

Alexander Williams is now a tall, slender young man with a deep baritone voice and a casual look. We meet in the formal living room of his parents' house on a sweltering day in August. Alex complains good-naturedly, but nevertheless pointedly, about the fact that the house lacks air conditioning. He is at home only by chance. A health epidemic in the city where he had expected to be for a medical internship caused him to change his summer plans. He came home and, with help from his mother, arranged to do some volunteer work in the offices of two different local physicians ("mostly following doctors around"). He also intends to take a long trip to California to visit his girlfriend.

Alexander is surprised to find that I do not know that he has been planning to be a doctor for many years. He had a series of internships in high school, some aimed at minority youth, that gave him exposure to the world of medicine. As he says, "It is just nice to know your way around a lab." He took practice SATs "ten or eleven times" and his scores "kept going up." He also had a private tutor. He says that he is "satisfied" with his score of 1350/1600 [2030/2400], but he adds, "I think I could have done better." When he began looking seriously at colleges, he very much wanted to be admitted to a special "eight-year" combined undergraduate and medical school program offered at Columbia. His career path has long been a clear one: being a doctor is "what I want to do." Alexander applied to Columbia under its early decision provision, which meant that if he were invited to attend, he would be committed to accepting the offer.¹ His record of nearly all A's in high school, combined with his strong SAT scores, led his mother, at least, to be "pretty sure I would get in." But, had Alex not been admitted, then he "would have had like a week and a half to apply everywhere else." If rejected from his first choice, he had plans to apply to other schools, including Brown, Haverford, Cornell, Dartmouth, and Washington University. He recalls that when he was "younger," he wanted to go to Stanford: "It seemed like the place to be." His father took off from work to spend Alexander's spring break

looking at possible colleges. Ms. Williams also took him to colleges. In addition, he visited still more colleges on a summertime college tour, during which “a friend and I looked at a bunch of schools.” The early-decision strategy made his father nervous: “My Dad was wondering why I hadn’t applied anywhere else.” But, as when Alex was younger, his mother’s view prevailed. The gamble paid off. Alex was admitted both to Columbia and to the university’s prestigious program that guaranteed him admission to medical school. He explains that he “did not qualify for a need-based scholarship,” and he did not get an academic scholarship. But his parents could afford the full cost of Ivy League tuition and room and board. He was set.

When I ask how college has worked out, Alex responds enthusiastically, “I love it.” His fall semester courses included medical ethics, neural science, a history seminar on slavery, and a science course. Spring semester, he took chemistry, biology, a top level science course, and a Black experience course. The university does not offer plus or minus grades. This, in Alex’s opinion, “kind of stinks.” He received a B in all but one of his courses (barely missing an A in some instances); in the Black experience class, he received an A. He pauses for a long time before replying to my question about how he feels about these grades. “I could have done better,” he says slowly, “But still, I don’t have any regret. I enjoyed myself. I think that I studied a lot. I know I studied *a lot*.” His father, however, made it clear that he would prefer that Alex get higher grades. As Alex puts it, “He knows that I know that I could have done better.”

Reflecting on his freshman year experiences, he comments that his roommate was “kind of a problem,” in part because “our schedules were opposite.” And, he adds, “We had a few arguments.” In the end, Alex’s roommate moved out, and he did not get another one. During sophomore year, he will live “with a close friend of mine.” The two met initially because they both had rooms on the same floor during freshman year. Alex is aware that for some of his fellow African American students,

the transition to college has been difficult: “Some people came from all-Black high schools and they experienced shell shock.” For him, “It wasn’t such a shock; my high school [was] predominantly white.” Alex attended a college pre-orientation for students of color. Although some colleges offer special dorms focused on African American experience, Alex did not live in one. In explanation, Alex says he “gets along with everyone.” He has a girlfriend who is Black, but he is not active in any of the African American groups on campus, in part because “it can eat up all of your free time.” He acknowledges having gone to one meeting of a Black student organization but, citing his need to study, never returned. Although originally cautious about his slavery class and concerned about a “one-sided view,” Alex feels his instructor was “very open-minded” and “very nice.” “I didn’t feel uncomfortable,” he reports.

I ask whether Alex has had any problem with being followed around in stores. He grimaces and replies: “Oh yeah, there is nothing you can do about that. . . . I just ignore it. I don’t let it bother me. . . . Sometimes I play games with them and [stand] in a not very visible place in the store and someone will come to ‘put something away.’{hr}” This pattern began in middle school. “My parents have always talked to me about that kind of thing. I kind of expected something to happen.” When I ask how often he must contend with this problem, he says, “It doesn’t happen *that* much,” estimating that he is harassed this way a couple of times per month.

Alex drives but does not own a car. When he comes home, he takes over one of his family’s several available cars. He does not seem worried about finances. His parents give him money, and he also has a bank account with some of his own money in it. His parents’ careers have continued to prosper. Mr. Williams, a lawyer, received a major promotion to a highly respected position; Ms. Williams is in the same corporate position she held when Alex was in fourth grade, but she is traveling much more than in earlier years (a fact Alex’s father notes in a somewhat unhappy tone of voice). Alex is anxious to travel and is excited about his upcoming trip to California.

He seems content and optimistic about the future.