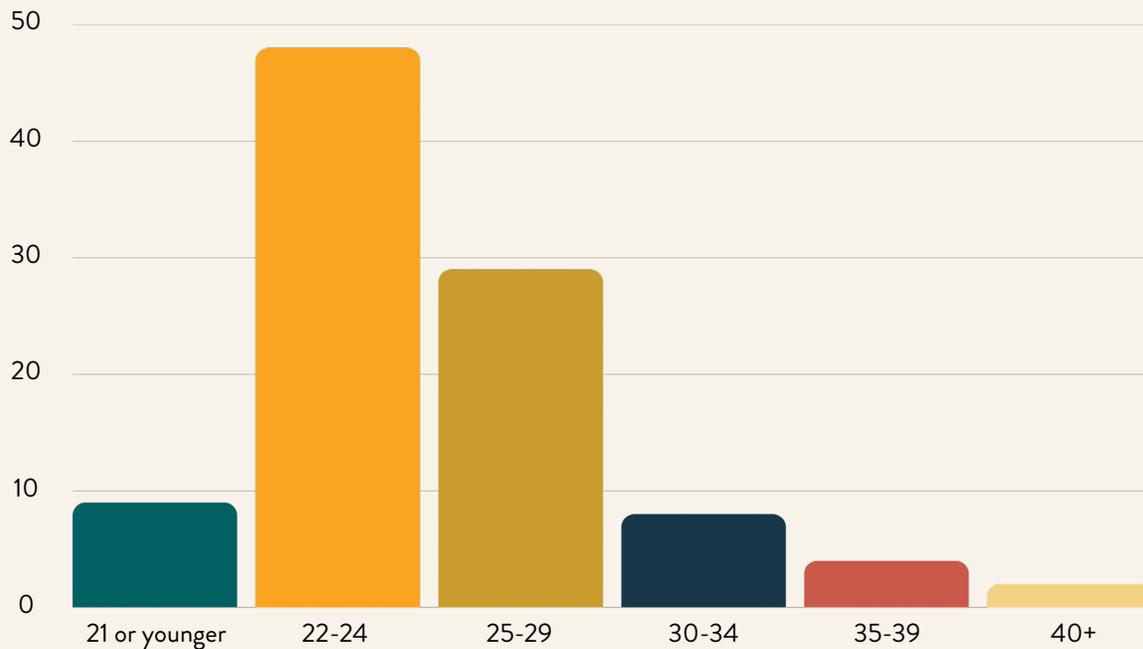
For more information about JD-Next, visit www.JDNext.org



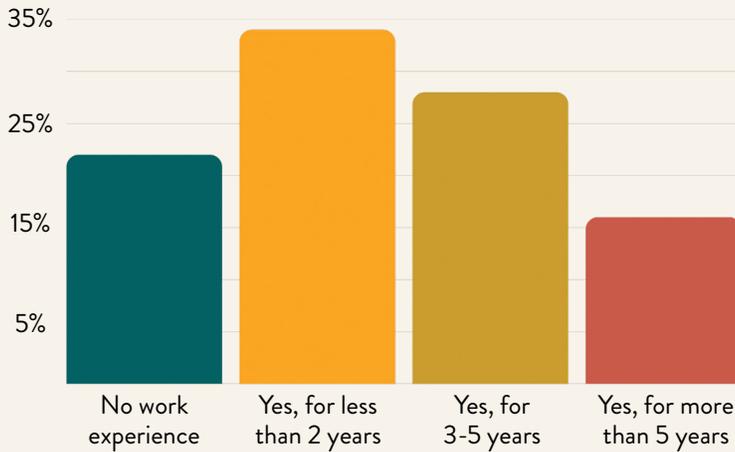
SECTION 1. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF TODAY'S 1Ls

The 1L class reflects a rich diversity of backgrounds and ambitions. Nearly half of the students are between 22 and 24 years old, while almost one third are 25 or older, bringing with them a wide range of life and professional experiences. Many enter law school with prior exposure to legal or government work, adding depth to classroom discussions through varying perspectives.

Age Distribution:



Work Experience Before Law School:



Legal/Government Background:

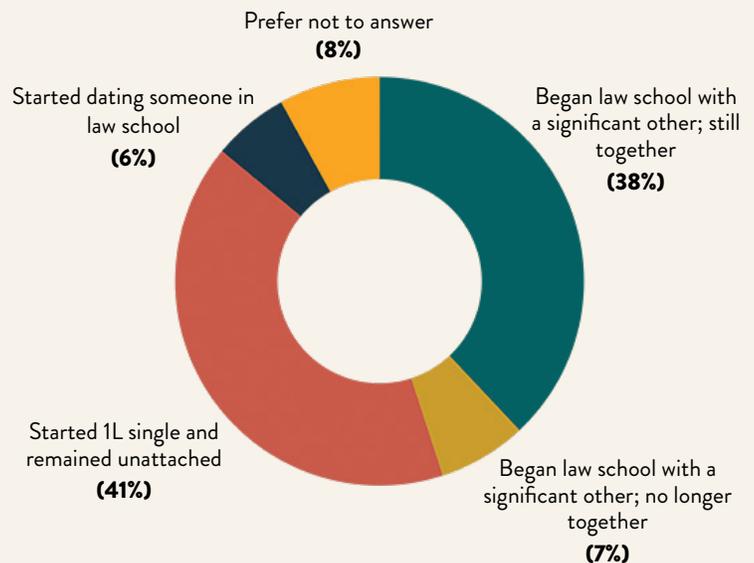
Of those who worked, **41%** had experience related to law, legal services, or government.

On a personal level, nearly one in five students identify as a first-generation college graduate. Relationship dynamics also varied — some started law school with a romantic partner, while others began single and unattached — but most reported that the intense demands of the first year significantly reshaped their social and personal lives.

First-Generation College Students:

19% identified as first-generation college students.

Relationship Status:



SECTION 2. EXPECTATION VS. REALITY: THE 1L ADJUSTMENT GAP

Most incoming law students enter 1L with cautious optimism: about two-thirds arrive at least “somewhat confident” that their expectations are accurate, but only one in nine feels “very confident.” That initial optimism is quickly put to the test. By the end of the first semester, just under a third report that reality “mostly” or “exactly” matched what they imagined before starting 1L; however, for the overwhelming majority, the experience diverged – sometimes sharply. Nearly half say their first semester of law school was “somewhat different” than expected, and almost one in four found it “very different.”

The pattern is unmistakable: most students begin 1L confident they understand the workload, pace, and pressure, yet the semester quickly exposes gaps in those expectations. On day one, confidence levels suggest optimism (11% felt very confident, 54% somewhat confident, 18% neutral, 13% somewhat unsure, and only 4% very unsure), indicating that most believed they had a clear picture of what lay ahead. By the end of the term, those assumptions were largely overturned. After finals, only 29% said reality matched their expectations (7% exactly, 22% mostly), while a striking 71% reported a mismatch (48% somewhat different, 23% very different). This inversion underscores how the lived experience of 1L often diverges sharp from pre-law perceptions, revealing the need for better preparation and more realistic guidance for incoming students.

It turns out that this mismatch isn’t just about grasping doctrinal law. It results from the combined impact of academic demands and other stressors, including the overall workload, cold calls by professors, the rapid accumulation of course material, and the social and wellness trade-offs that characterize the first semester.

Workload & Academic Demands: The survey data indicate the 1L workload is demanding, both in and out of the classroom.

- ✔ **Cold-Calling:** Nearly 70% of students reported being cold-called at least once during the semester, with 22% experiencing cold-calls “multiple times.”
- ✔ **Reading Load:** The average 1L completed 51–75 pages of reading per night across all their classes, with 19% reported reading more than 75 pages nightly.
- ✔ **Weekday Preparation:** Most students spent 3–5 hours each weekday outside of class preparing for upcoming discussions, with 27% spending more than 5 hours.
- ✔ **Weekend Study:** On weekends, 61% of students reported studying or doing coursework for 6–15 hours, and 14% spent more than 15 hours.



Where the Gaps Were Largest:

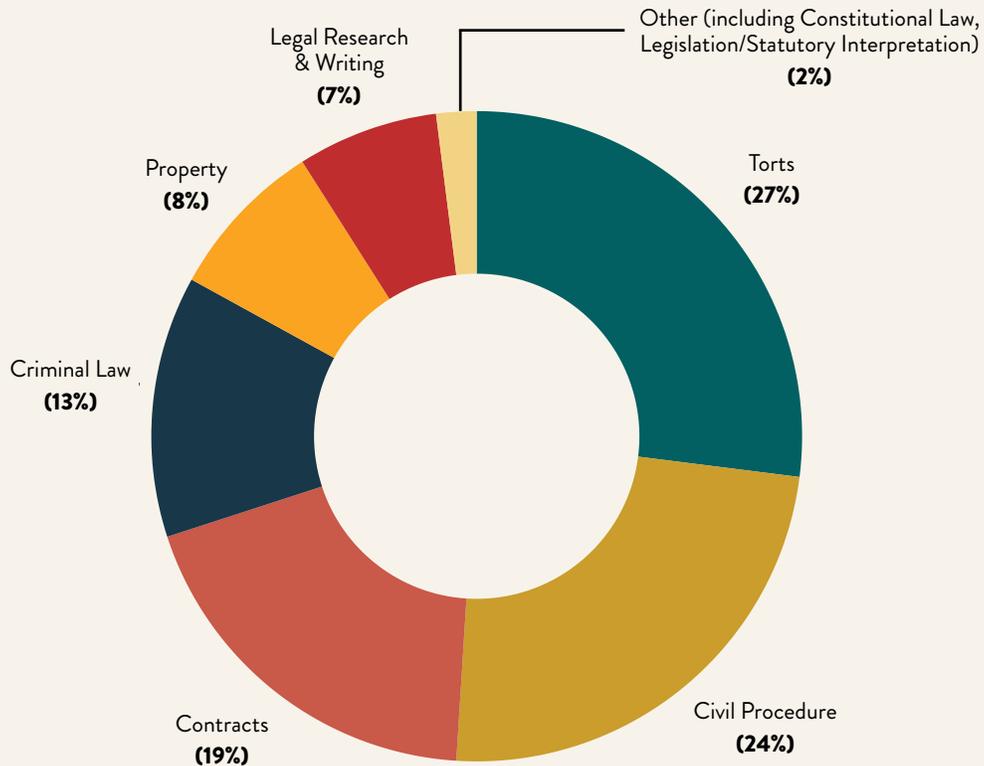
- ✓ **Workload & Time Management:** 63% cited “volume of reading,” “never feeling caught up,” or “difficulty balancing outlining and class prep” as the most significant differences from what they expected.
- ✓ **Academic Rigor:** 41% mentioned “depth of analysis,” “Socratic method,” or “cold-calling” as unexpected challenges.
- ✓ **Social & Emotional Impact:** 29% referenced not having expected law school’s “impact on relationships” and its “competitive atmosphere.”

Practical Advice for Entering Law Students:

- ✓ **Expect a Steep Learning Curve:** Most students (71%) found 1L “somewhat different” or “very different” from their expectations.
- ✓ **Develop and Practice Time Management Skills:** The majority of students cited time management and the workload as their biggest challenges.
- ✓ **Reframe Expectations:** In addition to learning what they will study in law school, pre-law students should not underestimate the impact of things like pacing (reading volume per night), cumulative stress around cold calls, and the logistics of protecting time for sleep, exercises, community, and outside relationships.



When asked which core 1L class they found most difficult, students responded:



“**Torts** was the hardest for me because it was so theoretical compared to my other classes.”



SECTION 3. WELLNESS & PERSONAL IMPACT

The first semester of law school is not only academically demanding but also a major test of personal resilience and adaptability. JD-Next survey data indicate that the challenges of 1L go well beyond the classroom, significantly impacting students' wellness routines, social lives, and emotional health.

For many students, maintaining their pre-law school exercise or wellness routines proved challenging. Only 18% reported exercising multiple times a week, while almost 60% of those who had regular routines before law school reported exercising “rarely” or “never” during the semester. This sharp decline underscores how the intensity of coursework and time pressures can crowd out self-care.

Social life and relationships were similarly impacted. Seventy-two percent of respondents reported going out socially only a “few times per month or less,” signaling a likely decline in leisure activities and personal connections. Notably, among those who started law school with a significant other, 27% reported that the strain of 1L pressures ended their relationship. For students who began the semester single, 81% stayed unattached, many citing a lack of time and energy for new relationships.

For stress relief, most students adopted basic coping strategies: sleep (32%), exercise (21%), and socializing with friends (19%). Importantly, by the end of the semester, nearly half (44%) wished they had prioritized these activities more intentionally, highlighting a gap between awareness and action.

The mental and emotional toll was equally striking. More than half (54%) reported frequent feelings of exhaustion or isolation, and over one-third (36%) experienced persistent self-doubt or imposter syndrome.

Subgroup Analysis: The Self-Care Divide and Its Consequences

A closer look at the intersection of exercise, social activity, and relationship status reveals a distinct subgroup of 1L students who lack meaningful self-care routines. This “no self-care” group – defined as those not exercising, not socializing, and not in a significant relationship – comprises 11.8% of respondents. These students are disproportionately likely to face demanding academic schedules, with 55% reporting three or more hours of homework per day and studying at least 11 hours on weekends, compared to just 37% among their peers who engage in at least one self-care activity.



Subgroup Analysis: The Self-Care Divide and Its Consequences (cont.)

Notably, older students (40+) are more than twice as likely to fall into the “no self-care” category (23% vs. 10% for those under 40), suggesting that age may compound the challenges of balancing law school with personal well-being.

When it comes to stress relief, the “no self-care” group overwhelmingly favors passive activities: 69% cite sleep or TV/streaming as their primary outlet, while only 34% of the “some self-care” group do the same. This paints a concerning picture: students who lack self-care are more likely to feel overworked, rely on passive stress relief, and may be at greater risk of academic and personal difficulties. Identifying and supporting this subgroup is essential for promoting resilience and retention among 1Ls.

Taken as a whole, the data show that the challenge of 1L isn’t just about learning doctrinal law; it’s an all-encompassing experience that may challenge students’ stamina, confidence, and overall well-being.

Practical Advice for Entering Law Students:

- ✓ **Prioritize Self-Care:** Make time for sleep, exercise, and healthy meals, even when it feels impossible. Your academic performance will benefit from a healthy mind and body.
- ✓ **Protect Your Relationships:** Before law school begins, communicate with friends, family, and significant others about the demands of law school. Then, during the semester, schedule regular check-ins or social time, even if brief, to maintain those personal connections.
- ✓ **Find Your Stress Outlet:** Identify one or two activities that help you relieve stress, and treat them as non-negotiable parts of your weekly routine.
- ✓ **Don’t Go It Alone:** Reach out to classmates, mentors, or campus wellness resources when you’re feeling overwhelmed.

“*I wish someone had told me how important it is to intentionally make time for things unrelated to law school that you find fulfilling or relaxing. If you wait until you ‘have time,’ they won’t happen.*”



4. ACCELERATED RECRUITING & SUMMER JOB SEARCH PRESSURE

Over the past several years, the timing and tenor of 1L recruiting have shifted markedly, introducing pressures from the summer job search into the earliest weeks of law school. JD-Next's survey indicates that this accelerated environment is not an outlier but a defining feature of the contemporary 1L experience.

Four in ten students (41%) felt pressure to begin their summer job search within the first month of the fall semester, and an additional 32% reported similar pressure by mid-semester. The result is a recruiting cycle that unfolds while students are still acclimating to doctrinal coursework, study routines, and the rhythms of law school life.

This accelerated timeline imposes a significant emotional burden. Nearly three-quarters (74%) described the job search as “moderately stressful” or worse, with 29% calling it “very” or “extremely stressful.” Only 8% found the process non-stressful, highlighting how widespread anxiety around early recruiting has become.

The sources of stress are multifaceted and cumulative. The most common challenge was finding time to research job opportunities while keeping up with coursework (82%), a practical issue that lasts throughout the semester. Students also reported that recruiting distracted them from outlining and exam preparation (67%), a tradeoff with direct implications for 1L grades. Social comparison amplified pressure: 61% felt behind their classmates, while others found tasks such as preparing application materials (59%) and managing interviews (54%) added an additional administrative burden.

Institutional and cultural cues also influenced students: nearly half (48%) felt pressured to attend recruiting events, and 44% reported a lack of adequate guidance or structure in their job search process. Besides these stressors, competing commitments from on-campus student organizations and personal responsibilities (39%) further divided attention and time.

Even the raw time investment, modest on paper, is consequential at this stage of a 1L's development. Most students (64%) devoted 1–5 hours per week to job-related tasks during the fall semester, and 18% spent 6–8 hours or more. In the early months of 1L, when reading loads, class preparation, and foundational study habits are still developing, these hours represent meaningful opportunity costs, often displacing rest, wellness routines, or focused academic study.



Practical Advice for Entering Law Students

- ✓ **Expect Recruiting to Start Early:** Be prepared for the job search to begin almost immediately. During the summer before 1L, consider researching potential employers, application timelines, and preparing basic materials like your résumé and cover letters. Setting aside time to plan your summer job before law school begins can help reduce some of the burden during the fall semester.
- ✓ **Balance is Critical:** The job search can easily distract from coursework and exam prep. Use calendars and checklists to manage deadlines and avoid last-minute stress.
- ✓ **Don't Compare Your Progress:** Every student's recruiting timeline is different. Focus on your own goals and avoid the trap of feeling "behind" based on classmates' updates.
- ✓ **Seek Guidance:** Take advantage of career services, alumni, and upper-class mentors. Many students reported feeling lost without structured support.
- ✓ **Protect Your GPA and Well-Being:** Remember that in the long term, your 1L academic performance and mental health are far more important than landing a summer job. Don't sacrifice time for studying, sleep, or self-care for recruiting.

“ *I wish I had known how early the recruiting process would start so that I could have been better prepared for it.* ”



SECTION 5. MOTIVATION AND CAREER OUTLOOK

Why do students choose law school, and how do their motivations change after the first semester? JD-Next survey data reveal a nuanced picture of idealism, pragmatism, and shifting priorities among today's 1Ls, offering critical insights for advisors and applicants alike.

Initial Motivations: A Blend of Purpose and Practicality

Students begin law school with a variety of overlapping motivations. The most common was intellectual curiosity, with 68% citing the desire for an academic challenge. Idealistic reasons were also prominent: 62% were interested in social justice or advocacy, and 41% were committed to serving underserved communities. Pragmatic factors were also influential, as 59% sought career stability and 54% were motivated by earning potential. Other reasons included interest in constitutional principles and the rule of law (39%), encouragement from mentors or family (33%), and, for a smaller group (11%), uncertainty about their ultimate goals. The good news is that most law school applicants are entering with clear, long-term professional ambitions rather than viewing law school as a temporary placeholder to figure themselves out.

Evolving Perspectives After the First Semester

The first semester's challenges and realities changed motivations for some students, but certainly not all. A majority (61%) reported feeling "more motivated" or "about the same" in pursuing their original career goals. However, 22% acknowledged that their motivations had "shifted somewhat," often citing exposure to new areas of law as reasons for reevaluation. A smaller group (7%) remained unsure or actively reconsidering their path, while only 2% reported decreased interest in their initial career objectives.

Patterns Across Demographics

Previous work experience seems to provide a buffer against uncertainty. Students with backgrounds in legal or government work were more likely to maintain or boost their motivation, possibly because of earlier exposure. On the other hand, first-generation college students and those without law-related work experience were more likely to report changing motivations or feeling uncertain about future career paths.



Implications for Advisors and Applicants

These findings highlight that while most students maintain their initial ambitions, a significant minority adjust their goals in response to the challenges and discoveries of 1L. For advisors, this emphasizes the importance of early conversations about flexibility in career paths. For applicants, the data provide reassurance: evolving motivations are normal and often indicate growth rather than failure. Entering law school with clarity and flexibility, grounded in realistic expectations, can help students navigate this formative period with confidence and less self-doubt.

Practical Advice for Entering Law Students

- ✓ **Clarify Your “Why”:** Take time before law school to reflect on your motivations. Knowing your purpose can help sustain you through challenging periods.
- ✓ **Stay Open to Change:** It’s normal for your interests to evolve as you encounter new subjects and experiences. Be willing to explore different areas of law and career paths.
- ✓ **Seek Mentors and Role Models:** Connect with upper-class students, alumni, and faculty to learn all the ways a law degree can help you achieve your professional objectives.
- ✓ **Don’t Be Discouraged by Doubt:** Many students question their ultimate career path during 1L, especially as they become introduced to new areas of law. Use these moments as opportunities for self-assessment and growth.

“ *My motivations have shifted somewhat—I came in for social justice, but now I’m also interested in business law.* ”



CONCLUSION

The JD-Next 1L Experience Survey offers a rare, data-driven window into the realities of the first year of law school. The findings are clear: while 1L is intellectually stimulating and personally transformative, it also proves far more demanding, more stressful, and more unpredictable than most entering law students expect.

For Advisors and Gatekeepers:

You play a pivotal role in shaping the next generation of law students. By sharing these insights and practical tips, you can help your advisees and applicants approach law school with realistic expectations and practical recommendations.

For Prospective Law Students:

Law school is a marathon, and preparation is key. Embrace the challenge, seek support, and remember that your well-being is as important as your academic achievements. The journey will test you, but it will also prepare you for a rewarding and impactful career.

Next Steps:

- ✔ Share this white paper widely with pre-law students, applicants, and members of your advising networks.
- ✔ Use the data and advice to spark conversations in workshops, info sessions, and one-on-one advising meetings.
- ✔ Encourage pre-law students to reflect on their motivations, establish strong routines, and seek help early and often.
- ✔ Visit www.jdnext.org for additional law-related tools, support, and research.

Thank you for your commitment to supporting the next generation of legal professionals.

