

Tour De Farce

Don't bring your kid! And other things parents should know when it's time to visit college campuses.

As a Texas mom, I always assumed that college would be a no-brainer. If you wanted your child to get a world-class education, you sent him to the University of Texas. If you wanted him to have unnatural congress with barnyard animals, it was off to Texas A&M. Something for everyone. But like so much else about parenthood, from potty training to the home tonsillectomy, it turned out to be vastly more complicated than I'd been led to believe. ¶ My first shocking discovery was that the majority of the kids UT accepts are in the top 10 percent of their class. I take that on faith, since a quick stroll across the Forty Acres reveals myriad flip-flopped chuckleheads who look to have been in the top 10 percent of their class in, maybe, Gap Sweater Folding for Condescending Teens. In any event, UT is not the given it once was, and now that Teen Boy is a junior in high school, I have been forced to consider the roughly one squidgillion colleges outside the state. ¶ This necessity presented a particularly brutal learning curve, since my own college preparation fell somewhere between blithe and comatose: I stepped out of a giant public high school, walked a few blocks up the street, and entered a giant public university. The concept that there was much difference between one college and another only penetrated my consciousness when I spent a summer as an intern in Washington, D.C. (far less spicy than one might hope). Everyone I met took an inexplicable interest in where I'd gone to school. I found this quirky trait endearing until I figured out that conversations tended to stop dead after my bright and peppy answer, "University of New Mexico! Go Lobos!" On the other hand, intense friend-



ships involving weekends sailing on Chesapeake Bay developed when the answers were "Princeton," "Harvard," or "Yale."

The next shocking discovery was that getting into college is reminiscent of snagging a seat on the last lifeboat leaving the *Titanic*. It's a frenzy driven by fear—the fear that if your child doesn't get into a "good" college, he faces a lifetime of janitorial work sweeping up at China Intergalactic, and the far greater fear that your tennis partner's child will get into a better school than yours and make you look like a giant loser driving around with a "My Son and My Money Go to East Pan Gravy Community College" bumper sticker on the back of your Lexus. The damn Brits have it so easy: You're | CONTINUED ON PAGE TK

FEAR AND CLOTHING: The more you approach a ninja-level of invisibility, the happier your teenager will be.

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born. You get the coat of arms. Case closed. Now stressed-out parents have to club their children's way into the meritocracy with lacrosse sticks and Suzuki violins.

So there I was, facing a mountain of depressing consumer research about a purchase that, in year one of four potential years, could end up costing us—literally—what our first house did. Luckily my mantra is the writer's mantra: When the going gets tough, the tough retreat into a fantasy fugue state. I decided to write a novel about the college search. My main character would be female, a straight-A overachiever dying to go to an Ivy League school. Which meant that I had to hie myself east and actually tour a few campuses. After much nuanced, artistic deliberation about where I had friends I could stay with for free, I decided to investigate Harvard and Princeton.

Being nothing if not service oriented, I now offer these tips to Lone Star parents on how to survive a Back East college tour.

* Number one with an armor-piercing bullet: Leave your own child home. Do as I did and take along an imaginary teenager. Take the one who loves to share her thoughts and listens raptly to yours. Who digs it when you wear belly shirts and sing out loud. Who is not going to be em-

barrassed by your dopey questions, dopey shirt, dopey shoes, your dopey insistence on breathing. Rory, that animatronic poppet from *Gilmore Girls*, would be perfect.

* Next, a bit of fashion advice for parentals as you head east: Leave the pastels behind. Your Southwest connection in Dallas is the last time you'll see clothing in any color that an Italian widow wouldn't wear. This tip is especially crucial if you screwed up royally and brought your own, actual child along. The more you approach a ninja-level of invisibility, the happier your teenager will be. Parents, you can't go wrong with the official fabric of the dorky dad and misguided mom: polar fleece. You can't go right either, but isn't that parenthood's essential conundrum? And, students, you are going to be tempted to look presentable. Don't. If you need fashion tips on touring the Ivy League, head out to the nearest highway intersection. Your style gurus will be holding signs offering to work for beer.

* Develop filtering systems capable of fuzzing out phrases that begin with words like "interdisciplinary" and "process oriented." Also immediately route to the lint trap comments like "In assembling our freshman class, we're looking for more than ____." Fill in and ignore "grades," "test scores," "freakish brainiacs," "thirteen-year-old Nobel Prize winners," "big fat bank accounts," and "colossal endowments."

All right, let's say that worse has come to worst and your offspring is with you. Take immediate action! Before you open your mouth, you must, must, must attach yourself to someone else's child. Yes, Dad, go up to the nearest child who is not your own and put your arm around her. Trust me, the years you spend in the slammer nicknamed Short Eyes will be nothing—the merest blip on the parental radar—compared with the agony of watching your own daughter incinerate from embarrassment—literally spontaneously combust and burn to cinder—after you ask the hottie student guide, well, essentially anything. But do try the question one mother in my Harvard tour group posted to the delight of her six foot two son: "Will we be able to examine the sprinkler system in the dorm?"

My favorite parent question, though, came from the Korean dad on the Princeton tour. After the admissions counselor—herself a recent grad with, perhaps, a bit too much Ivy in her high-fiber ego—told us that P'ton admits roughly one out of every nine million applicants, Korean Dad made up his mind. Stolid as a sumo wrestler entering the ring, he treated the admissions counselor like a particularly cagey used-car salesman who'd somehow managed to close the deal and gravely announced, "Okay, my son go this school. Where I pay?" ♣