

# (Re)conceptualizing International Student Mobility

## The Potential of Transnational Social Fields

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Although educational border crossings are not new, the creation of innovative theoretical constructs, such as transnational social fields, to examine the flow of students and social networks across national borders is a profound development. Within transnational social fields, a constant flow of ideas and practices is embedded within relationships, offering a framework for addressing evolving associations across borders to better understand how university students construct identities and negotiate social spaces, physical locales, and the geography of the mind. Employing the concept of transnational social fields in an analysis of student mobility illuminates student negotiations by recognizing simultaneity in localities and multiplicity in identities and refuting the generalization or homogenization of student experiences. This article aims to provide a working understanding of transnational social fields and justify adopting concepts that currently reside outside of the existing cross-border education discourse to frame international student negotiations that are not thoroughly explored or understood.

**Keywords:** *transnationalism; transnational social fields; student mobility; international students*

An increasing number of students travel abroad to pursue degrees from institutions around the world. Yet the voices and the complexity of degree-seeking student experiences are strikingly absent from cross-border education<sup>1</sup> literatures. The limited empirical research on international student sense making is focused on nationality and is simultaneously uniformed by the intersections of salient identities such as class, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, and gender. Cross-border education literature, specifically the international student mobility discourse, is bereft of significant and robust concepts that bring into view international student experiences and identity reconstructions, thereby homogenizing and generalizing the negotiations of international students when great dimensions of difference actually exist.

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Although border crossings are not new, the creation of theoretical approaches examining the flow of people across national borders is a profound development. A *transnational social field* provides a conceptual space that incorporates contexts of origins and educational locales abroad to illuminate international student negotiations and provides an example of the utility and benefit of adopting and applying theoretical constructs from transnational discourses. A transnational social field is “an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks that extends across the borders of two or more nation-states and that incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in these various locations” (Fouon & Schiller, 2001a, p. 544) and includes those who travel abroad and those who remain in contexts of origin. Transnational social fields are spaces for the exchange, organization, and transformation of ideas, practices, and social networks. Yet disciplines that employ concepts which illuminate border crossings only rarely examine educational contexts or the lived realities of university students.

The goal of this article is to describe ways in which the construct of transnational social fields elucidates flows and processes that reveal the sense making of international students in higher education. Furthering the exploration of international student positionality proceeds on an assumption that existing literatures should be problematized and conceptualized in ways that allow for an understanding that (a) attends to the intersections of the past, present, and future; (b) fills voids in the literature with regards to the intersection of identities and the importance of contexts of origin; (c) challenges the assumptions that international students are deficient or aliens; and (d) refutes the generalization that international students are a homogeneous group who similarly experience educational border crossings. This article develops an analytical lens to deepen the understanding of international student sense making so that student perceptions and identity reconstructions are placed in the center of a dialogue on international student mobility.

This article is a critique of the existing analytical approaches to international student mobility. The author proposes a perspective not grounded in the globalization or internationalization discourses, but rather in the transnational discourse. The cross-border education discourse primarily focuses on globalization and internationalization of higher education efforts at the national, sector, or institutional levels, whereas the majority of literature on student mobility highlights trends at the national level, such as the number of students engaging in cross-border education and the amount of income generated through student expenditures in host countries. However, this article argues for adopting a lens that does not examine national trends or statistics, but that illuminates student voices and the impact of cultural flows and processes on student-inhabited transnational spaces, identity negotiations, and networks of association. Although the cross-border education community continues to engage in research on a national policy level, efforts are needed to create and implement policies and programs not only based on data that reflects these national trends and figures, but also by taking into consideration the voices of students who engage

in educational sojourns and who are impacted by these very policies, thereby requiring researchers and practitioners to step outside standardized practices to develop innovative programs and realize the potential of international student mobility.

This article does not debate the myriad of murky definitions that abound within the cross-border education literatures or propose a repackaging of existing concepts that may no longer apply to dynamic and evolving realities. This article aims to provide a working understanding of transnational social fields as part of an analytical framework for examining international student mobility and a justification for adopting concepts that currently reside outside of the cross-border education discourse to frame international student negotiations. Through a lens grounded in transnationalism, it is possible to position international student voices at the center of a discourse on international student mobility.

The remainder of this article situates and defines transnational social fields in the transnational migration literature before turning to the utility of transnational social fields when applied to educational border crossings. Finally, questions for further research and analysis are raised.

## Transnationalism

Globalization is a highly debated concept. On one hand, perspectives of globalization include Americanization and Westernization, highlighting the homogenizing effects of global flows and processes on nations, cultures, and identities. This view conceives of globalization as a uniform and linear process of cultural homogenization achieved through cultural imperialism and domination, ultimately leading to an impending Westernization and creation of a global village or a world culture. On the other hand, perspectives of globalization include creolization, hybridization, and fragmentation, illuminating the heterogeneity of globalization outcomes. This view conveys globalization as emphasizing diversity and complex conditions where ruptures affect locales and people in different ways. Between the two is a plethora of metaphoric language to describe the processes, influences, and factors associated with globalization.

Yet some theorists critically examine globalization and all that is associated with processes of time-space compression, advances in communication technologies, and the interdependence of societies and organizations to conclude that globalization is not only a highly debated concept but an overused term for another process, *transnationalism*. Globalization cannot be applied to everything and “certain movements of people, ideas and objects are best defined as transnational rather than global” (Schiller & Fourn, 1999, p. 343). The forces of globalization are locally experienced and people, communities, and societies interpret and respond in a range of ways to the same cultural flows and processes. The notion of transnationalism challenges the all encompassing global cultural trends proposed by some globalization theorists (Appadurai, 1996; Featherstone, 1995; Hannerz, 1996), asserting that “an interest in

locality of settlement as well as place of origin *and* the global forces shaping both locations” (Schiller & Levitt, 2006, p. 15) are critical. Contemporary transnational processes and spaces reflect globalization but are more limited in scope.

Grounded in critiques of globalization theories, the phenomenon of transnationalism as a dynamic, “multifaceted, multi-local process” (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998, p. 6) emerged in the 1990s and was used to describe the lives and state of affairs of immigrant groups to the United States and Europe (Roudometof, 2005; Schiller, 2005). A “new kind of migrating population is emerging, composed of those whose networks, activities and patterns of life encompass both their host and home societies. Their lives cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single social field . . . We call this new conceptualization transnationalism” (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992, p. 1). Although Schiller and Levitt (2006), who are at the forefront of integrating the concept of transnationalism within the migration literature, recognize that transnational processes are not new and that cross-cultural encounters are pervasive, they also acknowledge that the development of a vocabulary to describe and frame the ways transmigrants or border crossers maintain ties and participate in identity constructions that extend beyond the borders of nation-states is an innovative and evolving theoretical approach.

Transnational migration scholars encourage us to acknowledge that although the world is politically and economically organized and divided into nation-states, aspects of our lives are penetrated by social and cultural processes that extend beyond geographical borders (Schiller & Levitt, 2006). An increase in transnationalism cannot be reduced or explained solely by recent technological advances in communication, the sharing of social and cultural activities through mass media, or intensified travel opportunities (Pries, 1999; Roudometof, 2005; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). Yet transnationalism generates new approaches for exploring and analyzing the flows of migrating populations, including educational border crossers. A transnational social field is a robust concept that holds great potential for deepening the understanding and exploring the possibilities of cross-border education through student-defined spaces.

## **Transnational Social Fields**

The concept of a transnational social field emerged from the study of migration as part of the trend to examine global flows on transnational spaces and processes (Schiller & Fournon, 1999). As previously stated, a transnational social field is “an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks that extends across the borders of two or more nation-states and that incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in these various locations” (Fournon & Schiller, 2001a, p. 544). Global processes promote the creation of transnational social fields, which forces the (re)examination and (re)conceptualization of the relationships between social spaces, physical locales, and the geography of the mind.

What Schiller and Fouron (1999) labeled a *transnational social field*, other scholars have conceptualized as *transnational social spaces* (Pries, 1999), *transnational villages* (Levitt, 2001), *contact zones* (Clifford, 1997; Pratt, 1992), *translocality* (Appadurai, 1996), and *third spaces* (Bhabha, 1994). Yet subtle differences exist. Although some theorists contend that the nation-state will become a global organizational structure of little relevance, the conceptualization of transnational social fields does not assume that because migration and social networks are not grounded in the geography of a nation-state that a new or ambiguously defined space is created. In fact, migration strategies within transnational social fields may ultimately reinforce a sense of cohesiveness and familial relations, may not necessarily challenge nationalism, or may be coupled with national imaginaries that transcend geographical borders (Schiller & Fouron, 1999). The use of the concept of transnational social fields recognizes various power dynamics and outcomes that manifest when individuals with a range of cultural identities encounter each other; however, it does not limit or predict how spaces, identities, or networks of association are created or negotiated.

### **Transnational Social Fields and Cross-Border Education**

Scholars generally employ the concept of transnational social fields in their examination of transmigrant or diasporic community identity negotiations. These scholars explore how global processes and flows influence transnational processes, highlight issues of agency and community, facilitate the creation of new transnational social networks, and address issues such as the identity construction of second generation Haitian immigrants in New York (Fouron & Schiller, 2001b), the social networks of Senegalese immigrants in Italy (Riccio, 2001), Puerto Rican women's development and maintenance of transnational communities in the United States (Alicia, 1997), entrepreneurial business spaces of Middle Eastern immigrants living in Europe (Moallem, 2000), the alienation of Japanese-Brazilian migrants returning to Japan (Tsuda, 2001), the conceptualization of migrant communities among Chilean refugees in Australia (Cohen, 2004), the perspectives of human agency among Yucetecan in response to changes in US immigration laws (Adler, 2000), and the adoption and integration of cellular phones in Jamaican transnational communication (Horst, 2006). However, transnational migration literatures neither recognize nor incorporate university student voices or include educational border crossings in their analytical approaches.

Transnationalism encourages researchers and scholars to examine "the changing role and nature of the state by keeping state processes and structures within our frame of analysis and yet not confining our field of study within the borders of any one state" (Schiller, 2005, p. 440). Yet existing research on student mobility is overwhelming, dominated by country comparisons and constructs that analyze statistics and trends at the national level. Since 1948, the Institute of International Education

(IIE) annually publishes *Open Doors: A Report on International Education Exchange*, which elaborates on statistical trends in international student mobility to and from the United States including data for enrollment, funding, fields of study, places of origin, and institutional destinations among others. IIE also manages Project Atlas, an atlas of student mobility that tracks the migration patterns of students who chose to pursue higher education outside the borders of their home countries, a project that in comparison to the *Open Doors* report adopts a global perspective to student mobility, yet still resides at the national level.

Today, an estimated 2 million students around the globe pursue higher education in countries other than their own (UNESCO, 2005), with the United States, the leading destination. The transnational movement of university students is one of the “central and most apparent expressions of globalization” (Staring, van der Land, Tak, & Kalb, 1997, p. 14) and represents the largest segment of cross-border education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004, p. 19). In 1904, when official numbers of international academic activities were initially recorded, 2,700 foreign students studied in the United States (Baron, 1998). Today international student enrollments total 582,984 and comprise approximately 4% of those pursuing higher education in the United States (IIE, 2007). International students contribute over US\$13 billion to the US economy and the Department of Commerce ranks higher education as one of the top five largest service sector exports (IIE, 2006). These statistics are helpful for establishing context, but do not tell the entire story.

### **Transnational Social Fields and International Student Mobility**

International students, although not specifically mentioned in the transnational literature, certainly constitute a significant migrating population and operate in transnational social fields. Unlike students who study abroad for a semester or pursue short-term specialized educational sojourns, undergraduate degree-seeking students are grounded in multiple social spaces for substantial periods of time, traveling to and from contexts of origin and campuses abroad over a period of several years. Yet the experiences of these students are virtually invisible. The limited research on student experiences focuses mainly on universal adjustment or culture-shock issues of students abroad for only short periods of time. Undergraduate degree-seeking international students simultaneously remain family members in contexts of origin, while attending classes, engaging in campus activities, and interacting with local communities abroad, thereby building and maintaining social networks that transcend national boundaries. International students must negotiate transnational social fields or networks that cross national boundaries and develop social networks of associations that maintain social, familial, economic, religious, and political relations with contexts of origin. Employing the concept of transnational social fields recognizes the fact that international students are straddling

worlds while creating and engaging in transnational social fields where the associations, ruptures, and intersections between the social, personal, and academic are forged.

However, few education scholars use the concept of transnational social fields to address international student sense making or identity constructions. Limited research to date tackles the educational experiences of international students operating within transnational social fields, and the few published works that do exist include populations that do not involve the United States, but rather those found throughout Europe (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) and the trans-Pacific (Butcher, 2004; Waters, 2005). Therefore, the remainder of this article presents a detailed argument for how framing educational border crossings within transnational social fields can expand our insight into international student identity negotiations. Although the United States provides a case study of sorts, the utility of adopting a transnational lens to recognize, situate, and engage student voices provides universal lessons in cross-border educational arenas throughout the world.

### **What do Transnational Social Fields Illuminate about International Student Mobility?**

The concept of transnational social fields allows a (re)envisioning of international student experiences and sense-making. A transnational social field “provides the conceptual space . . . to study social processes and positions, including gender, radicalization, class, and identity, which are not contained within the border of a single state” (Schiller & Levitt, 2006, p. 9). Within transnational social fields a constant flow of ideas, practices, and goods are embedded within the relationships between individuals, offering conceptual space for addressing evolving familial, academic, and social networks across borders to better understand how educational sojourners position themselves within academic and international student communities, make sense of their networks of associations, and envision possibilities. Employing the concept of transnational social fields contributes to an analytical framework that refutes the generalization or homogenization of international students and acknowledges simultaneity of locality and multiplicity in identities.

#### **Refutes the Generalization and Homogenization of International Students**

As with any evolving field of study, a degree of debate and dialogue is constructive. Some scholars have conceptually challenged and criticized transnationalism and the language developed and employed within the field for redundancy or the repackaging of an established concept into something new, stating that nothing is

gained “by calling immigrants ‘transmigrants,’ when the earlier and more familiar term is perfectly adequate” (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999, p. 219). In contrast, other scholars are struck by “the extent of conceptual slippage, and lack of theoretical clarity, in the terminology of migration, emigration, exile, refugees, diaspora, and asylum thinkers” (Einhorn, 2000, p. 702). While this debate is ongoing, it is evident that transnational research emphasizes variability and multiple trajectories among border crossers. The experiences of all transmigrants, immigrants, sojourners, or border crossers are not the same and should not be labeled or lumped together in a manner that only fosters their continuing homogenization or generalization.

However, scholars often employ literary metaphors to lump border crossers into a single category—aliens. Throughout academic works, the word *alien* is used to describe many aspects of cross-cultural experiences, including “alien tongue” (de Courtivron, 2003), “alien core” (Aciman, 1999), “alien elements” (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002), “alien nation” (McClennen, 2005), “alien cultures” (Hannerz, 1996; Rizvi, 2000), “alien other” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998), “alien customs” (Bateson, 1994), “alien classrooms” (Hellsten, 2002), “homeless-stateless alien” (Robertson et al., 1998), “resident alien” (Robertson et al., 1998), “pre-alienated self” (Papastergiadis, 1998), “hyperlalienation” (Budick, 1996), “alien society” (Agar, 1996), “alien community” (Goffman, 1963), “alien voices” (Gergen, 2000), and even “alien difference” (Bateson, 1994). Authors and publishers incorporate the concept of aliens into cross-cultural training resources, including a video entitled “Aliens: Being a Foreign Student” and a diversity simulation marketed as “An Alien Among Us,” both published by Intercultural Press. The depth and breadth of alien concepts and terminology framing cross-cultural encounters are substantial and continue to nondiscriminately categorize individuals and groups whose lives are lived across borders.

Yet the experiences of international students are inherently different from other groups of border crossers, such as immigrants, refugees, or expatriates. Immigrants leave their contexts of origin for a variety of reasons, including a conscious decision to seek out economic opportunity. Refugees are often forced to leave or exiled by the will and resources of dominant and powerful groups. Expatriates travel or live abroad as representatives of corporations engaging in the global marketplace or as representatives of nations engaging in public diplomacy. Each condition and rationale for crossing borders brings with it different expectations and realities. The crossing of borders is an enduring and permanent change for some, whereas others view the experience as temporary and relish the fact that they can return home. Certainty about the future is characteristic for some, whereas others leave without a clear idea of what a new life may bring. On arriving in a new culture, some will be warmly received and welcomed, whereas others will be shunned or marginalized, viewed as a burden on society. Some travel alone, others in groups or cohorts. Border crossers come with different cultural and linguistic understandings and expectations of a new culture, ultimately impacting their experiences.



International student voices differ from other groups and a sense of their experiences cannot be assumed by analyzing the experiences of other border-crossing communities or the experiences of previous generations of educational sojourners. International students, who travel to the United States and are immersed in an academic setting, begin their sojourn in a different space than other border crossers. International students studying in the United States today have very different experiences than international students who studied here in the past. Instant communication and an increased ease of travel allow and often require students to participate in the happenings of contexts or origin and the educational spaces they inhabit. Therefore, a sense of their experiences cannot be assumed by analyzing the experiences of other groups of border crossers or international students of another era.

Considerable diversity exists among international students. Students who come to the United States to partake in higher education come with a variety of skills, worldviews, histories, and educational experiences. However, the most common approach on campuses throughout the United States is to lump together or homogenize the experiences of international students based on the assumption that as a collective international students experience educational sojourns in a similar way, proliferating generalizations where great diversity at the intersection of cultures actually exists. Yet transnational social fields provide a lens to challenge the notion that international students are a “homogenized enclave of otherness” (Cohen, 2004, p. 125) and to highlight unique student-defined spaces, perceptions, and identity negotiations. The limitations of scholarly literatures reverberate on campuses where policies and programs isolate, marginalize, and stereotype international student needs and interests.

Transnational social fields provide a conceptual space to elaborate on the multiple trajectories that emerge from international student experiences and the juxtaposition of different practices, beliefs, worldviews, and transnational learning spaces. There are many ways to be and not to be an international student, and transnational social fields allow for consideration of a wide variety of contexts, social interactions, and historical approaches. However, no one illustrative characteristic such as ethnicity, class, religion, language, or previous international experiences can determine the vast range of meanings students ascribe to an educational sojourn. What transnational social fields offer is an opportunity to situate student experiences within a social network that holds the possibility for exploring aspects of educational border crossings and saliency of identities that international students themselves define as influencing their sense making.

### **Acknowledges Simultaneity of Locality and Multiplicity in Identities**

The concept of transnational social fields offers elements of simultaneity of locality and multiplicity of identities in the analysis of international student identity constructions. Acknowledging the multiplicity of student identities is an integral aspect of addressing an existing void in the international student mobility

literature by recognizing students simultaneously negotiate contexts of origin and new contours of lived realities abroad.

The nation-centered approach that dominates the research on student flows to and from countries around the world extends into the minimal research on student identities. International student mobility literature lacks comprehensive and coherent theories for analyzing the intersections of identities, is highly focused on nationality, and is uninformed by issues of class, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, sexual orientation, gender, academic, and other student-defined salient identities. Nationality consistently trumps other germane identities, as demonstrated by the titles “Taiwanese Students’ Perspectives on Their Educational Experience in the United States” (Yen & Stevens, 2004), “Extracurricular Activities and the Adjustment of Asian International Students: A Study of Japanese Students” (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002), “Adjustment Issues of Turkish College Students Studying in the United States” (Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington, & Pisecco, 2001), and “Cultural Differences and Similarities in Seeking Social Support as a Response to Academic Failure: A Comparison of American and Chinese College Students” (Mortenson, 2006). Understanding the role of multiple identities and their influence on how students experience their world is essential for breaking the silence in the literature. Arguing that nationality is the most salient of identities because it is national borders that are being crossed oversimplifies the experiences of educational sojourners and ignores the ways in which international students recreate or contest cultural or alien ideologies.

The use of the concept of transnational social fields in an analytical framework allows for the incorporation of the contours of a geographically unbound terrain characterized by continuously changing contexts where international students maintain associations and networks across borders. Employing the concept of transnational social fields challenges the prevailing discourse and recognizes that student experiences are shaped through ongoing interactions grounded in contexts of origin and new spaces. The extent to which transformations or events in contexts of origin impact the formation of transnational social fields is essential in understanding how students construct and reconstruct a sense of self and to what extent international students utilize this educational experience to transform perceptions of what is possible.

Incorporating the tenets that create the foundation of transnational social fields into an analytical approach provides a space for elaborating on processes that international students engage in throughout the duration of their educational border crossings and illuminate important points of reference and ways of understanding that, while developed in another context, influence student sense making abroad and are essential for their understanding and interpretation of various worldviews. Transnational social fields provide the space for addressing what life experiences, identities, and localities form the lens through which international students articulate the past, make sense of the present, and predict the future as state of growing consciousness. By viewing international students as operating and negotiating

transnational social fields, it is possible to illustrate how international students engage in “imaginative rediscovery” (Hall, 1993) and weave together a cohesive narrative of contexts of origin and educational spaces and explore perceived terrains of possibility.

Although historically border-crossing experiences were largely viewed within dominant frameworks of bipolar landscapes and localized identities, research now focuses on the relationship between the alternative images of transnational social spaces and multilocal affiliations (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Understanding how international students negotiate transnational social fields challenges binary thinking, exemplified by frameworks grounded in the geography of home and host countries. For some international students the concept of home may not be tied to one place. A context of origin may not be a singular location in which a student holds citizenship, but a myriad of destinations or localities that create contexts of origin. The families, friends, and communities that comprise the social network of a student may be spread across multiple geographic spaces, not just located in home and host countries. Research demonstrates that international students “invest in their higher education with a strategic cosmopolitan imaginary already in mind” (Rizvi, 2005, p. 10) and often engage in pathways to the university already grounded in established transnational social fields.

## Concluding Comments

Globalization, internationalization, and transnationalism are distinct, yet interrelated phenomena. Conceptually, educational researchers and scholars attempt to delineate between the three and offer a plethora of perspectives and justifications for defining and utilizing global, international, transcultural, or transnational education terminology. However, more often than not, the focus is on the various forms of education and not on the populations or individuals partaking in the learning process. Laboring over terminology, though useful for delineating the types of efforts undertaken by governments and higher education institutions, does little to place student voices at the forefront of a discourse on student mobility.

International student voices and the complexity of their experiences are strikingly absent from the discourse. A single anthology, *Crossing Customs: International Students Write on U.S. College Life and Culture*, is the only publication to date where international students share how they situate themselves at the intersections of traditions and cross-cultural exchanges, with attention given to understanding the implications of the past, present, and future on identity constructions. The students in *Crossing Customs* describe how they approach the ruptures between what is familiar and what is foreign to them as they live and study in new educational spaces, renegotiate identities, and develop habits of mind and association that are grounded in multiple life trajectories.

Existing international student mobility literature is bereft of significant or robust concepts to bring international student negotiations into view and the concepts employed by disciplines that bring transnational networks and spaces into view are only rarely applied to educational contexts or student experiences. Therefore, the complexity of international student identity negotiations and sense making are not fully understood. Current frameworks for analyzing educational border crossings lack concrete theoretical groundings or are 1-dimensional at best, making it important to seek out and apply approaches and analytical constructs that lie outside of current educational discourses. Situating student lives across borders intensifies our understanding of student sense making and illuminates the contours and possibilities of educational sojourns.

The purpose of this article has been to propose that a personal level of analysis be included in the literatures that address cross-border education policies and practices to ensure that student voices are at the core of discourses on international student mobility. Current processes are focused on the similarity of international student experiences as a reactionary cultural adaptation exercise as a result of national identities. Although grappling with internationalization efforts at the national, sector, and institutional levels is paramount to the development of policies and practices, understanding how these initiatives affect students should be central to cross-border education dialogues. Although scholars frequently question how global flows and processes impact student mobility trends, the question of how transnational flows and processes influence student negotiations is asked much less often, if at all.

An analytical lens grounded in transnationalism focuses on individuals as members of networks of association and communities engaged in cross-cultural exchanges. By focusing on social, cultural, academic, and support networks, it is possible to acknowledge the constraints and power relations that influence what is thinkable or possible within a larger context and still determine how networks of associations transnationally and transculturally contribute to international student self-representations. Outlining a transnational research agenda illuminates how international students construct identities in relation to personal interpretations of educational border crossings and answers the question of how international students deal with the “persistent pull of ‘locality’ as a social space of identity formation” in transnational social fields (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998, p. 22). Individualized interpretations and negotiations are essential for distinguishing and tracing the multiple meanings associated with being an international student and the sense of belonging or not belonging to campus communities.

Essentially, applying an analytical lens grounded in transnationalism facilitates an examination of the processes and attributes through which international students maintain transnational associations. Therefore, utilizing transnational social fields in a conceptual framework to explore international student sense making allows for a closer examination of individual experiences, relevant aspects of international student communities and groups, and academic spaces as sites of transcultural sense making and transnational negotiations.

Adopting a transnational framework of analysis raises some questions that initiate a dialogue to uncover the range of meanings associated with educational border crossings. How do students incorporate personal histories into sense making in transnational learning spaces? How do socioeconomic, cultural, educational, and familial histories influence student identity negotiations and constructions in transnational social fields? What border crossing and life experiences form the lens through which international students articulate the past, make sense of the present, and predict the future? How do students reconstruct identities within the increasingly mobile contexts in which we live? How do students reconcile dimensions of difference that manifest across contexts? How are student experiences shaped through ongoing interactions between the traditions, worldviews, and values of contexts of origin and educational spaces abroad? How, if at all, do students define themselves as international students? How do the perceptions of others contribute to student self-representations? How does the positionality of students on campus inform the construction of a sense of being and belonging? These are not simple questions, but rather questions that involve an exploration of student-defined spaces, negotiations, and identities.

The purpose of this article is to examine the potential a transnational analytical lens has for furthering our knowledge of international student experiences in light of new realities students face as educational border crossers. It is possible that a deeper appreciation of student negotiations will materialize into innovative and improved international higher education policies, programs, and practices. The answers to these questions and a myriad of others position university student voices at the forefront of a discourse on student mobility and begin to pave the way for a critical discourse of international higher education efforts and outcomes.

## Note

1. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) cross-border education refers to "situations where the teacher, student, programme, institution/provider or course materials cross national jurisdictional borders" (OECD, 2004). This article focuses specifically on mobility of students as educational sojourners crossing national boundaries to pursue degrees abroad at institutions of higher education.

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