

BY CRAI BOWER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB HOWARD

# Admissions Testing Te

A FATHER AND HIS BOARD-SCORE-BLESSED SON  
SAMPLE EAST COAST COLLEGES IN A LEXUS LX.



AS WE SWING OUT OF THE ADMISSIONS Department parking lot at Williams College, I'm struck by the realization that my son, Taliesin, is old enough to apply to college. "Time-Consciousness in Modern Literature and Philosophy' sounds cool," he comments, thumbing through the course catalog.

We're smack in the middle of our summer college tour, an opportunity for Taliesin to form impressions of East Coast schools. Our goal is to take their pulses, not their guided tours. Taliesin wants to see how they feel: the size, the students, the scene. This is a trip I've planned with him since he was 7—a chance for us to return to the years when I was a single parent and we were inseparable. Today, as Taliesin dashes through life all grown up, Alison (his stepmother) and I are for the most part preoccupied with Aodhan and Malcolm Stuart, his younger brothers, ages 5 and 2.

Taliesin is not laconic by nature, but the days when he would talk incessantly on a drive from our home in Seattle to Montana are definitely behind us. And the 11-speaker sound system in our Lexus LX means the iPod will remain buried in his backpack.

"I can't imagine attending a school that's smaller than Garfield," he says. His high school has 1,800 students. Williams actually has a couple hundred more than that, but still.

"You might decide that in the end, but I think it's important to visit every type so you know your options," I tell him, citing a common theme. He agrees.

Taliesin has grown up in Berkeley and Seattle, so eastern colleges are as unfamiliar to him as an old-growth rain forest is to a kid from New Hampshire. But the exotic sound of going to school "back east" carries some weight, and Taliesin revels in exploring the different whenever he can.

I used to travel I-90 when I attended Connecticut College, and I enjoy pointing out arenas in Worcester and Springfield where I played college hockey or saw the Grateful Dead. Just inside New York state, we head south on the Taconic Parkway, a secret garden of highway. The Taconic feels too narrow, the trees hang too low, for it to be an American freeway.

#### DAY 1: BARD COLLEGE

The first school we visit is Bard, in Annandale-on-Hudson. Taliesin's academic leaning is toward architecture. (No prescience here: Taliesin was named after Merlin from the Arthurian legend and not after Frank Lloyd Wright's southwestern institute.) Though he appreciates Bard's general arts focus, he's really jazzed to see the only Frank Gehry-designed concert hall on the East Coast. Unlike urban Gehry designs, this hall is juxtaposed with a broadleaf forest—and provides a lesson in reflection as the grass, clouds, and sun perform a visual concerto upon the facade. Taliesin pulls out his sketchbook and settles on the grass to draw the serpentine roof.

#### DAY 2: CORNELL UNIVERSITY

We awake early and scoot up the Taconic to the New York Thruway. This is the settle-in part of the trip: hours of rolling farmland. The Thruway follows that original artery, the Erie Canal, closely, and we occasionally spy remnant locks, picnic tables, and an interpretative sign. Like the scores of times I made this trip in my youth, there's no getting off the toll road. My parents never exited and neither do I. Four hours laze by and we reach Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, one of the largest wetlands in New York state.

"Do you remember," I ask Tally, "crying when you couldn't see that blue-winged teal in the spotting scope? You were 3."

"I think so," he says.

"The offending duck was in that pond right over there."

Driving south on Route 13 along the longest Finger Lake, we see the Gothic-style university rising, just as Cornell's alma mater song promises: "Far above Cayuga's waters." We sneak off to Treman State Park for a swim. Tomorrow we'll swim at Buttermilk Falls, another shale waterfall tumbling into a cool pool, another antidote to the heat and humidity.

I discover "From Dublin to Ithaca: Cornell's James Joyce Collection," an exhibit at Cornell's Olin Library. I spend a couple of hours poring over letters from the great Irish writer to his brother, Stanislaus, and wife, Nora. What could



#### RESOURCES

##### Bard College

If possible, visit during Summerscape (The Richard B. Fischer Center for the Performing Arts, 845-758-7900), a celebration of a single composer through performance, lecture, and discussion. Stay at Beekman Arms and Delamater Inn in Rhinebeck (845-876-7077), and eat at Gigi Trattoria (845-876-1007).

##### Cornell University

Our Ithaca trip was enhanced by a night's stay at the region's premier Euro-style inn, La Tourelle Resort & Spa (607-273-2734), and dinner at the adjacent John Thomas Steakhouse (607-273-3464).

##### Williams College

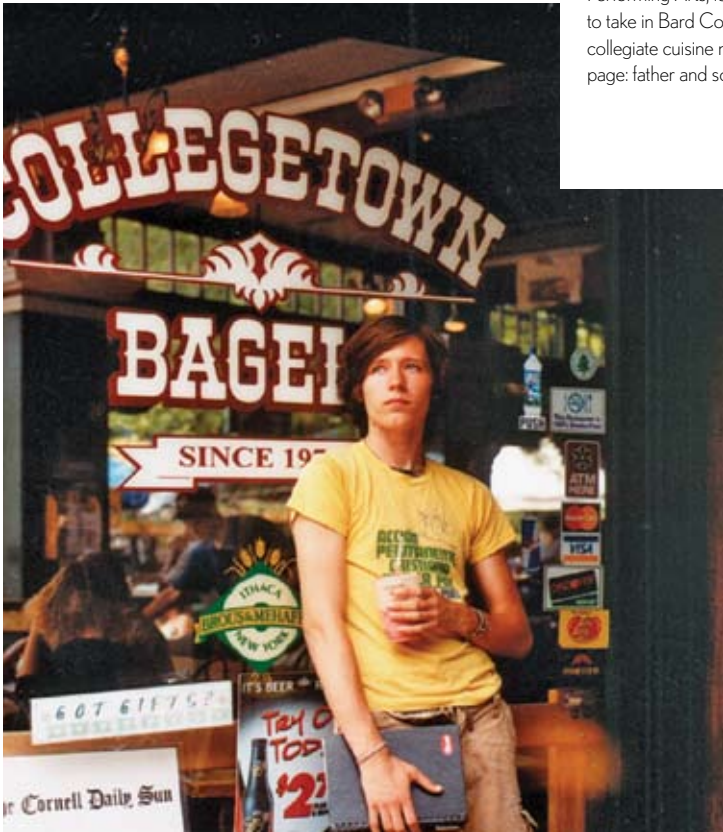
The Williamstown Theatre Festival (413-597-3400), in its 53rd season, spans the majority of the summer, while MASS MoCA (413-662-2111), in nearby North Adams, is open year-round. Williamstown's lone four-star hotel, The Orchards (800-225-1517), offered welcome respite.

##### Harvard University

We traveled over the Charles River (via the Harvard Bridge, of course) to stay at The Park Plaza (617-426-2000)—the grande dame of Boston's luxury hotels, just a block from the Public Gardens—and ate at Ristorante Toscano (617-723-4090) on Charles Street.



Page 15: outside TK at TK. Opposite page: hanging out with John Harvard. This page, clockwise from top left: sketching the Gehry Center for the Performing Arts; leaning on the Lexus to take in Bard College; TK; sampling collegiate cuisine near Cornell. Next page: father and son TK near TK.





## LEXUS LX HIGHLIGHTS

### ENGINE

4.7-liter V8

### HORSEPOWER

275 hp at 5,400 rpm

### TRANSMISSION

Five-speed automatic Electronically Controlled Transmission (ECT)

### STANDARD FEATURES

- Variable Valve Timing with intelligence (VVT-i)
- DVD Navigation System with backup camera
- Mark Levinson Premium Audio System
- Variable Gear-Ratio Steering (VGRS)
- Vehicle Stability Control (VSC)
- Adaptive Variable Suspension
- Tire-pressure monitor
- Automatic front/rear climate control
- Lexus Memory System

### OPTIONAL FEATURES

- Night View
- Rear-Seat Entertainment System (RSES)

be better fodder for a pre-college trip than surveying a first-edition *Ulysses*? Taliesin soon departs for the stacks to search for obscure design journals.

“This school is like a city,” the city boy observes as we stroll the 745-acre campus and down salads at Collegetown Bagels.

### DAY 3: WILLIAMS COLLEGE

The day’s drive to Williamstown, Massachusetts, calls for a tour through the Catskill Mountains, during which Taliesin remains impressed with all that Cornell offered. My son—raised to experience whatever, whenever—has discovered the Ivy League: personalized institutions that present infinite possibilities.

“Imagine what college will be like for you, Tal,” I say, feeling proud and even a bit envious. “You’re interested in everything from architecture to philosophy to music. A school like Cornell covers it all!”

“Yeah, everything I could want to study is there,” he says. “Too far from a major city for me, though.” A priority has emerged.

We pass one mountain town after another, each distinguished by a white steeple and a regional park. I-84 always feels like an invisible highway, probably because it doesn’t lead to New York City. Rarely seeing more than two cars in front or behind creates a false sense of solitude. My speedometer begins inching northward, until I spy the familiar blue and maize of the New York trooper. Turns out this patch of thoroughfare isn’t completely forgotten after all.

As we cross into Massachusetts on Route 2, the New England ambience is unmistakable. Towns give way to dairy farms, historic signs introduce quaint hamlets, and Williamstown proves quaintest of all, a fact that Taliesin immediately appreciates: “This is what a small college should look like, exactly!”

We stroll among the brick and white clapboard buildings, pause to check out the cemetery’s fantasy gatehouse, and step inside the theater complex. The 1962 Center for Theatre and Dance is the newest jewel on the 213-year-old campus. Designed by renowned architect William Rawn, the three-theater

building works beautifully with the traditional campus. We’re smitten the moment we enter the glass lobby, accentuated with wood shutters that open to usher the outdoors in.

“What a space for a show,” muses Taliesin, who mixes music in his spare time, as we check out the Black Box, a small experimental theater with black walls and moving catwalks.

Leaving Williamstown the next morning on Route 2 after climbing past the Hairpin, a switchback of regional lore, we stop to visit MASS MoCA in nearby North Adams. In its sixth year, this amazing museum—dedicated to the newest trends in art, yet hours away from the nearest large city—has invigorated this once forgotten mill town. After lunch, we course through the northern Berkshires on Route 2 to I-91, off which we turn south onto I-90, looping back to Boston.

### DAY 4: HARVARD UNIVERSITY

I’m pretty sure Tally will be most taken with the combination of Ivy League and urban, so saving Harvard for last has proved as simple a decision as visiting Mass. Ave.’s Toscanini’s for a scoop of burnt caramel ice cream. We fall in naturally with the tourists admiring the statue of John Harvard (or at least the sculptor Daniel Chester’s idea of him, as no actual images of the school’s founder exist). Taliesin again requests that we forgo the formal tour: “They’re like walking ads.” So we wander from quad to quad—or, in Harvard-speak, from yard to yard.

“Harvard. Damn,” says Tally.

The swagger of the place is evident; the epic sense of history and reputation makes it feel off limits. Tally is incredulous that he qualifies to attend such an institution. I assure him that—with his good grades, excellent board scores, highly lauded paintings, and a couple of essays published in books—he does.

Our college visits are far from over. Brown awaits, as do trips to New York, New Haven, and Montreal. Yet hopping on planes, with little time in between to kick back with each other and the campuses, can’t compare to our summer car journey, an opportunity to feast on the observations of my eldest child as he envisions college days to come. □

