Over the past three decades, the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the student and adult populations in North America, as well as other parts of the world, has increased substantially, due in part to changing migration patterns and to varied birth rates. In the United States, the number of students with disabilities has also grown. Many members of the educational research community are concerned about the challenges that diversity poses for equity and excellence. In particular, they are concerned about the persistent achievement gap between students who are poor and from racial, ethnic, and linguistic minority groups and their peers, as well as continued disparities in the distribution of educational resources. In addition, there are many concerns about the extent to which responses to student diversity take into account cultural, linguistic, social, and economic factors in teaching, learning and schooling.

At the same time that the demographic landscape has dramatically changed, and accountability issues have taken center stage in many of the most important discussions about education around the world. While most educational researchers and practitioners agree on the need for accountability, substantial disagreement exists about what students and educators ought to be held accountable for and how best to assess results. Some believe that an emphasis on testing, the cornerstone of the current accountability movement, is essential to ensuring that all students are educated to high standards. Furthermore, there are many who believe that a “free market” approach to education will pressure educators to raise students’ test scores. Others, however, think that a singular focus on testing for purposes of accountability is inappropriate and that more attention is needed to the social and political dimensions of accountability and to equity issues at the societal level.

Underlying differing views of accountability are profoundly different conceptions of democracy and beliefs about the role that education plays in democratic societies. Some argue that a democratic society and a free market economy go hand in hand, and that education is the system for cultivating the human capital a society needs to be
economically competitive. For others, the role of education in a democratic society is to cultivate the human potential—including dispositions, knowledge, and skills—needed for active participation in a vibrant and evolving representative government. From this perspective disparities in educational resources among diverse groups are seen as anti-democratic, and education is seen as one important way to ameliorate disparities.

Understanding the convergence of these three trends—increasing diversity among students within the context of disparities in achievement and resources, increasing tension regarding the role of education in a democracy, and increasing accountability through testing—requires thoughtful and purposeful examination. The theme for the 2005 AERA Annual Meeting, “Demography and Democracy in the Era of Accountability,” is intended to promote such examination from all research paradigms and perspectives. Program organizers welcome the full range of perspectives on these critical issues from researchers in the United States and the larger international community. We are particularly interested in proposals that consider the implications for democratic and emerging democratic societies of research, practice and policy related to quality education and fair assessments for all students.