Stephanie, Cyarah, Sam, Adedoke, Gifty, Ola, Justin, Christian, and Lovanie are a small sample of the students who entered college in the fall of 2015. Their names reflect the currents and cross currents of migration, history, aspirations, and dreams. Some came from families with deep roots in the United States; others proudly proclaimed themselves first generation. In statements composed to introduce themselves to others in their university’s social justice learning community, a few made note of their communities of faith, while others paid homage to family and friends who inspired their life choices. In moving prose, they spoke of premature births, early deaths, and personal struggles. Passionately, they talked of what they wanted to become, the dreams they had for themselves, their families, and their communities. Lovanie Pomplilus echoed many of her classmates when she wrote:

I am the youngest of four children. I am also the only one born in America out of all of my siblings. My parents are
from Haiti and they do not speak much English. Throughout my younger years my parents only spoke Creole to me, so when I started school I did not speak or understand English. As a result I took an ESL class, which I enjoyed. After one year of ESL I was able to take regular classes. All my life I had to work really hard in school because I did not receive help at home with my school work.¹

Like others in her cohort, she imagined a future that she would shape: “I work really hard for the things I want in life, because quitting is never the answer. Although the world we live in makes it easy to fail and hard to become successful, [I] will refuse to let failure consume my life. So I leave you with a quote so dear to me, ‘Your future depends on what you do today’—Mahatma Gandhi.”²

Lovanie’s classmate Christian overcame other challenges to find himself among the first-year students. He was quick to remind readers that a person’s outside may mask struggles and demons competing for attention internally. Adolescence, regardless of background, can be difficult enough, but in this case, self-loathing, identity struggles, and social alienation certainly exacerbate the movement from child to teenager to adult. He wrote:

Growing up, I struggled with questions of identity. From my picture, you’ll see that I’m a light-skinned, red haired, male. I will tell you, however, that I am a Latino queer. As a child, I saw myself as a white, cis-male. Unknowingly, I had engaged in self-negation, and self-hatred. I hated my culture. I hated speaking anything other than English. I hated eating anything other than hotdogs and hamburgers. As I matured, I came to understand my familial heritage, but I continued to struggle with how this implicated the way in which I saw
myself. Engaging in critical work, I learned to affirm myself and love those around me, which is an ethos I wish to one day teach along with the aspirations, goals, and dreams of those who fight, relentlessly, for true justice for all.3

Christian and Lovanie speak for themselves, but they also exemplify current and future generations of Americans who complicate old notions of diversity and influence how we speak about it. To see them as only black, white, or Latino is to oversimplify how they entered and enter the world. Color, gender, gender identity, and family ties to another land, language, or cuisine mingle with age, race, geography, class, religion, sexuality, and birth order to give form and substance to the lives they are shaping.

Christian and Lovanie attend Rutgers University–Newark, an urban campus populated by students from a wide variety of backgrounds. They applied for college in the age of the Big Test or SAT, an assessment that determines the fates of millions annually. This is an era when educational attainment increasingly sorts people into poverty or relative wealth.4 Yet their statements reflect the hopefulness of those who have been presented with opportunity. They have come of age at a time dominated by calls to educate more, not less, of our talent pool. They are hopeful, too, about the possibilities for building community out of difference as they progress through pathways of inclusion.

Yet any number of campuses are roiled by the outrage that emerges from experiences of exclusion. In 2015 in university settings as varied as the University of Missouri and Yale, the kinds of campuses often championed as model sites of tolerance and acceptance, students from minority backgrounds frequently called attention to what they experience as individual and institutional examples of hostility, while those who disagree often charge
them with hypersensitivity. At Missouri, for example, graduate student Jonathan Butler commenced a hunger strike to force the university to remove the president he deemed unresponsive to a series of racially charged incidents, most notably a feces-constructed swastika in a residence hall bathroom. When asked if he was prepared to die, Butler remarked, “I don’t think Tim Wolfe [the president of the University of Missouri] is worth my life. But I do believe that when it comes to fighting for justice, you have to be willing to have a level of sacrifice.” Wolfe ultimately resigned after Missouri football players and coaches rallied to the cause. Their protests brought into sharper focus the ways that diversity does not always translate into inclusion.

At Yale, black students blasted administrators of all backgrounds for asking, or at least allowing, students of color to bear a disproportionate responsibility for educating others about demeaning forms of expression, such as ethnically or racially stereotyping Halloween costumes. As in so many moments of protest, students raised other questions: Should a fraternity be allowed to block admission to a party on the basis of race and gender, as was alleged? Why continue to call the heads of the residential colleges masters, given the term’s usage in American history? Is now the time to close the chapter on the university’s allegiance to the nineteenth-century proslavery advocate John C. Calhoun?

The diversification of American life and its institutions can produce positive and negative reactions. Demographers such as William Frey say that Christian and Lovanie will represent an ever-larger share of the American nation in the decades ahead. In fact, the United States is predicted to have a nonwhite majority by midcentury. Demographic transition, some assume, will drive change. The old categories of “minority” and “majority” will
evolve, if not disappear, the optimists trumpet. Yet at the same time, and as the foregoing examples suggest, this very heterogeneity has the potential to compromise the ambitions of the American democratic project. As the New York Times columnist Frank Bruni described, there is a real worry that heightened difference will exacerbate “sharpening divisions, pronounced tribalism, corrosive polarization.”

This inaugural volume in the series Our Compelling Interests: The Value of Diversity for Democracy and a Prosperous Society comes as we contemplate a transforming societal landscape. The series promises to explore diversity—in racial, socioeconomic, gender, religious, regional, sexual, and other forms—through accessible, sophisticated, and balanced treatments by leading scholars, writers, intellectuals, and commentators. The goal is lively, informed analysis, not social or political bromides. We have commissioned studies of how diversity affects social organization and productivity, educational access and testing, crime and incarceration, art and creativity, education and social mobility. Volumes under way ask if diversity improves the bottom line and enhances overall productivity; and if the concept of diversity carries the same meaning in Europe, Asia, Africa, and elsewhere in the Americas.

Aiming to be balanced, informed, and at times edgy and pointed, the series seeks to force even the most ardent skeptic and most devoted proponent of diversity to pause and consider: what are our shared compelling interests as a nation and a civil society? In the law, the idea of “compelling interests” captures those reasons that the state may limit or abridge what are otherwise recognized as protected rights. The state’s compelling interest, for instance, in providing equal protection under the law justifies limiting the rights of employers, landlords, and
public accommodations in order to achieve nondiscrimination. Yet we might move beyond the legal technicalities to take a more expansive view of the idea of compelling interests. As a society, we share a compelling interest in our constant need to balance the individual’s right to escape unwanted state interference against the state’s interest in protecting individuals from unfair and unconstitutional treatment. This series seeks to shape this formulation by further asking: Can we ensure a healthy and vibrant democracy without carefully aligning guarantees of civil and human rights, mechanisms for civic connection, and pathways for economic opportunity? Ultimately, we wonder how we advance democracy if we limit the numbers who have reason to believe they have a fruitful stake in its future. Is the perceived legitimacy of American institutions—from those that educate to those that adjudicate, from those that promulgate free expression to those that safeguard our security—at risk when so many are left behind in the “land of opportunity”? For us, issues of fairness and inclusion are themselves a matter of compelling interest.

Accordingly, we ask a number of timely and interlocking questions, beginning with: Is diversity an opportunity for growth or a constraint on prosperity? Is diversity in institutions a goal worth pursuing or a condition to be managed? What happened to our aspirations for finding common cause, despite observable difference, for e pluribus unum? Are the hopes of sustaining a prosperous society upended if successive waves of advancement leave scores abandoned and neglected on the shoals?

Efforts to craft broader social and economic inclusion are not new, to be sure. A little more than sixty years ago the country set about dismantling “separate but equal” with the hope of eliminating racially segregated schooling. Just over fifty years
ago the nation launched a “War on Poverty” to arrest and correct perceptible inequality. Yet as we pass the half-century mark of this “war,” we face escalating, not diminishing, inequality. And six decades after the outlawing of separate but equal, more rather than fewer schools and neighborhoods are segregated, especially in our economically stagnating urban centers. We are left to ask: Have we abandoned our commitment to equal opportunity for all? As the faces, faith traditions, native languages, and social traditions of our neighbors continue to change, gated communities, ever-higher incarceration rates for some youth, and other forms of separation raise the question: Why do we fear the difference in our midst? Could the difference in our midst perhaps rather be the key to our sustained future? The essays in this inaugural volume, as well as the volumes to follow, confront these questions while also probing how we define our shared compelling interests.

**Discourse on diversity.** A range of studies point to the ongoing demographic transformation of America. By midcentury, Americans living along the Atlantic, Gulf, and Pacific coasts will live amid a notable nonwhite majority, with traditional patterns of sizable white majorities continuing to dominate in the interior Midwest, plains, and mountain West. The nonwhite majority will not constitute a monolith, however. The largest group is projected to be Hispanic, which includes a broad cross section of Spanish speakers—with roots in Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere. African Americans will comprise a second population cluster, remaining 13–14 percent of the overall population. But even here, the population composition will continue to shift, with an increasing share of those, like Lovanie, with roots in a broader African diaspora. Some will hail from the Caribbean and confound the
simple interplay between race and ethnicity, being both black and Latino, or black but not multigenerational African American. Others will have grown up with parents in the United States and grandparents on the African continent, members of a contemporary and swelling American African population. A quickly growing Asian-descended population will blend strands from several nations of origin—China, Japan, the Philippines, Korea, India, Vietnam, Thailand, Samoa, Guam, and Pakistan—with long-established communities to give form to the Asian American population.

A focus on percentages alone obscures the continued presence of this country’s indigenous peoples and the growing numbers who consider themselves mixed race. We have frozen native peoples in time, substituting one-dimensional Hollywood images for the varied communities that stretch from the Arctic Circle in Barrow, Alaska, to the Gulf Coast in Mississippi. Native Americans live in rural areas and cities, on reservations and in suburbs; they head major enterprises and struggle with human afflictions, and will demand attention in the quarter century ahead.

Alongside them expect to find a greater number of Americans who refuse to answer the question of whether they are white, black, brown, yellow, or red. America’s racial chromatic scale has less meaning for them as they embrace the multiple histories that formed them. Old binaries of one race or the other, one language or the other, one religion or the other will mean less to the kid who grew up celebrating Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa and whose best friend is Muslim and speaks French fluently. They, too, are part of the change we are to see.

Numbers alone won’t trigger a commitment to diversity or recognition of our shared compelling interest in leveraging
diversity for democracy and prosperity. As post–World War II South Africa vividly attests, a numerical majority need not always lead to full political and social opportunity. From restrictive voting rules, to prohibitions on membership, to the criminalization of certain behaviors, to overheated, bigoted political rhetoric, to subtle residential steering by real estate agents, societies can draft ingenious tools to prevent diversity from changing the status quo. Clusters of individuals come together to advantage their own group or perspective, failing to ask what’s best for the common good.

Attempts to engage aspects of our common interests are numerous and varied. In some ways, we are awash in such conversations in virtually every arena of American life. Often the focus is on obstacles to full participation faced by too many Americans and on the proper role to accord to particular dimensions of difference, especially race, ethnicity, and class in opening up avenues for social mobility, opportunity, and civil rights. These conversations capture our hearts and our minds, whether framed by the courts, by Congress, or by the media; whether focused on school desegregation, access to higher education, immigration reform, voting rights, a cradle-to-prison pipeline, disparities in health and wealth, or global economic competitiveness. They are riveting whether cast in the haunting light of history (Is this a new Jim Crow?), viewed through the hopeful visions of prophets of a postracial, color-blind future, or anchored in the alternative vision of a society enriched by leveraging that diversity and difference. Sometimes these conversations can seem too technically focused on legal claims and arguments of precedent, far from the realities of lived lives. At other times, it is harder and harder even to have the conversation, especially in the light of the frequent clashes that begin with intense
intergroup distrust and suspicion and end in tragic confrontation. Certainly, what one group sees as enlightening debate, or even equal-opportunity satire, another sees as targeted provocation in light of what it holds sacred. How, then, do we learn to value the freedom of expression and the responsibility of listening?

**Documenting the landscape.** This inaugural volume, *Our Compelling Interests: The Value of Diversity for Democracy and a Prosperous Society*, seeks to set the context for the volumes to follow by asking how we reconcile the core national principle of equal opportunity for all with the failures that still haunt our current realities, the divisiveness in our social landscape, and what promises to be more, not less, difference given the demographic explosion we are poised to encounter. In other words, how do we consider the pursuit of civil rights, social connectedness, and prosperity in an age of fragmentation? Will the diversity explosion that William Frey describes in the first essay of this volume lead us to make ever firmer and crisper distinctions of identity, fighting with one another as if forever caught in a zero-sum world, or will we instead mobilize to take the complexity and dynamics of that changing landscape as an opportunity to break out of our historical patterns? Will the world that Christian and Lovanie graduate into soften enough to allow the nuances of their worldviews to lead down a path that leverages difference and opens up opportunity as a shared interest? The answer is by no means clear. Recognition of this is itself an important turning point for our nation, and the world.

Indeed, as all the essays in this volume note, we cannot simply presume progress, especially as patterns of residential, educational, and economic segregation have in many ways hardened over decades. While the demographic map reflects a blurring of
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canonical groupings, Charles Tilly’s “durable inequalities” hold fast.\textsuperscript{11} We see widening divides between the “haves” and the “have nots,” greater social distrust across lines of difference, sharper instances of education serving the interests of some kids more than others, and other patterns disturbingly aligned with historically familiar group dynamics. These patterns require us to take seriously the relentless drag backward, to segregated neighborhoods, schools, prisons, and workplaces, that Thomas Sugrue compellingly describes here. This in turn sets the table for Danielle Allen to articulate a need for policies and skills of interaction that build social connectedness. The durability of inequality also puts us on notice that, if we fail to educate inclusively, we may well face diminishing prospects for a prosperous society, as highlighted here by Anthony Carnevale and Nicole Smith. This concern leads Marta Tienda to call for policies of human capital investment in the education of youth, especially the burgeoning minority youth cohorts.

**Defining diversity.** The structural lines that simultaneously define diversity and solidify inequality along familiar divides—of race, ethnicity, class, home, or birthplace—have in some very real way intensified since the civil rights legislation of the 1960s (as Sugrue notes). At the same time, though, the social landscape of diversity, identity, and group affiliation has taken on more complex intersectionality as more people move across national and cultural boundaries, and other critical dimensions of difference—gender, sexuality, ability, faith—gain attention (as Allen notes). Both the intensification of demarcations by race and ethnicity and the complex, more fluid landscape of identity surface here as essential to any discussion of civil rights, social connectedness, and full economic participation. This tension in definition and focus—often characterized, on the one hand, by
a concern that the power of race gets lost in an inclusive definition of diversity and, on the other hand, by the need not to overlook other significant dimensions of difference—highlights how much harder the task of leveraging diversity will be in the future and how complex the answers will be.

When Sugrue traces the time line of racialized inequality, and Carnevale and Smith lay out the economic imperative for full educational and workplace participation by the fastest-growing racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups, there is little doubt of the potential value of diversity as defined in traditional terms. This potential value is true, Sugrue points out, even as the normative particulars of racial and ethnic categorical distinctions shift and blur (as they always have). Yet, when the discussion moves in Allen’s essay to bridging social ties and the social construction of social connectedness, then the power of broader, more fluid, more inclusive, and yet textured identity categories emerges just as clearly. This is when the lived experiences—the internal psychology and the external interactions that motivate Lovanie and Christian to push onward against traditional binaries—become useful to examine. This contextual specificity is, in our view, inevitable and provides a more comprehensive, albeit also more complicated, picture of diversity—its manifestations and impacts and potential value.

Although Allen is certainly right to warn us against reifying particular salient categories of difference and identity, as they are socially constructed and fluctuate with associational habits and context, life opportunities remain structured by durable inequalities that articulate with race, ethnicity, class, and neighborhood. And those durable inequalities, as Sugrue argues, also determine the salience and longevity of particular group distinctions. In turn, we are led by both Sugrue and Allen, along

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with the commentaries of Ira Katznelson and Patricia Gurin, to question whether we are on a path of relentlessly increasing isolation (bonding within but not bridging across groups) or on one of increasing connectedness without assimilation. Are there instances in which more demographic diversity—population heterogeneity produced by immigration in some cases and changing patterns of association in others—isn’t accompanied by increasing inequality? Will our implicit biases and default assumptions relax enough to allow us to perceive just how complex and multi-identified people have become? Will it help as we move forward to think of diversity in more than demographic terms, as the commentaries of Katznelson and Kwame Anthony Appiah suggest?

In this volume, we start this process of interrogation of our compelling interests in order to find the right way to examine and respond to increasing diversity. We understand the fuller exploration of our compelling interests that marks this series will not be easy. We will need to overcome habits of conflating the concept of diversity with white-black interactions. We appreciate the need to include research that confounds rather than affirms initial assumptions. As the series develops, moreover, we must be poised to reassess what counts as a compelling interest.

**Leveraging diversity.** To leverage diversity is to use it to promote the common good. This requires us to ask new questions and to reexamine old conclusions. How do we recognize the long arm of pervasive racial binaries and at the same time go beyond descriptions of structural or representational diversity—that is, the number of individuals in specific categories? What will it take to recognize, for example, the very real threats posed by hyper-residential segregation? This “architecture of segregation”¹² hinders our ability to live together, reduces our ability
to learn from one another, and often leads to significant differences of opinion. As important, how do we consider the dynamic complexity of diversity? Words such as intersectionality, hybridity, and blurred group demography speak to the ways an individual can occupy many social categories, simultaneously. As the authors and commentators in this volume note, shifting social group composition and norms, and the changing landscape of power, inform what is meant by diversity and how it can be best leveraged.

In fact, it is not just the salient descriptive (or prescriptive) dimensions of diversity that shift in influence over time and context; it is also the ways in which individuals perceive diversity as they interact with each other. Diversity is never enough in and of itself to produce compelling impact, as Gurin and Tienda strongly assert here, and as many educators have noted in valuing the educational benefits of diversity. Proximity is not the same as interaction. We argue that a true democracy depends on individuals from different communities being presented with informed and intentional opportunities to learn from one another. This is true whether the measured result centers on social interaction (as in Allen’s essay) or economic productivity (as in Carnevale and Smith’s) or intergroup inequality and the distribution of wealth and power (as in Sugrue’s). As Appiah wisely notes, whereas unfettered inequality can destroy democracy, embracing diversity can spur creativity, productivity, and prosperity. Attention must be paid to the social and behavioral dynamics of effective inclusion, full participation, and intergroup interaction. An accumulating literature across domains as disparate as education, the behavior of firms, public health, and community policing, underscores this point as does Katzenelson in his commentary on democratic diversity. As a result, we take as a
“first principle” that making diversity work is a positive societal value. Indeed, for democracy to work, we must leverage the range of human actors who contribute to the overall wellbeing of our society.

Valuing diversity. We can succeed in defining and leveraging diversity and still fail to value diversity’s role in sustaining a prosperous democracy. To value is to signal importance. This volume, and the series it inaugurates, argues that diversity in all forms must be valued. It further suggests that everyone’s civil rights must be respected, social connectedness in all aspects of civil society must be encouraged, and participation in the economy should be based on ability and open to all. The interactions among diversity, civil rights, social connectedness, and economic opportunity are key to realizing a fully prosperous society.

Of course we recognize the tension between what is professed and what is experienced. In principle, a society can profess a belief in the value of diversity and in practice limit the benefits of its application (whether through political attacks, legal battles, or social worries) to a small community of participants. This series hopes to influence the continued evolution of conversation and thought about the interplay between diversity and democracy—in the United States and other countries.

In conclusion, for Lovanie and Christian to realize their dreams and play a significant role in shaping their communities, this nation, and our world, diversity must be valued, defined, and leveraged. As is argued in the pages that follow, we have a compelling interest in doing so.