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## Serving the Needs of International Students: A Qualitative Study


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# Serving the Needs of International Music Students: A Qualitative Study

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## Introduction

As the number of international students studying in North America increases, libraries and institutions of higher education have begun to examine how to best meet their needs. The literature is rich with studies that explore the barriers international students face, the specific programs that have been successful in helping them, and best practices for meeting international students' academic needs. However, little research has been conducted to discover how to best serve the needs of international music students in particular, especially regarding how to support them as they conduct research required for their academic music courses. Non-international students often have difficulties navigating the library's resources, finding and reading research, and citing sources appropriately, but these difficulties are compounded for international music students who may not have strong English language skills and who may be less familiar with research practices compared to their international peers in more research-heavy disciplines.

This study attempts to discover the barriers that international music students encounter when using the library and conducting research at North American academic institutions. To these ends we implemented multiple semi-structured interviews. Most studies that have been conducted about international students and information literacy employ a survey,<sup>1</sup> but other qualitative means of study reveal important insights into the needs of this population. In-depth qualitative research that explores the experiences of international music students has the potential to cultivate better understanding of this phenomenon so that music librarians and faculty can more effectively serve this distinct population.

1. Amanda B. Click, Claire Walker Wiley, and Meggan Houlihan, "The Internationalization of the Academic Library: A Systematic Review of 25 Years of Literature on International Students," *College & Research Libraries* 78, no. 3 (2017): 328–58.

This study suggests ways that music librarians and faculty could overcome the barriers that international students may experience interacting with librarians and professors, navigating the university's or library's website, studying on campus or in the library, and finding appropriate support services provided by the university and/or music department. The study endeavors to answer the following research questions:

- What barriers do international music students encounter when using the library or conducting research at North American academic institutions?
- How can the library and music faculty address these barriers?

The researchers for this study are Cleveland State University's Performing Arts & Humanities Librarian (the liaison librarian for the Department of Music) and Assistant Professor of Musicology for Cleveland State University's Department of Music. First we will define the issues through an examination of the relevant scholarship. Then, we will explore the themes revealed in the student interviews we conducted. Finally, based on a synthesis of the assembled information, we will provide suggestions for music faculty and librarians to mitigate the challenges encountered by international music students.

### Barriers for International Students

Our research confirmed, perhaps unsurprisingly, the findings of Maria Christina Fava that international students encountering U.S. culture for the first time might experience culture shock and its correlate "academic shock," as well as stress and anxiety due to homesickness and performance pressure.<sup>2</sup> While cultural, language, and academic barriers create challenges for international students in their studies in general, there are distinctive challenges for international students developing library and research skills while studying abroad. Challenges often include communication problems, understanding social and cultural norms as they relate to research, and adjusting to a new library and college environment.<sup>3</sup> Language issues in particular can make using the library difficult, especially when it comes to asking directions to the library, navigating the library's online presence (including the library's catalog and databases), and finding and integrating sources into research assignments.<sup>4</sup> Misreading or misspelling search terms prevents students from efficiently finding sources, and

2. Maria Christina Fava, "Teaching Music History to Non-Native English Speaking Students: An Exploration of the Cultural and Linguistic Challenges," this *Journal* 8, no. 2 (2018): 15–29.

3. Sara Baron and Alexia Strout-Dapaz, "Communicating with and Empowering International Students with a Library Skills Set," *Reference Services Review* 29, no. 4 (2001): 318.

4. William Badke, "International Students: Information Literacy or Academic Literacy," *Academic Exchange Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (2002): 3; and Charity K Martin et al., "Closing the Gap:

simple tasks like reading a database search results page may take considerably longer than for native-born students. Formulating research terms may be more difficult for non-native-speakers as well.<sup>5</sup>

International students' preconceptions about the library may impede their success when conducting research in particular. International students may have little experience using a library, even in their own country, where the library may not be a significant part of the culture.<sup>6</sup> For those that have used the library before, their experience might have been very different; perhaps their libraries had no catalog, or only a print catalog. Some students might be unused to free access to library materials and the computers, and may expect to have to pay a fee; others may not be aware that academic libraries offer services like interlibrary loan or journal databases.<sup>7</sup> International students in a number of studies also indicated a belief that they did not need to use the library to succeed academically in the North America.<sup>8</sup> This conclusion is unsurprising if the international student is from a culture where the library acts simply as a storage location for books or a location for socializing.

One of the most drastic differences is in how international students understand the role of the librarian. Many international students may be unaware that librarians are available for research help, and view librarians as library staff and/or as clerks who purchase, organize, and put books on the shelves.<sup>9</sup> They

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Investigating the Search Skills of International and US Students: An Exploratory Study," *Library Philosophy and Practice* (October 2009): 11, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac>.

5. Hilary Hughes, "Actions and Reactions: Exploring International Students' Use of Online Information Resources," *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 36, no. 4 (2005): 173.

6. Hughes, "Actions and Reactions," 174; Jackson, "Incoming International Students and the Library: A Survey" *Reference Services Review* 33, no. 2 (2005): 198; Ilka Datig, "What Is a Library?: International College Students' Perceptions of Libraries," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40 (2014): 354, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.05.001>.

7. Hughes, "International Students' Experiences of University Libraries and Librarians," 84; Datig, "What Is a Library?," 345; Yan Liao, Mary Finn, and Jun Lu, "Information-Seeking Behavior of International Graduate Students vs. American Graduate Students: A User Study at Virginia Tech 2005," *College & Research Libraries* 68, no. 1 (2007): 23; Ganster, "Reaching Out to International Students: A Focus-Group Approach to Developing Web Resources and Services," *College & Research Libraries* 18 (2011): 369.

8. Lorrie Knight, Maryann Hight, and Lisa Polfer, "Rethinking the Library for the International Student Community," *Reference Services Review* 38, no. 4 (2010): 587, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00907321011090746>; Xiaorong Shao et al., "Chinese Students in American Academic Libraries: A Survey of Chinese User Satisfaction with U.S. Library Experience," *International Information and Library Review* 45 (2013): 32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iilr.2013.05.002>.

9. Hughes, "International Students' Experiences of University Libraries and Librarians," 84"; Shao et al., "Chinese Students in American Academic Libraries," 32; Datig, "What Is a Library?," 353–54.

may also interpret anyone who works in a library, such as a library staff member or paraprofessional, as a librarian.<sup>10</sup>

Misunderstandings about the role of librarians in aiding students with overcoming research barriers are especially unfortunate considering that international music students, who may need librarians the most, are often anxious about interacting with them.<sup>11</sup> They may feel embarrassment or shame about not knowing how to use the library and refrain from asking questions for this reason.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, they may ask friends or classmates before asking a professor or librarian for help,<sup>13</sup> especially if they do not understand the role of the reference librarian as someone who is meant to help with research.<sup>14</sup> When directly asked if they understand, international students may say “yes” even when they are confused in order to appear more capable.<sup>15</sup>

### *Barriers for International Students Studying Music*

Although they are usually asked to demonstrate their *musical* skills via an audition recording, international students studying music in North American institutions are rarely required to demonstrate writing or reading skills, beyond the TOEFL test, to be accepted into a program.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, writing and reading skills in the host country’s language may be quite low for international students entering music programs. Linguistic challenges are exacerbated by the anxiety and low self-confidence second-language-learners might feel.<sup>17</sup> International students may assume that their TOEFL scores indicate they have

10. Koenigstein, “Alleviating International Students’ Culture Shock and Anxiety in American Academic Libraries: Welcome, Ahlan Wa Sahlan, Anyeong Hae Sae Yo, Bienvenidos, Huan Ying, Sanu Da Zuwa, Shalom, Swaagat Hai.” *Library Philosophy and Practice* (2012): 2.

11. Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie and Qun G. Jiao, “Library Anxiety Among International Students,” *Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Education Research Association* (1999): 7; Hughes, “Actions and Reactions: Exploring International Students’ Use of Online Information Resources,” 174.

12. Koenigstein, “Alleviating International Students’ Culture Shock and Anxiety,” 3; Badke, “International Students: Information Literacy or Academic Literacy,” 1.

13. Zhixian Yi, “International Student Perceptions of Information Needs and Use,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 33, no. 6 (2007): 666–73, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jalib.2007.05.001>.

14. Ganster, “Reaching Out to International Students,” 376.

15. Dorothy M. Moore and Philip C. Howze, “Measuring International Students’ Understanding of Concepts Related to the Use of Library-Based Technology,” *Research Strategies* 19 (2003): 63.

16. Jocelyn Wolfe, “‘You’ll Have to Start Early If You Want to Be on Time for the F Sharp!’ Language and the Study of Music: Implications for International Students Studying in Tertiary Music Programs in Australia,” in *ISANA International Conference: Student Success in International Education*, 2007, 1–7.

17. Tomoko Yashima, Lori Zenuk-Nishide, and Kazuaki Shimizu, “The Influence of Attitudes and Affect on Willingness to Communicate and Second Language Communication,” *Language Learning* 51, no. 1 (2004): 120.

sufficient language skills to communicate easily with members of their host country. When this assumption is dispelled, they may then inaccurately conclude that they have no English skills at all and struggle to recover.<sup>18</sup> Academic, discipline-specific language is difficult even for native speakers, so early on international students may understand as little as 10% of what they hear in the classroom.<sup>19</sup>

Music history courses are often reading-intensive and require extensive use of metaphors and cultural references.<sup>20</sup> Even if different cultures share musical concepts, they may express them very differently, so a translation may not be useful for an international student.<sup>21</sup> International music students may need special help from their instructors and peers to adopt these cultural expressions and learn how to read and write in the field of music. Adopting the language of a disciplinary community will help international music students feel more like members of the community, which will help them succeed academically and personally.<sup>22</sup>

### Exploring Experiences of International Music Students

While the existing scholarship clearly identifies the barriers for international students, we are interested in finding solutions for our students who struggle to use the library and conduct research. For this reason, we designed a qualitative study to uncover not only the experience of our international music students as they navigate the library and research, but to discover the underlying meaning of this lived experience.<sup>23</sup> To accomplish this objective, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews exploring the lived experiences of the participants. As a second step, we identified relevant quotations from the transcripts, attempted to avoid researcher bias by considering each quote equally and separately, organized them into “meaning units” or topic groups, and analyzed them in order to identify underlying themes.

18. Judith Carroll and Janette Ryan, *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*, 2007.

19. Janette Ryan, “The Student Experience,” in *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*, ed. Judith Carroll and Janette Ryan (Routledge, 2007), 147.

20. Fyr, “Teaching Music History in a Multilingual Environment: An Accommodationist Approach,” this *Journal* 8, no. 2 (2018): 7–10; Wolfe, “You’ll Have to Start Early,” 1.

21. Wolfe, 3.

22. Wolfe, 6.

23. This study employed the qualitative tradition of inquiry as described by Creswell in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to determine the underlying meaning of an experienced phenomenon, which, in this case, is the experience of international music students as they navigate libraries and research. See John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 1997).



The target population for this study was the international graduate and undergraduate student population at the researchers' institution Cleveland State University (CSU), an urban, public university campus in the Midwest United States that serves over 17,000 students. The campus is in the heart of downtown Cleveland, Ohio, and many of its students are commuters. The total number of international students enrolled at CSU is 1,280, which is 7% of the entire student population.<sup>24</sup> International students are served by the university's Center for International Services & Programs. The Michael Schwartz Library is the main library on campus, with ten subject librarians serving all campus departments. The library currently offers no programs that specifically take into account the needs of international students. However, many of the music students, including international music students, receive information literacy instruction facilitated by the music librarian in both of their required 400-level music history courses, or the required 500- and 600-level music history courses (for graduate students).

The Cleveland State University Department of Music serves 350 undergraduate and 30 graduate students. The total international music student population consisted of five graduate and four undergraduate students, and the sample for our study consisted of four graduate students and two undergraduates. The sampling method for this study was purposive or criterion sampling, as international music students make up the population that experiences the phenomenon in question and were therefore directly targeted. While the sample was small, the results of the study can still be informative for faculty and librarians serving a similar population. The study participants were recruited with help from faculty members in the university's music department, through solicitation at student organization meetings and via email, and by offering a \$20 gift card to the university student store as compensation for their participation in both interviews.<sup>25</sup> Details about each participant are given in Table 1.

24. CSU Enrollment Services, *2017 Enrollment Services Newsletter*, Cleveland: Cleveland State University Website, 2017. <http://csuohio.edu/sites/default/files/Enrollment-Services-Fall-2017-Newsletter.pdf>.

25. This study was approved by the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board.

**Table 1:** Study Participant Profile Information

Pseudo-nym	Home Country	Length of Time in US	Instrument	Degree Program	Future Goals
Ji-Yoo	South Korea	7 years	Violin	Masters in Music Performance	Orchestra musician and teacher
Li	China	2 years	Piano	Masters in Music Education	Music teacher
Pim	Thailand	2 years	Bass trombone	Masters in Music Performance	Orchestra musician
Alice	Sweden	1.5 years	Percussion	Bachelor of Music in Performance	Orchestra musician
Joaquin	Chile	8 months	Percussion	Masters in Music Performance	Orchestra musician
Joshua	Kuwait	5 years	Piano	Bachelor of Music in Performance	Master's degree in performance

Each participant met with one of the researchers on campus for a 30–45 minute semi-structured interview (some questions were determined in advance, and some followed organically from the course of the conversation).<sup>26</sup> The questions explored the student's use of the library website and resources; the student's relationship/impression of the librarian liaison to the music department; the student's impression of the library as a useful space; and perceived support from the university and music department.<sup>27</sup> The interviews were recorded and, after 4–6 weeks, participants were interviewed again. As with the first interview, the second interview<sup>28</sup> was semi-structured and took 30–45 minutes. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to develop longer-term engagement with the participants and gauge any change in attitude over the course of the semester. This persistent observation also increases the dependability of the collected data.

We transcribed recordings of the interviews and then horizontalized the data. In the horizontalization process, we listed statements relevant to our research questions and then considered each statement equally, attempting to set aside preconceived notions about the experiences of the participants. We

26. See Appendix A.

27. See Appendix B.

28. See Appendix C.



then grouped statements into meaning units (themes) and labeled them with their underlying theme. To increase the credibility and reliability of the data, both authors worked separately and then compared the results. The researcher who conducted the interviews also constructed a narrative description of each interview experience. After identifying the shared themes, we developed a structural description of the experience (or “phenomenon,” as it is commonly referred to in this research methodology) for the participants in an attempt to determine the essence of the experience.

### Issues that International Music Students Encounter

While each of the students interviewed had unique experiences, the horizontalization process revealed several themes that affected most or all of the participants. What follows is an exploration of the major issues that emerged in the interviews, along with direct quotes from the transcripts that demonstrate the student perspective. The original language of the participants is retained in these quotations.

#### *Language*

For many participants in the study, language was the most significant barrier to their academic and musical success. Several students mentioned the difficulties of reading assignments for their musicology courses, even with a translation tool at hand.

*I'm trying to translate first of all, all the difficult vocabs and everything. And then, even though I found every word clear, I cannot understand what the sentence means. –Ji-Yoo*

*I use Google Translator a lot . . . But you have to immerse yourself in the book and you have to understand the concept instead of the words. –Joaquin*

*The paper itself is hard and confusing. It took me almost 3 hours to read just 10 pages. And I try to understand it . . . It's quite hard for me. –Pim*

One participant explained that the reading was difficult for native speakers as well, which is, perhaps, unsurprising. Reading academic literature requires different reading techniques and a deeper understanding of contextual background information. While native students struggle to attain these skills, they do not have the additional burden of language barriers, unlike some international students.

Other students describe difficulties of comprehending language during class discussions, or other fast-paced communication. Conversational language in which they engage could be easier because of its slower pace, as opposed to

the quick back-and-forth that can occur between native speakers discussing an academic concept in class.

*I don't have difficult with communicating with other people because you say one sentence, I say one sentence. But in the class, you know, the professor say to whole class, and sometimes the classmates they participate in the class and they speed up their . . . they're speaking so quickly. –Li*

*Me and my [musicology] teacher, I know what he want to say and he understand me. I think that is not a problem. But the academic . . . –Pim*

One student, the newest to arrive in the United States, found that even conversational language was difficult, and this made connecting with others challenging.<sup>29</sup>

*It is my perception that [the cultural barriers I encounter are] just because of the language. Because I have to ask people here or people in general and they say "What?" So I have to explain again and again and I feel shame. –Joaquin*

The isolating experience of feeling unable to communicate even conversational thoughts and expressions came through in the account this student gave of his experiences as an international student.

Language difficulties are compounded when musical terms in one language do not translate clearly into another language. As described in the literature review, musical language tends to be full of metaphors and symbols which may be mystifying to a student for whom the language is not native. In addition, Romance language countries use solfège syllables for pitches and not letters. This creates additional barriers for students who may be proficient in demonstrating musical skills or techniques when described in their native language, but who struggle to understand the parallel English referent.

For international music students who wish to continue living in North America, language differences can be a source of great anxiety. In order to continue on as a professional musician, some of the participants had aspirations to earn their doctoral degrees, which requires a high level of English language mastery.

29. While it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between challenges caused by language difficulties and those created by cultural differences, some participants reported barriers that were specific to cultural differences between their home countries and the United States. These differences can become apparent in the way individuals use body language, the idioms and slang interspersed in the language used, and in the way instruction is conducted in the classroom. For some students, cultural differences made them feel less comfortable interacting with Americans, which, in turn, made them feel more isolated and anxious. One student in particular showed signs of academic shock when describing how, in his country, educational institutions had different structures, processes, and rules. All of these differences made it hard for him to become oriented to being a student in the United States.

*If I want to continue my DMA, my English need to be much better. ... Like I want to audition at Juilliard for the DMA, but they require a score of 100 or something. It's quite high. –Pim*

One significant aid for international music students for whom English is not the first language is the support of their instructors. For one student, communicating with her instrument instructor in English was challenging, especially at first. The instructor allowed her to write her responses down in her lessons and, outside of lessons, email the instructor for guidance. The support of instructors and faculty can have significant positive effects on an international student's experience.

Another student described his instructor's willingness to help with issues beyond music.

*He helped a lot, not even just about music, you know? He also cares about how I'm living, how I'm doing right now. He asks, you know, about my personal stuff and my family. He's kind of ... looking care of you. –Pim*

Students who were fluent in English described other barriers, but seemed to be better adjusted to their new environment. They did not describe challenges with interacting with American students or the same level of difficulty completing reading and writing assignments. Students with language problems had the most difficulty overall in the classroom and conducting research.

### *Stress and Anxiety*

Another theme identified by the researchers was stress and anxiety. At least one participant described extreme feelings of anxiety and stress, perhaps associated with culture shock. Others reported that their initial time in the United States had been stressful, but their anxiety related to being in a foreign environment subsided over time. One student admitted to feeling stressed when she first arrived, but after more than a year in the United States, she was feeling much more comfortable. Some of this newfound ease seemed to be aided by a positive relationship with her instrument instructor and other professors. She also emphasized the importance of being open to new experiences and positive about the experiences that ensue.

*I think if you have an open mind you can accept a lot of things. At first I allowed myself to like this department and then I can learn more. Instead of at first saying I don't like it and then I don't learn. –Li*

While a positive spirit in the face of so much uncertainty and unfamiliarity may be challenging for many international students, early positive and welcoming impressions of the music department and university may help students overcome initial qualms and settle into the new environment more easily.

### *Using the Library*

Using the academic library for research can be stressful and unfamiliar even to native-born students. The participants mentioned several elements of library research that they found difficult or different from the familiar library experience of their home countries. Many students, through their responses to questions about basic research, revealed a lack of familiarity with library research and tools. When asked where he found research information for an analytical paper he had written the previous year, Pim said “basically on the Internet.” Others clearly confused the library catalog with article databases or vice versa when asked about their comfort with using either. These themes are relevant to both librarians and music faculty who have a research component in their curricula.

Some participants expressed direct attitudes or opinions about the library and research. One student was frustrated by the additional time required to research that took away from practice time.

*Practicing six, seven, eight hours a day. And then you have a big research? It doesn't make sense. –Pim*

He argued that taking a research course would not help him gain an orchestra position after graduation, and it was holding him back from the activities that he perceived would help him: namely, practicing his instrument and working with his instrument instructor.

Others had positive things to say about the library and its services.

*Yeah, I think it's useful, they [library staff] are useful. The work here is ... can't say the word ... they want to help. –Joaquin*

*Those library sessions to me just prevented me from having to seek help because it would just be clear. So I do think that is something that should not stop, because it really helps. –Joshua*

Overall, the students seemed to find the CSU library staff helpful, and music history course library instruction sessions, in particular, useful to their research experiences.

### *“It's Big and It Has a Lot of Things That I Need”: Getting to Know the Library*

A couple of students expressed awe at the size and scope of the library collection.<sup>30</sup> They were used to a much smaller library environment in their home countries.

30. To give the reader a sense of the size of the collection of The Michael Schwartz Library, we would describe it with roughly 600,000 print items as a small- to medium-sized collection

*All the material is here, and you have a lot of books and information, papers. Maybe it's because I'm a foreign student—I'm used to have little libraries at the universities, and there's not many books, and you have to do a big effort to find some books. In your case this society, this library specifically ... you have so much, so much material. –Joaquin*

One student was also surprised to find that the library offered a consortial borrowing service, and said that in his own country, if a book was not available at the university library, he would have to go to another place to find it.

When asked how they used the library, or wished to use it, most participants were more interested in using the library collection to find scores than research materials such as scholarly books and articles. Ji-Yoo admitted to using the online source IMSLP to find scores but wondered if the library had scores to check out. She was pleased to learn about the presence of scores in the collection and desired to learn more about how to find them.

All of the students in the study were required to complete a research paper about a subject related to music history as part of their music history course. Most of this research was completed outside of class. When asked about their experience conducting research, many of the participants said that the assignment for this class was their first major research project. During the limited amount of research the participants had done, many indicated that finding useful keywords was especially difficult.

*Sometimes it's quite ... you need to have the right word and the correct title and all of that. –Pim*

*It's kind of a complicated search. You might need to have specific word to search. –Pim*

*It was just [hard to know] where to go to find things, where to actually—what to put in [the search box]. It was just confusing. –Alice*

The difficulty of formulating productive search terms is connected to the broader language barriers discussed above. Others did not indicate difficulties finding keywords in particular, but expressed frustration at attempting to find specific scores or resources about their research topics. When a work's title is in a language other than English in the catalog, the students found it difficult to navigate the additional non-native languages that might be used instead, a challenge that English-speaking students have also repeatedly expressed. Other research issues that were mentioned included finding the full-text of articles and the use of jargon on the library website (for example, the difference between a database, such as *RILM* or *Music Index*, and our online library catalog, called *Scholar*, was not clear to them).

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in comparison to other libraries in North America.

Students also often confused the services of the library with those of the Writing Center (which is housed within the library building, contributing to the confusion). Participants asked if the Writing Center appointment procedure could be made more efficient for graduate students, and complained that they often could not get an appointment because the appointment slots filled so quickly. Several students asked if workshops about writing could be offered to international students, which would be the purview of the Writing Center, but could also be discussed in the classroom by music faculty.

The interviewers explicitly asked students to describe what library services would most help them and their international student colleagues, and the responses given were revealing and informative. Their requests included:

- A workshop or meeting with the music librarian to help international students get started on stronger footing
- A workshop about citation, as international students may not be exposed in high school to the citation styles and rules common in American universities
- Library sessions and information literacy instruction frequency that reflects learning an instrument: repetitive, regular practice, especially at the time of need

*“For Many of Us It’s Confusing Because We Never Do That Kind of Thing”:  
Learning How to Use the Library*

The students requested more frequent library instruction in our interviews.

*So something I’ve seen is that students would have to re-ask questions a lot, which is fine, because as friends we can explain it again. I think if maybe we had an extra session day where students would have to do some sort of presentation on “hey, you’re going to teach us how to use this resource,” you know? I think that would maybe put them on alert a little bit more. Rather than “Oh, I’ll figure out how to use that source later when I’m writing my paper.” –Joshua*

*I feel like a lot of the sessions are so informative and we’re all taking notes. I think some students have in the back of their head, “Oh, I didn’t really get that, but I’ll figure it out.” And then the time comes, and they go, “Oh, I forgot I was supposed to figure this out! How do I get to that page again?” –Joshua*

Students asked that the content of library sessions be more integrated with the assignments in class. This might mean having the librarian help design assignments; conduct multiple information literacy sessions across the semester tied to the research assignment; or even integrate small, regular quizzes or exercises related to research (librarian- or professor-designed and delivered) that begin or end most or every class.

When accessing library help outside of class, such as through an online tutorial, one participant asked for a very basic overview of database searching,

for example. “I know there are tutorials,” she said, “but maybe one could make it even more ‘for dummies.’” Basic online tutorials are another tool for helping international students that could be accessed at the point of need, without consulting the librarian if doing so is too intimidating.

As an unintended consequence of conducting interviews with these students, the librarian found that many students were quick to make a positive connection with her and ask questions about conducting research, or even about her life experiences. One student said, “I just feel happy to talk with you!” and others approached her outside of the interviews to say “hello” or make small talk. A few interviewees asked to have a reference interview with the librarian immediately after the interview to ask questions and find research sources. Overall, the librarian had the impression that many of the students were very pleased that someone had shown interest in their situation and were excited to make a personal connection in what could sometimes be a lonely environment.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

While each institution may present unique challenges, the underlying themes brought out in these interviews are likely common across North American institutions and music programs. What follows are suggestions based on the literature review and our students’ feedback for how music faculty and librarians can better accommodate international music students.

#### *Language*

For those faculty and librarians who provide instruction for international music students, the delivery of the content can be an important aid for ESL students. Without talking down to students, presenters can avoid the use of confusing jargon and cultural idioms, speak clearly, use synonyms for difficult vocabulary, and leave plenty of time for questions and clarification.<sup>31</sup> When teaching international music students a specific skill, keep the pace flexible to allow for differing skill levels, and allow students to demonstrate their understanding by encouraging hands-on participation. Music faculty may provide extra time or support for international students conducting reading or writing homework, allow alternatives to oral presentations, and give students chances to redo assignments. Using more frequent, shorter writing assignments can also help

31. Amsberry, “Talking the Talk: Library Classroom Communication and International Students,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34, no. 4 (2008): 356; Hughes, “Actions and Reactions: Exploring International Students’ Use of Online Information Resources,” 175.



international music students scaffold their language learning and get feedback from the instructor in a more timely way.<sup>32</sup>

Music students should be made aware of the campus resources (such as counseling and health services) available to them after their arrival on campus for reducing stress and anxiety early on—especially international students. It may also be useful to explicitly explain how the services of the Writing Center, tutoring center, advising, library, and other campus departments differ for international students who confuse them. It is important to acknowledge students' struggles and demonstrate that music department faculty and staff are available to listen and help.

### *Using the Library and Information Literacy Instruction*

Many studies offer advice for librarians and faculty who hope to help international students overcome some of these barriers, and most of the studies can be applied to interactions with international music students in particular.<sup>33</sup> Interaction studies show that using synonyms to describe difficult terms, avoiding or thoroughly explaining jargon, and avoiding idioms can improve international students' ability to understand class content.<sup>34</sup> This is true not only of new library- or research-related terms, but also idioms and cultural references.<sup>35</sup> The ACRL-IS (Association of College & Research Libraries Instruction Section) Committee on Instruction for Diverse Populations' has created a glossary to help international students become more familiar with library jargon (i.e. abstract, article, journal, etc.).<sup>36</sup> Also, librarians and faculty should ask questions that require more than a simple yes/no or one- or two-word answer and have students demonstrate understanding instead of assuming that silence, a nod, or even a verbal "yes" is an indication of understanding.<sup>37</sup>

It can be challenging for librarians and faculty who are native-born to understand the accented English of international students, but evidence shows that a negative attitude toward an ESL (English as a Second Language) speaker can cause the intelligibility of their speech to decrease.<sup>38</sup> Other studies demonstrate that native speakers who practice listening to accented speech can learn

32. Fyr, "Teaching Music History in a Multilingual Environment," 6.

33. Click, Houlihan, and Wiley, "The Internationalization of the Academic Library," 328–52.

34. Amsberry, "Talking the Talk," 356; Hughes, "Actions and Reactions," 176.

35. Amsberry, "Talking the Talk," 355.

36. Howze, Philip C., "Measuring International Students' Understanding of Concepts Related to the Use of Library-Based Technology," 64.

37. Koenigstein, "Alleviating International Students' Culture Shock and Anxiety," 3.

38. Joan M. Fayer and Emily Krasinski, "Native and Nonnative Judgments of Intelligibility and Irritation," *Language Learning* 37, no. 3 (1987): 313–26.

to understand it quite quickly,<sup>39</sup> especially when the subject of the speech is familiar to both parties. Librarians and faculty can overcome difficulties with understanding accented speech by approaching these interactions with a positive attitude, listening for the gist or context of the accented speech rather than individual sounds, and practicing listening to accented speech, perhaps by interacting frequently with international students.<sup>40</sup>

Training in cultural intelligence may also help library and music department employees interact more thoughtfully with international students.<sup>41</sup> Hiring librarians and faculty with multicultural backgrounds, especially those who demonstrate empathy for and knowledge of the barriers that international students face may also help,<sup>42</sup> as would assigning a librarian liaison to work with international students and/or the international programs department on campus.<sup>43</sup>

In teaching environments, encouraging international and local music students to collaborate and interact may help them both begin to better understand the range of learning styles that exist across cultures, and it may help international students gain more confidence.<sup>44</sup> The international students' diverse backgrounds can be seen as a learning opportunity for the entire classroom rather than a barrier, and the expertise that these students bring can be incorporated into the course structure and materials.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the phenomenon of academic shock may require that international students receive additional help with their academic endeavors. International students may need more time to complete assignments, the ability to record lectures and listen to them at a slower pace, and more explicit instructions and grading policies.<sup>46</sup> International students may struggle when class material references cultural background information which is unfamiliar to them, such as examples from

39. Constance M. Clarke and Merrill F. Garrett, "Rapid Adaptation to Foreign-Accented English," *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 116, no. 6 (2004): 3656.

40. Dawn Amsberry, "Using Effective Listening Skills with International Patrons," *Reference Services Review* 37, no. 1 (2008): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00907320910934959>.

41. Shao et al., "Chinese Students in American Academic Libraries," 34; Jackson, "Incoming International Students and the Library," 206–7; Yusuke Ishimura and Joan C. Bartlett, "Are Librarians Equipped to Teach International Students? A Survey of Current Practices and Recommendations for Training," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40 (2014): 320, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.04.009>.

42. Shao et al., "Chinese Students in American Academic Libraries," 34.

43. Jackson, "Incoming International Students and the Library," 205.

44. Hughes, "Actions and Reactions," 175.

45. Hughes, "Actions and Reactions," 175; Fava, "Teaching Music History," 24.

46. Shapiro, Farrelly, and Tomas, *Fostering International Student Success in Higher Education*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL International Association.

U.S. history or cultural idioms.<sup>47</sup> A patient approach is required to adequately serve the needs of these students.

In addition, the participants in this study requested more frequent, short instructional sessions with the librarian in order to better retain the research skills they needed to complete their assigned work (just as frequent practice helps them gain technical skills for playing their instruments). Professors could invite the music librarian to come in more frequently and refresh students' research skills, or regularly point students to online resources developed by the music librarian that help explain and teach research basics, such as research guides or tutorials. Music librarians might discuss trying an "embedded librarian" model when scheduling library instruction sessions with faculty members, so library instruction is more integrated into the music department curriculum. Arranging for the music librarian to meet one-on-one with international music students when they arrive may help these students build a stronger foundation for conducting research later.

Music librarians who do have the opportunity to teach international music students how to conduct research may find it useful to spend more time discussing keyword development and uniform titles, as these concepts seem to provide a special challenge to international students. For example, having students create concept maps for their topics and encouraging them to consult a dictionary or thesaurus while developing keywords can help international music students succeed in their keyword searching. Citation and plagiarism may also be topics that are difficult for international students and could use attention in library instruction sessions. When an in-person library session is not possible, the music librarian could create an online research guide, tutorial, or workshop guiding international students through common citation styles.

Some additional recommended methods for addressing the needs of international music students include offering hands-on research workshops with a flexible pace, providing information about library terminology and examples in handouts to international students, giving clear help options in online research environments, creating online research guides targeted at international students, and communicating both verbally and non-verbally during encounters with international students.<sup>48</sup> Providing clear contact information for reference librarians on the library's website may also help international students.<sup>49</sup> It may even be helpful to create a "know before you go" online research

47. Shapiro, Farrelly, and Tomas.

48. Baron and Strout-Dapaz, "Communicating with and Empowering International Students," 319–20.

49. Ganster, "Reaching Out to International Students," 379.

guide for international students as they begin to prepare for their academic experience abroad.<sup>50</sup>

To address the misconceptions international music students may have about the library's services and the librarian's role, librarians can interact with these students more frequently and explicitly explain the roles of librarians.<sup>51</sup> Participating in introductory orientation programs and collaborating with the campus International Programs office can help music librarians maintain more substantial contact with international music students and establish their capacity to help with research.<sup>52</sup> Including the librarian in classroom instruction about research can also help clarify their value and role. Overall, customized library outreach efforts to international music students have been shown to be the best methods of helping them overcome library-specific barriers.<sup>53</sup>

Music librarians should expect that international music students may have a different understanding of the library and the librarian's role in research than native-born students. Being explicit about the music librarian's ability to provide research help and clearly explaining the services of the library can help international music students understand how to have the best research experience possible. Some music librarians may choose to create a research guide outlining what kinds of reference questions are appropriate, as the researchers did.<sup>54</sup>

It is necessary to clarify the importance of research to the study of music, especially for performance students. International music students who have decided to come to North America to study performance with a particular American instructor may struggle to understand why they are being asked to sacrifice precious practice time for research. This understandable attitude can be addressed directly in library instruction and library marketing targeting music students. For example, exploring the historical context of a specific piece and how its historical background might affect performance decisions can show students why research is important for performers too.

50. Shao et al., "Chinese Students in American Academic Libraries," 35.

51. Hughes, "International Students' Experiences of University Libraries and Librarians," 86-87; Datig, "What Is a Library?," 356.

52. Knight, Hight, and Polfer, "Rethinking the Library for the International Student Community," 589; Hughes, "Actions and Reactions," 175.

53. Ishimura and Bartlett, "Are Librarians Equipped to Teach International Students?," 318-19.

54. See Appendix C for a screenshot; see also Mandi Goodsett and Theresa Nawalaniec. *International Students' Guide to Research*, Cleveland, OH: Cleveland State University Michael Schwartz Library, 2017. <http://researchguides.csuohio.edu/international>

### **Limitations of the Study**

The greatest limitation of this study is its uncertain generalizability. The qualitative nature of the study allows its results to reveal more personalized, nuanced data than a survey might have done, but the extent to which the conclusions may be applied to other international music students is unknown. The uncertain generalizability of the data is compounded by the sampling method, which was purposive. This sampling method was chosen because the population under study had specific qualities which the researchers wished to examine, but the interviews were not conducted on a control population for comparison. We suspect that non-international students experience similar challenges when using the library, but our current data do not address this issue.

Qualitative research generally cannot establish validity or reliability the way quantitative research can; indeed, the data analysis process is somewhat subjective and may reflect, in some part, the biases and pre-conclusions of the researchers. The limitations of this study invite further research in this area. A larger-scale study which includes international music students from multiple institutions would provide more generalizable results. Focus groups, rather than individual interviews, constitute an alternative research method that could provide useful insights into the challenges international students face regarding the use of university libraries. A further study that implements some of the recommendations of this study and compares the perceptions of international music students before and after could provide more conclusive evidence that the suggested methods in this study are indeed effective.

### **Conclusion**

The increase in international students at North American higher education institutions has led to the development of programs and services to serve these students in academic institutions as they conduct research. However, it may be more challenging for music librarians and faculty to meet these needs for international music students. The results of this study fill a gap in the literature and provide valuable information for music librarians and faculty about how to better serve international music students.

Perhaps the most significant reward for the researchers in this study was to learn that time spent listening to international music students improved the students' comfort level when asking questions. Two of the participants asked the librarian-researcher if they could meet to discuss research immediately after the interview (which neither had done before), and most of the others have happily approached the librarian-researcher on campus to say hello or ask a question since conducting the interviews. Most of the participants seemed

genuinely pleased and gratified to have the opportunity to share their experience and express their wishes for improving the services of the library and department. Providing opportunities for international students to share and building relationships that allow them to feel comfortable asking questions may be the best way to improve service to international music students.

For our international music students, the support of their music professors and librarian can mean the difference between a stressful, taxing study abroad experience and a supportive, successful one. Taking the time to address the needs of this unique population may help music departments retain these students and improve their experiences. International music students who are given the tools to succeed are a valuable resource for North American communities and universities.

## Appendix A

### Interview #1 Questions

#### Part One: General Information

1. Could you please share your nationality and the amount of time you've spent in the United States?
2. What brought you to Cleveland State University (CSU)?
3. What are you studying? What do you hope to do with your degree?
4. Did CSU provide any support for you as an international student? If so, what was helpful? If not, what do you wish CSU had done?

#### Part Two: Music

1. What made you choose CSU's music program?
2. Do you feel supported by the CSU Music Department?
3. How would you describe your relationships with your professors? Your instrument instructor? Your advisor?
4. Have you experienced any difficulties in pursuing your musical goals? What contributed to those difficulties?
5. Have you had any difficulties reading or comprehending music literature (research materials)?

#### Part Three: Library Preferences

1. Now I'd like you to think about research you've conducted since beginning at CSU. Did a librarian speak to your class? What elements of the library session were especially helpful? If you didn't attend a library session, did you communicate with the librarian in another way and how was that helpful? If you didn't interact with the library at all, did you consult any other resources to gain help in conducting research?
2. What elements of library research do you find difficult or confusing?
3. Have you encountered any cultural barriers? Have you found the behaviors or expectations of American libraries, librarians, or professors confusing or unusual? If so, how has this affected your impression/use of the library?
4. Have you encountered any communication barriers? Have you found it difficult to understand research assignments or expectations? Have you had any trouble comprehending the librarian or the library website? If so, how has this affected your impression/use of the library?
5. Have you encountered any technology barriers? Have you noticed any differences in the CSU library's online resources (databases, website, etc.) from what you are used to? Have any of these differences created challenges for you? If so, how has this affected your impression/use of the library?
6. What changes would you make to the library session or the library if you could?

#### Part Four: International Students in the Library

1. What library services do you wish were offered for international students? What services would you prefer in an online environment?
2. Any other comments or questions?



## Appendix B

### Interview #2 Questions

#### Part One: General Information

1. Have you become involved in any activities on campus?
2. Which CSU service has helped you most? How?
3. In your classes or on campus (i.e., in ensemble rehearsals), do you spend more time with other international students or American students? Have you ever felt actively marginalized or not included?

#### Part Two: Music

1. How would you describe your relationships with your professors? Your instrument instructor? Your advisor? Have these relationships changed since our last interview (and if so, why)?
2. Have you experienced any difficulties in pursuing your musical goals? What contributed to those difficulties? Have any of these difficulties changed since our last interview (and if so, why)?
3. What do you find most helpful about CSU's Music Department? What do you wish was different? Has your opinion changed since our last interview (and if so, why)?
4. Thinking about your music research and other music courses, do you feel that the amount of time given for assignments is sufficient?
5. Have you been asked to give a verbal presentation or response in any of your classes? If so, how comfortable were you with that experience? If not, how comfortable would you be?

#### Part Three: Library Preferences

1. Now I'd like you to think about research you've conducted since beginning at CSU. Did a librarian speak to your class or speak to you one-on-one? If so, what elements of that meeting were most helpful during the research process?
2. Have you conducted any research in the CSU library since our last interview?
3. What barriers have you encountered in conducting research or using the library?
4. What issues did you experience with the physical space (finding books, getting around, etc.), if any?
5. What issues did you experience with using/understanding the resources of the library (books, articles, scores, etc.), if any?
6. What issues did you experience with the online resources of the library (databases, library website, etc.), if any?
7. What changes would you make to the library and its services if you could?

#### Part Four: International Students in the Library

1. What library services do you wish were offered for international students? What services would you prefer in an online environment? Has your opinion about this changed since our last interview?
2. Any other comments or questions?

## Appendix C

Cleveland State University International Music Students Research Guide  
<http://researchguides.csuohio.edu/international>

[Michael Schwartz Library](#) / [Research Guides](#) / [International Students' Guide to Research](#) / [Home](#)

## International Students' Guide to Research: Home

A guide for international students considering studying at CSU or already here, especially those doing research or using the library.

Home

What You Can Do in the Library

How to Ask a Reference Question

Library Vocabulary

How to Begin Your Research

Language Resources


### Library & Campus Info

- Library Homepage
- Contact Us
- Ask Your Personal Librarian
- Off-Campus Access
- The Writing Center @ CSU
- CSU Tutoring & Academic Success Center (TASC)

### Campus Resources

- Center for International Services and Programs (CISP)
- Center for International Student Services
- Orientation for International Students
- International Student Arrival Information
- CISP Upcoming Events & Workshops
- English as a Second Language (ESL)
- CISP Contact Information

### Welcome!



Hello and welcome! This research guide is for those who are or are preparing to be international students at Cleveland State. Here you will find links to campus and library resources, tips for finding resources in the library, and other useful information, such as how to cite sources correctly and where to find language resources. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact a librarian at the "Ask Your Personal Librarian" link to the left. We're very happy you have joined our community!

- ESL and IELP Research Guide
- See this guide for more language resources!

### Library PIN

To access research databases from off-campus, you will have to authenticate first -- select Cleveland State University, and then enter your name, CSU ID, and Library PIN. If you don't have a Library PIN yet, then you can create one on the My Account page.