Princeton sociologist Thomas Espenshade got an unexpected bout of publicity last week when a New York Times columnist used a study he published in October, a 500-page tome on college-admissions practices at eight elite schools, to argue that working-class whites — as well as whites in rural areas — get the short end of the stick. As columnist Ross Douthat sparked a viral rebirth of the affirmative-action debate, Espenshade was quick to point out that the newspaper article had overreached with the data. He talked to TIME's Katy Steinmetz about his 2009 work, No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal, and detailed what this decade-long admissions investigation did and did not uncover. (See TIME's special report on paying for college.)

Douthat cited your study to say that the gatekeepers of elite education seem inclined to exclude the poor of red-state America. You say those findings go beyond your study. How? What I think he did was take a relatively minor finding and push an interpretation that goes beyond the bounds of available evidence. We have this finding that if students held leadership positions or won awards in career-oriented extracurricular activities when they were in high school, there was a slightly negative impact on their chances of being admitted to one of these top private schools.

Now, what are these career-oriented activities? Douthat mentions as possibilities, and I don't deny it, that it could be participating in a 4-H club or Future Farmers of America, but those aren't the only types of activities that might fall into that broader category. It could include Junior ROTC. It could include co-op work programs. It could include a host of things. And these aren't necessarily rural types of activities. My interpretation is that [having leadership positions or winning awards in career-oriented activities] suggests to admission deans that these folks are somewhat ambivalent about their academic futures. (See pictures of a college for Native Americans.)

Did you find any geographic bias?
I went back to the original computer output that we generated for this book, and we don't actually measure rural residence ... But what we do know is what state the students lived in when they applied to these top schools, and what we found is that once you know all these other things about an applicant — their gender, whether they're recruited athletes, SAT scores, race, social class — in most cases it doesn't really matter...
what state you’re applying from, but there are some instances where it matters a lot and in a positive direction. And those instances tend to be students who are applying from red states. So if you are an applicant from Utah and you are in all other aspects identical to someone who’s applying from California, your chances of being admitted to one of our elite colleges or universities are 45 times greater. We found the same advantages if you’re applying from Montana, from West Virginia, from Alabama.

What is it about diversity that is so important? People take its value to be axiomatic, but why does it matter?
I think it matters in two respects. One has to do with opening up pathways to leadership for all members of society. This would be true whether we’re talking about the legal profession, the medical profession, Congress, whatever. We want to make sure that our society is creating opportunities, access to these elite schools and pathways to upper mobility for all groups in the population.

It also matters in another respect. In the old days, going back to, say, the 1950s, if you looked at the Princeton campus and who came here, it was all white men, most of whom were from privileged backgrounds. Their perspectives on life didn’t vary that much from one student to another. So the learning that they did was largely book learning, but there’s another aspect of learning that one hopes takes place in college, and that has to do with expanding one’s horizons, expanding one’s perspectives, coming into contact with people whose life circumstances are different than your own and broadening your outlook as a result of that. That can’t happen if there isn’t a diverse group of students. (See pictures of the college dorm’s evolution.)

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How did you get interested in studying college-admissions practices?
What was originally intended to be a 12-month study grew to be a 10-year study. The original provocation was this: Two Harvard faculty members had observed that if you look at the black undergraduate students at Harvard, the majority were not what most people have in mind when you talk about the beneficiaries of race-based affirmative action. In other words, the majority of the black students at Harvard were not descendants of the American slave population but rather they were first- or second-generation immigrants with parents from the Caribbean or Africa or they were multiracial students. The majority of the black undergraduate students at Harvard were more like the Barack Obamas of the world than the Michelle Obamas of the world. [So we decided to] do a quick study and find out if what these faculty members observed at Harvard is true generally throughout selective schools.

Once we were going to do a survey, it became evident that we shouldn’t just focus on black students and issues of immigrant backgrounds. There were a whole bunch of other interesting things having to do with admissions and campus life, surrounding not just black students but [also] white, Hispanic and Asian. And then we decided that social class was an interesting aspect to look at. So it just mushroomed very quickly into a much, much bigger study. (Read "Inside the College-Admissions Process.")
How long did it take you to put the study together?
Longer than I had anticipated. [In 1999] we first approached 10 elite colleges and universities and asked them to participate, and then we asked them for data: individual student information for all applicants for admission in 1983, 1993 and 1997. Then we also wanted to supplement that information with a student survey, so we took a sample of 18,000 students who had applied to or enrolled at one of these top schools and sent them a 16-page questionnaire, and it took a while to up our response rate. And we added other information to our database, from the Census Bureau, from the Department of Education and other places, so the actual writing of the book started in about June of 2005, and we finished it in about three years. It came out in October of 2009, about a decade after we originally conceived of this project.

When the study came out in October, what findings did people tend to latch onto?
One of the issues that always concerns people is whether we still need affirmative action, because we have evidence that underrepresented minority students get a plus factor in the admission process, and there are some conservatives who find this very distressing. One of our chapters has a whole bunch of simulations where we look at a series of what if questions. One of the things we asked was what would happen if we did away with race-based affirmative action. Some people argue that all we need to do is substitute economic or class-based affirmative action and we'll get the same results. Well, it turns out that we don't get the same results. And after having done a whole bunch of simulations, what we concluded is that there really is no feasible alternative to race-based affirmative action if you want to preserve today's [ethnically diverse] profile.

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