About the Theme
Contemporary research discussions regarding educational opportunity bear a familiar ring to those of past decades. They affirm the importance of equal opportunity while highlighting the significance of empirically rigorous research for improving opportunity and access. As a result, they have reignited research and policy debates, dating back more than 60 years (Clark and Clark, 1947, and the Coleman Report, 1966), about segregation and civil rights in the U.S. There is little dispute that considerable change has occurred in legal and institutional mandates as well as social practices that served as barriers to equal opportunity. However, a series of recent research articles, book volumes, and national initiatives have re-examined this change by focusing on the tensions between opportunity and outcomes in relation to several factors, among them, educational attainment, academic achievement, and college enrollment and retention. They raise questions about the meanings and uses of the concept, equal educational opportunity; the social barriers that contribute to inequality; and approaches to increasing educational attainment and achievement for all children.

We are left asking: Are we better positioned today to improve educational opportunities than we were in the past? What are the pathways to achieving equal educational opportunity? How do we transform the power of knowledge and scholarly discourses into public will, engaging practice, and responsive policy? These questions of knowledge and action to achieve equal educational opportunity will be the focus of the 2017 Annual Meeting.

The theme of the Annual Meeting is framed around historical and contemporary discussions about unequal educational opportunity, as they relate to four critical dimensions. The first focuses on the meanings and interpretations of educational opportunity, access, and equity for the purposes of understanding and addressing perennial issues such as school quality and recently intensified problems such as violence in schools. The second poses questions about whether the problems associated with unequal opportunity and the methods used to study them are conceptualized to capture the diversity and complexity of circumstances that countless children, families, and communities (e.g., poor and underserved) face. The third reinforces the need for interdisciplinary research and intersections between education research and other fields invested in eradicating social disparities that lead to marginalization and poor school outcomes. The fourth underscores possibilities for linking educational, social, and public policies that can respond to both longstanding educational issues, such as teaching and student engagement, while attending to increasingly visible problems such as homelessness, trauma, and incarceration that affect students’ ability to thrive.

As we begin AERA’s second century, the theme of the 2017 Annual Meeting is a call to examine these critical dimensions of educational opportunity and rigor in research as they pertain to the diversity of issues, populations, and contexts served in and by educational inquiry. These range from young children to their parents and families, from PreK-12 to postsecondary education and adult learning, from affluent districts to financially struggling schools, and from immigrant to low-income communities within urban and rural settings alike. They are studied in large datasets and in field studies, and through multiple methods, including qualitative approaches, experimental designs, and discourse analyses. They are investigated in both vastly different and complementary theories of learning, human development, literacy, sociolinguistics, and culture, and within different contexts. They are connected to race, language, and gender, and are embedded in systemic inequalities. Finally, they exist alongside enormous technological innovation, new approaches to studying diverse
and historically underserved populations, refinement of existing methodologies, recurrent policy revisions, and the wide reach of global exchanges.

We invite AERA members to deliberate the expanse of issues associated with equal educational opportunity and contribute submissions that consider the following groups of questions:

- What counts as educational opportunity, for whom has it improved over the past 60 years, for whom has it not improved, and with what sustainability and potential for the future?
- How do we conceptualize educational opportunity, who is studied and who is not, and what are the implications for research, policy, and praxis of such conceptualizations?
- How do we ensure that our inquiry and research questions are relevant and in what ways is the rigor of our research matched by the rigor of methodological frameworks and approaches, interpretation of results, and application of knowledge?
- How do we leverage knowledge from research and practice to ensure that the most pressing issues reach the forefront of major policy decisions and action, from longstanding issues of teaching and learning, to persistent problems of racial and economic inequality, to understudied topics such as homelessness and incarceration and their effects?
- What steps might research help craft across educational, social, and public policies at all levels of government and in philanthropy—and what partnerships are needed—to reimagine equity and reduce the risks faced by students, families, schools, and related institutions?

We approach the 2017 Annual Meeting with a deep sense of enthusiasm and hope in the renewed attention to inequality of educational opportunity and ongoing research. We approach the meeting as well with a heightened sense of urgency about the need for enduring change that eliminates barriers to opportunity, engagement, and success. We encourage submissions that motivate members to answer the call to action and to draw decisively upon the strengths of research, practice, and policy to fulfill the promise.

Works Cited


Vivian L. Gadsden, President
Angela E. Arzubiaga and James Earl Davis, Program Co-Chairs