With colleges aiming to diversify their student bodies, underrepresented minorities have been given preferences in admissions, particularly at elite institutions. But how much is minority status worth? And how does it compare with other admission advantages, such as being a recruited athlete or a legacy? According to a new study by Thomas Espenshade ’72, professor of sociology, the minority edge is comparable to the preferences for athletes and children of alumni.

In examining admission decisions at three unnamed private research universities, Espenshade found that African Americans and athletes enjoy the most significant bonus in admissions. Using the S.A.T.’s 1600-point scale as a measurement, Espenshade found that being black is worth roughly 230 extra points, while being a recruited athlete is worth 200 points. Hispanic applicants get an average bonus of about 185 points, and legacy status translates to 160 points. Asian applicants are at a disadvantage, comparable to a loss of 50 points.

The study is part of the multidimensional National Study of College Experience (N.S.C.E.), which is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Espenshade admits that relying on the numerical data of standardized test scores does not capture some important portions of the admission process. Admission officers have more information, including “soft variables” derived from personal statements and recommendations. “We’re looking at this with a set of binoculars where one of the lenses is not available to us, in some sense,” Espenshade says. “So we see partially, and I think the numbers that we come up with make generally good sense. But it’s only a partial story.”

In addition to expressing admission preferences in terms of S.A.T. scores, Espenshade’s research also tracks the likelihood of admission for the different applicant groups over time, from the 1980s through 1997, the last year of data included. Based on those statistics, the athlete advantage has shown significant growth, while advantages for African Americans and Hispanics are declining.

Looking at college admissions from a social scientist’s perspective could help to demystify some of the underlying mechanics of the admission process. The research also appeals to a wider audience outside academia. “There is a lot of interest in this topic of college admissions, simply because the competition to get into places like Princeton has become, among some segments of society, frenetic,” says Espenshade, who notes that Princeton is not one of the institutions that provided data for his work.

Espenshade’s paper on minority, athlete, and legacy preferences will be featured in an education-themed issue of Social Science Quarterly later this year. His current and future work on admission preferences also includes an examination of the impact of high school class rank and the quality of a candidate’s high school, and the N.S.C.E. is examining the impact of socioeconomic status in admissions.

Espenshade’s interest in diversity and higher education does not end with acceptance letters. When the Supreme Court upheld preferences for underrepresented minorities in Grutter v. Bollinger (2003), Justice Sandra Day O’Connor’s opinion of the court cited two primary reasons for permitting preferences: ensuring that the “path to leadership” is open to people of all races and ethnicities, and enabling the “substantial” benefits of diversity in education.

To reap the benefits of diversity, Espenshade says, patterns of social interaction need to include the type of mixing and mingling that O’Connor’s argument presupposes. Espenshade hopes that N.S.C.E. survey data will give a clearer picture of how well friendships, roommate patterns, and intergroup contact enable exchanges between people with diverse backgrounds. “We need more empirical evidence on this question of whether there are educational benefits to diversity,” Espenshade says. “I think that in principle there are, but are we realizing that full potential? Probably not.”

By B.T.