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Education and Training in the United States: A Guide for International Music Therapy Students

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Abstract

Music therapy stakeholders may benefit from a more comprehensive understanding about international students and their process for becoming music therapists in the U.S. The purposes of this paper are to: (a) articulate the international student process from home country to credentialed music therapist in the U.S., (b) outline common concerns and difficulties of international students studying in the U.S., and (c) share best practices obtained from the research literature to support international students through the process from student to professional. The process for international music therapy students from home country to professional includes pre-departure tasks related to information, finances, and student visas; mid-coursework requirements related to clinical practice, curricular degree, and full-time status; and post-coursework aspects of Curricular Practical Training, board certification, Optional Practical Training, and applying for a work visa. Common challenges of international music therapy students in the U.S. include culture shock and racism, academic challenges, financial and psychological issues, and developing music skills and repertoire. Best practices identified from the literature encourage international students in the U.S. to improve language competence, utilize campus support, develop social networks, and increase cultural humility. The authors discuss implications for music therapy education and training, provide suggestions for students, and share recommendations for key stakeholders.

Keywords: music therapy; international students; education and training

An increasing number of international students from around the world choose to study in the United States. *International students* are defined as nonimmigrant foreign nationals who travel to the United States (U.S.) temporarily to take classes (U.S. Citizenship and

Immigration Services, 2024). These students receive specific types of visas and complete programs of study at Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP)-certified schools (Department of Homeland Security, 2023). The U.S. accepts more than a million international students each year, comprising approximately 4.6% of college students in higher education (Parker, 2023). International students contribute over 44.7 billion to the U.S., with the majority of students attending from countries in Asia (Institute of International Education, 2022). The number of international students studying music therapy in the U.S. is currently unknown.

International students face many challenges that may hinder their achievement in higher education (Andrade & Hartshorn, 2019). These challenges may include several cultural, language, monetary, informational, and systemic barriers (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). For those who wish to remain in the U.S. after graduation, the path to employment or permanent residency is filled with uncertainty. Furthermore, international music therapy students may face additional stressors and challenges unique to their degree and work experiences. Thus, music therapy students, educators, supervisors, clinicians, administrators, and business owners may benefit from a more comprehensive understanding about international students and their process for becoming music therapists in the U.S. to better support students' needs.

Thus, the purposes of this paper are to: (a) articulate the international student process from home country to credentialed music therapist in the U.S., (b) outline common concerns and difficulties of international students studying music therapy in the U.S., and (c) share best practices obtained from the research literature to support international music therapy students through the process from student to professional. The three authors include a student from China who completed a combined music therapy equivalency and master's degree program at a large U.S. Midwestern university; a faculty member from South Korea who completed music therapy undergraduate and graduate degrees in the U.S. and currently works at a U.S. university; and a music therapy faculty member who was born, educated, practiced, and taught in the U.S. in various parts of the country. All three authors have different backgrounds, experiences, viewpoints, and responsibilities regarding international music therapy students and their education and training process in the U.S.

Overview of the Process from Pre-Departure to Music Therapy Professional Practice

The process from pre-departure to music therapy professional practice in the U.S. is complex and multidimensional. The following describes the process identified at the time of this publication (please see the Appendix for a summary of this information). International students are encouraged to check government websites for the most current information about the overall process and follow directions and instructions exactly. Pre-departure processes include issues related to information, finances, and student visas. Education processes include understanding music therapy practice in the U.S., completing curricular requirements for the degree, and maintaining full-time student status. Post-coursework processes may include taking the board certification exam, and—if staying in the U.S.—completing Optional Practical Training (OPT) and obtaining a work visa.

Pre-Departure Processes

Khanal and Gaulee (2019) developed a model for understanding challenges for international students prior to arrival in the U.S. Pre-departure challenges may be categorized into those related to information, finances, and visa.

Information and finances

The first step for potential international students is to research education options. The USAGov (<https://www.usa.gov/study-in-US>) and U.S. Department of State (<https://educationusa.state.gov/your-5-steps-us-study>) websites help international students understand education options in the United States. International students can use these websites to identify educational advising centers across countries; compare institutions (e.g., college, university) by location, type, program, and major; and learn from collections of stories by other international students studying in the U.S. (EducationUSA, n.d.; USAGov, 2024). International students interested in studying music therapy should review the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) website (www.musictherapy.org) for a list of approved schools in the U.S. and find an institution that is both AMTA-approved and SEVP-certified. Once an institution that is both SEVP-certified and AMTA-approved is identified, students complete the required documentation to attend the chosen institution.

The second step is to complete the required applications and admission documents, which may vary depending on the institution. Specific requirements for each institution are usually located on their international admissions office webpage (U.S. Department of State, 2023). General requirements typically include (a) educational credentials, such as diplomas, transcripts, certificates, and final national exams; (b) standardized test scores to verify academic scores (e.g., American College Testing [ACT] or Scholastic Assessment Test [SAT] for undergraduate, Graduate Record Examinations [GRE] for graduate admissions); and (c) English proficiency test scores (e.g., Test of English as a Foreign Language [TOEFL]) unless students are eligible for a waiver. Other requirements may include letters of recommendation, personal statement, resume or curriculum vitae (CV), and/or essays. In addition, as part of the admission requirements, music therapy students—including international students—may need to complete an audition or demonstrate their musicianship.

Most institutions require an international student to demonstrate financial ability to pay at least one year of academic and living expenses. Therefore, after receiving an offer from one or more institutions, the next step for an international student is to send proof of financial ability to the designated school official (DSO) (Durrani, 2020).

Students typically need to submit (a) a completed Form I-20 request; (b) a copy of a biographical page of student's valid passport; and (c) certificate of financial responsibility that verifies that the student has sufficient financial resources to cover their educational and living expenses for their first year of study. This proof may include official bank statements issued within the last six months, sponsor documentation, scholarship, graduate assistantship offers letters, or employer letters (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2023). If the student plans to bring a spouse and/or children under 21 years of age, they must also provide evidence of additional financial support. A student transferring their Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) record from another U.S. college or university needs to submit a SEVIS transfer request.

After reviewing a completed request for an I-20, the DSOs review eligibility and issue the student a form I-20, the "Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status." Form I-20 allows the student to legally enroll in a study program in the U.S. and is required for the subsequent student visa application (Durrani, 2020; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2023). This form contains important information about the student, their program of study, the school they attend, and their unique SEVIS number. More information about Form I-20 can be found here: <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/students/prepare/students-and-the-form-i-20>. The student needs their I-20 throughout their international student life and are encouraged to safeguard this form from loss or theft. New I-20s can be issued to continuing students

whenever there is a significant update to a student's record (e.g., biographical data, program dates, change of major, addition of a work authorization). When leaving the U.S., students must obtain a DSO travel signature on the I-20 and travel with the form to reenter the U.S.

Some students may have difficulty meeting the financial requirements. Although some international students may qualify for certain types of scholarships, grants, and loans, most foreign international students are not eligible for financial aid, and the funding is limited. However, other funding options may be available. Some students have access to home country study funds for national citizens, organizations that provide scholarships and grants for study abroad and research in the U.S., as well as exchange programs administered by the U.S. Government (U.S. Government Services and Information, 2022). Potential international students are encouraged to work with their International Admissions Office at the institution to identify potential institutional funding options (e.g., scholarships) or additional financial requirements (e.g., studio fees).

Once an SEVP-certified school accepts a student for admission and approves the necessary documentation, the school enters the student's information into the SEVIS system, creating a SEVIS record for the student. For student visa applicants (i.e., F and M visas), the school issues Form I-20, with the SEVIS number printed on it. Students who receive their I-20 must pay the SEVIS fee online at [FMJfee.com](https://www.fmjfee.com), and proof of the payment must be presented during the student visa interview along with the visa application, and upon entry into the United States (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2023). For more information about the I-901 SEVIS fee, visit the SEVIS fee website: <https://www.fmjfee.com/i901fee/index.html>.

Visa

The visa process is a series of steps that take place after students are accepted into a course of study at a SEVP-certified school in the U.S. The U.S. government generally offers one of three student visa types: F-1 visa, M-1 visa, and J-1 visa. An F-1 visa is for students pursuing academic or professional study, while an M-1 visa is for those attending vocational or nonacademic institutions (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2023). A J-1 visa is for individuals who are part of a government exchange program or receive funding from their home country. Most international students will apply for the F-1 visa if they attend a university or college, high school, private elementary school, seminary, conservatory, or another academic institution, including a language training program (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Most music therapy students have an F visa and receive the designation F-1 (F-2 designates a spouse or child) which allows them to attend accredited educational institutions and complete their academic programs in music therapy. Therefore, the information provided thereafter focuses on F-1 visa holders, the F-1 visa application, and interview process.

To obtain a visa, students must schedule and pass an interview at a U.S. embassy or consulate (U.S. Government Services and Information, 2022). F-1 visas for new students can only be issued up to 365 days in advance of the start date. Before the interview, students need to complete Form DS-160 Online Visa Application and print the application form confirmation page to bring to the interview. Required documents for the interview usually include a valid passport, Form DS-160 confirmation page, application fee payment receipt, personal photo, proof of the I-901 SEVIS fee payment, and Form I-20 (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Additional documents to bring include those related to academic preparation (e.g., transcripts, diplomas, degrees, certificates, and standardized test scores), evidence of intent to depart the U.S. upon completion of the study, and proof of financial coverage to demonstrate academic preparedness and financial stability (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Students must bring all required documents and attend the

visa interview at the U.S. embassy or consulate at the appointment time on their scheduled interview date.

Once the visa is obtained, international students may make travel arrangements, attend a pre-departure orientation either online or at an advising center, and gather pre-departure materials and documents for arrival in the U.S., and report to and attend orientations at the institution (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Students are encouraged to check the institution's website for specifics about health insurance, housing options, local transportation, and local weather when preparing for departure. Students who are in initial student visa status may arrive in the U.S. up to 30 days prior to the program start date noted on the I-20 form (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2023).

Education Processes

Once a student arrives, U.S. Customs and Border Protection issues them a Form I-94 "Arrival/Departure Record" at the initial port of entry (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2023). An I-94 is the official government record that confirms immigration status, the duration of time the student can legally remain, and when they enter and exit the U.S. (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2023). This form is proof of legal visitor status, needed for most interactions with any government or academic institution.

Upon arriving, all international students in F-1 status must report their arrival to their school as soon as possible. Failure to complete the check-in on time can negatively impact their student visa status. In addition, all new international students are required to attend an international student orientation at their academic institution. The international student orientation typically includes guidance for maintaining visa status, review of academic processes and requirements, information on employment regulations and opportunities, tours of the campus and community, social and cultural experiences, additional English proficiency testing, and international student resources and recommendations. Depending on their English skills and institution requirements, students may be required to take additional English tests or complete classes or workshops to develop their English language skills. In addition to these general requirements, music therapy students may need to complete music proficiency requirements before beginning their music therapy coursework.

International students begin their music therapy coursework and develop an understanding of practice in the U.S. The American Music Therapy Association (2021) defines music therapy as "the clinical and evidence-based use of music therapy interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program." Music therapy services may be individual or group sessions, and can focus on physical, cognitive, emotional, social, communicative, developmental, academic, wellness, or spiritual needs (Certification Board for Music Therapists [CBMT], 2020a). Music therapists may practice in many different settings including medical, educational, rehabilitation, mental health, and private practice, with a wide range of clinical populations from premature infants to older adults (Knight et al., 2018). In addition, music therapists in the U.S. practice using a variety of approaches including, but not limited to, behavioral, developmental, humanistic, neurological, psychodynamic, improvisational, culture-centered, community-based, and health and wellness (CBMT, 2020a).

The educational path of becoming a music therapist in the U.S. includes attending an academic program approved by AMTA and completing all undergraduate level requirements or their equivalents (e.g., courses, clinical practica, and internship) prior to taking the national board certification exam provided by CBMT. Students complete curricular requirements—such as courses in music, music therapy, and behavioral sciences—for a bachelor's degree or a post-baccalaureate equivalent (offered for students who have

a previous bachelor's degree) in music therapy. The bachelor's degree or equivalency also requires 1200 hours of clinical training, including internship, supervised by a qualified music therapist. During this time, students acquire the knowledge and skills identified in the AMTA entry-level professional competencies.

Throughout their academic journey, international students holding F-1 face the added responsibility of maintaining their immigration status to remain in the U.S. and successfully complete their degree. This, in addition to the inherent challenges of pursuing a degree in a foreign country and navigating intercultural differences, can be challenging. These students should diligently comply with the U.S. immigration regulations that govern their study in the U.S. Stanford University Bechtel International Center ([SUBIC], n.d.) outlined six crucial requirements in which international students need to adhere to maintain their legal status. First, students should have a valid passport for at least 6 months into the future. Second, students need to maintain full-time status during the academic year (e.g., Fall and Spring terms) and meet the required curricular expectations of the institution. For undergraduate students, full-time status generally means the equivalent of at least 12 credit hours of coursework per term. For graduate students, full-time status requires enrolling in at least 9 credit hours per semester, but a minimum of 6 credit hours is also allowed, depending on assistantships. All F-1 students must register as full-time students each semester, and failure to comply will result in loss of their student status. Full-time enrollment becomes optional during summer or winter terms. Students may be eligible to take a reduced course load under certain circumstances, such as medical conditions or the final graduate semester working on a thesis, but first must consult with their academic advisor and designated school official (DSO) to explore available options at their institution.

Third, international students are recommended to follow all on-campus or off-campus employment regulations and restrictions (SUBIC, n.d.). They should not accept any off-campus employment without specific pre-authorization. According to the U.S. immigration employment regulations, off-campus employment can only be requested from the DSO after students have completed at least one year of full-time study following the initial entry to the U.S. on an F-1 visa. International students can generally work on-campus for up to 20 hours per week during the academic year and full-time during breaks and summer vacation. Students must also obtain permission from the DSO before beginning their on-campus employment.

Fourth, international students are expected to make normal progress in their course of study. This entails being enrolled full-time, attending their courses regularly, and achieving the necessary grades to continue their studies. More specifically for music therapy students, additional curricular expectations typically include passing gatekeeping requirements or departmental assessments, maintaining a minimum grade point average, and meeting musical, clinical, and music therapy competency-based standards as stipulated by AMTA.

Fifth, international students are advised to always keep their immigration documents (i.e., I-20) accurate and valid (SUBIC, n.d.). Students should be aware of the program end dates listed on their I-20 and apply for timely extensions, if necessary. They should save each document issued during their F-1 status, as they may need the documents in the future.

Sixth, international students should report any personal, program, and financial changes to the international student office at their institution or DSO within 10 days of the change occurring (e.g., change of address, degree level, major, graduation date, name, immigration status, source of funding, stolen or lost travel documents) (SUBIC, n.d.). Overall, by following these six key requirements, students can ensure their legal status and continue their academic journey.

Internship and Curricular Practical Training (CPT)

In addition to academic coursework completed on campus, music therapy students require a supervised internship of at least 900 hours (AMTA, 2021). International music therapy students on an F-1 student visa, after applying for internship sites and receiving one or more internship offers, may choose to apply for Curricular Practical Training (CPT). CPT allows F-1 students to participate in off-campus employment or internships. Specifically, CPT is a temporary off-campus employment authorization that allows international students with an F-1 visa to gain practical experience directly related to their major or complete a required internship which is considered an integral part of a student's degree program (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2022).

Although CPT is not required for all internships, it is required for most internships for international students. Students can work either part-time (20 hours or less per week) or full time (more than 20 hours per week) as granted per quarter/semester through CPT. However, 12 months or more of full-time CPT will eliminate students' eligibility for OPT. Given that most music therapy internships are typically full-time, spanning 900-1040 hours per a six-month period, students may encounter issues when applying for OPT after graduation, and should consult their DSO during this process.

CPT is available to all international students studying on an F-1 visa. However, students must be enrolled full-time during the semester they are applying for and the preceding semester, and they must be studying in the major listed on their application. However, graduate students are not subject to this stipulation if their degree program requires immediate participation in CPT. Unlike OPT, CPT is only available prior to the completion of students' degree program and not available after graduation.

While CPT is not a separate visa category and does not require "sponsorship" from an employer (e.g., internship site), international students must secure an internship or job offer directly related to their major field of study (i.e., music therapy) and receive an offer letter before obtaining CPT authorization. Once students receive approval, their DSO updates the second page of the I-20 with updated CPT information, including the start date from which students may begin their internship or employment. Thus, students may apply for CPT authorization 1-4 weeks prior to the start of the internship. The process for applying for CPT can be complex and may involve multiple steps; therefore, international students must work closely with their DSOs to understand the eligibility criteria, application process, and any limitations or requirements associated with this practical training program.

Post-Coursework Processes

After completing academic coursework, international music therapy students may follow typical post-coursework processes. These processes can include completing the music therapy board certification exam to earn the Music Therapist-Board Certified (MT-BC) credential. Furthermore, for those intending to stay and work in the U.S., international students must apply for OPT or a work visa after completing their degree. While the post-coursework processes vary depending on students' circumstances, the following information generally applies to international students who wish to become an MT-BC or seek employment as a music therapist in the U.S.

Music therapy board certification exam

After successfully completing the undergraduate (or its equivalency) degree requirements and an internship, students are eligible to take the national board certification exam to obtain the MT-BC credential. The credential is necessary for professional practice in the U.S. (AMTA, 2021). The board certification exam serves as an objective measure to

determine if individuals demonstrate the entry-level competence needed to practice music therapy in the U.S. (Hsiao et al., 2020). Currently, the test format is computerized and timed, consisting of multiple-choice questions. Examinees are expected to answer 150 questions in three hours; out of these questions, 130 are scored while 20 are unscored pretest questions (CBMT, 2020b).

International students may face challenges related to language barriers and time limits when preparing for or taking the CBMT exam. International non-native English-speaking students may encounter unfamiliar words, idiomatic expressions, or specific terminology or vocabulary, which can hinder their comprehension and ability to answer accurately. The proficiency in English language may be one of the factors influencing the success of international students in passing the board certification exam on their first attempt. According to a study by Hsiao et al. (2020), the pass rate for survey participants taking the CBMT exam on their first attempt was 85.6%, but for international students who identified English as their second language, that pass rate dropped to 50%.

In addition, some program directors noted that international students with English as their second language encountered greater challenges in passing the exam because of the use of language in the exam (e.g., figurative language such as idioms, unfamiliar cultural context-specific wording) (Meadows & Eyre, 2020). In addition, the time limitation of three hours can be challenging. Some international students who require more processing time to answer each question in English may feel additional pressure and struggle to complete the exam within the allocated time. These language challenges and time constraints can lead to confusion, rushed decision-making, and increased likelihood of errors.

For international music therapy students who pass the exam and obtain the MT-BC credential, they must complete 100 continuing education credit hours and recertify every five years to align their practice with the latest evidence-based guidelines (CBMT, 2020b). If they do not pass, individuals may pay the exam fee again and retake the exam after 30 days. After international music therapy students receive their degree and MT-BC credential, they are faced with the choice to stay and practice in the U.S., return to their home country, move to a third country, or pursue an advanced degree in the U.S. If students prefer to stay in the U.S., they may apply for OPT.

Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a type of work permission program available for eligible international students on an F-1 student visa. Individuals with an F-1 student visa may participate in professional, temporary employment directly related to their main area of study (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2022). For eligible non-STEM degree students including international music therapy students, OPT is typically available for a maximum of 12 months before completing their academic studies (pre-completion) or after completing their academic studies (post-completion) (Israel & Batalova, 2021; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2022). However, students with certain STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) degrees may be eligible for a 24-month extension, resulting in 36 months of OPT.

Most students begin OPT after completing their program of study. To participate in OPT, international students must request that their DSO recommend OPT in the SEVIS. After the DSO recommends OPT in SEVIS, international students may apply for the work permit by filling out Form I-765 online and submitting it with an application fee to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). If approved, USCIS issues an Employment Authorization Document (EAD), which serves as proof of eligibility to legally work in the U.S. under the OPT program. Students are responsible for checking their EAD card for accurate information. If they received the card with incorrect information due to an USCIS

error (e.g., typo in name or incorrect birthdate), students must return their original EAD card to USCIS for correction. International students cannot begin work until they receive an accurate EAD. If they do, it is considered illegal employment, which leads to serious consequences. Therefore, students must wait until they have received their EAD card, and the start date on the card has arrived, before beginning any employment.

While on OPT, students are strongly advised to keep records of their employment history. This includes their EAD card, job offer letters, and documentation for each job (e.g., job title of position, duration of position or dates worked, supervisor name/contact information, a description of the work). Maintaining these records in their personal file will help students provide evidence of lawful status when applying for future immigration benefits. OPT has specific rules and reporting requirements, so students must adhere to the rules and regulations to maintain their legal status in the U.S. Following the OPT expiration date, non-STEM degree students are allowed a 60-day grace period to leave the U.S., change to another immigration status, or transfer their F-1 record to a new degree program. Before applying for OPT, international music therapy students are recommended to consult with their academic advisor to meet graduation requirements, confirm their graduation date, and request an OPT recommendation letter. In addition, students are encouraged to work closely with their DSOs to understand the eligibility criteria, application process, specific application deadlines, and any limitations or requirements associated with OPT at their respective educational institutions.

H-1B visa

For international music therapy students who wish to work long-term in the U.S. after graduating, the next step after 12-month OPT is to apply for an H-1B nonimmigrant employment visa. Commonly known as the “work visa,” the H-1B program allows companies and other employers in the U.S to temporarily hire foreign workers with bachelor’s degrees or higher in specialty occupations (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021). The H-1B does not allow self-employment, so an employer-employee relationship is mandatory.

While OPT allows F-1 eligible international students to work for one year (possibly longer if the student is eligible for an extension), H-1B visa applicants can work in the U.S for at least three years, which can extend for up to six years. However, due to the large number of applicants, the U.S government rules that all applications will be put into a random lottery if the number reaches 85,000 (VisaNation, 2024). The H-1B visa caps limit the number of individuals who can receive H-1B status every fiscal year, thus potentially impacting career planning and decision-making for international music therapy students who seek H-1B visa support. Some qualifying organizations are exempt from the H-1B cap, including institutions of higher education, related or affiliated non-profits, and non-profit research and government organizations (USCIS, 2023b). Due to the uncertainty, some students who want to pursue a career in the private sector may choose to either return to their home country or relocate to another country (Amuedo-Dorantes & Furtado, 2019).

To begin the process of obtaining an H-1B visa, international music therapy students need to first secure a job offer from a U.S. employer who is willing to support their H-1B visa application. The job must meet the criteria of a specialty occupation. A *specialty occupation* is a job that requires theoretical and practical application of a body of highly specialized knowledge, and attainment of a bachelor’s or higher degree (or its equivalent) as a minimum requirement for entry into the occupation in the U.S. (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2023a). International students are advised to confirm the employer’s willingness to sponsor their visa right from the beginning of the job application process by proactively discussing the topic.

Once both parties agree, the employer can submit a petition to the U.S. Citizenship and

Immigration Services (USCIS) for H-1B status on behalf of a prospective employee. Specific H-1B application processes can be found on the USCIS webpage. In summary, the sponsoring employer first needs to obtain prevailing wage determination from the Department of Labor (DOL) and files for and receives the certified Labor Condition Application (LCA). After that, the sponsor prepares the required H-1B petition documents with the assistance of an immigration attorney. These include the Form I-129 Petition for a Nonimmigrant Worker, supporting documents, and fees. The employer then files the H-1B petition with USCIS and receives an approval notice. The application process for an H-1B visa is complex and lengthy, so international music therapy students are encouraged to work closely with their prospective employer to ensure all requirements are met and the application is properly prepared. If an employer is unfamiliar with the H-1B petition process, the student and their employer can seek guidance from an experienced immigration attorney who specializes in H-1B visas (Herman, 2022). The USCIS typically accepts H-1B cap petitions starting from April 1st of each year for the upcoming fiscal year, which starts on October 1st but only until the annual H-1B cap is reached. Therefore, most employers need to submit H-1B petitions on April 1st or shortly thereafter, so students are highly encouraged to discuss this option with their employer before April 1st in the year their OPT expires (International Student Services, 2024). Effective collaboration between international music therapy students and their employers is crucial. The employer needs to be willing to maintain open communication with the international music therapists, clearly express their willingness to assist, and support and explore various options to ensure a successful H-1B petition.

As international students on an H-1B visa approach the maximum limit of their stay in the U.S., they face crucial decisions. Options include leaving the country, securing an extension, applying for a different immigration status, or applying for permanent residency (i.e., a green card) commonly through employment-based or family-sponsored immigration. If they intend to obtain another H-1B visa, individuals who have been in H-1B status are generally not eligible until they have resided and been physically present outside the U.S. for at least one year before qualifying to obtain another H-1B visa. The strict six-year limit, however, can be extended if the sponsoring employer is actively pursuing a permanent employment-based immigration path on a timely basis on behalf of the H-1B visa holder or if the H-1B visa holder does so on their own. Consequently, individuals holding H-1B non-immigrant status need to be aware of their “max-out” date—the date by which they will no longer be eligible for that visa status. H-1B visa holders are advised to plan well in advance of this max-out date to ensure that they can remain in the U.S. without interruption. Throughout the H-1B visa transfer process, maintaining open communication among the employer, employee (the H-1B visa holder), and legal counsel is paramount. Regular updates and clear documentation exchange can effectively address any potential issues or queries from the USCIS, thereby facilitating a smoother overall transfer experience.

Other visa options may be available. For example, after graduating from an academic program in music therapy, international music therapy students on an F-1 student visa may have other visa options such as the O-1 or J-1 visas depending on their eligibility and circumstances. Navigating specific visa categories and regulations can be complex, time-consuming, and challenging for many students, so academic advisors can play a crucial role in supporting them throughout this process. For instance, advisors can ensure that international students are aware of the various visa options available to them after graduation. When possible, they can also facilitate connections between international students and alumni who have successfully navigated the process and can offer advice and insights to help students.

Common Challenges for International Music Therapy Students in the U.S.

As international students embark on their educational pursuits in the U.S., they often encounter a range of challenges that can significantly impact their overall experience and well-being. After international students enter the U.S., they may experience common challenges associated with the acculturation process, financial and psychological issues, and academic difficulties (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). International music therapy students may experience additional challenges associated with music skills and repertoire. Better understanding of all these challenges may allow key stakeholders to develop effective strategies to assist international music therapy students in their transition from student to professional.

Acculturation process

International students from all around the world bring with them their unique cultural backgrounds when they arrive in the U.S. *Culture* is defined by a community or society, and involves the particular set of beliefs, norms, and values concerning the nature of relationship, people's lifestyle, and the way people organize their environments (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2016). Studying in another country means leaving the original familiar culture and entering a new cultural environment with different social norms, language, educational systems, and social expectations. When entering the U.S., international students often face adapting to and adopting the values, beliefs, behaviors, and customs of the new culture while also navigating their own cultural background. This process is called the *acculturation process* (Kim, 2011). The acculturation process involves many different factors including acculturative stress, culture shock, and racism.

To describe the acculturation process, Sue and Sue (2016) developed the Racial/Cultural Identity Development (R/CID) model, based on an original Minority Identity Development (MID) model. The R/CID model includes five stages: (a) conformity to the dominant culture, (b) dissonance between the dominant culture and one's own culture, (c) resistance to the dominant culture, (d) introspection on one's racial autonomy and the variability of all racial groups, and (e) integrative awareness of one's own cultural intersectionality, and an increased sense of autonomy and racial pride, in addition to selective appreciation of white cultural values (Sue & Sue, 2016). The stress that international students experience when they go through these steps of the acculturation process is termed *acculturative stress* (Wei et al., 2007). Music therapy could be considered an area of study that might impose higher acculturative stress on international students, given its higher demand of language skills, cultural understandings, and direct interactions within communities during practicum and internship experiences (Kim, 2011), as well as the need for developing music skills and repertoire.

Culture shock is a part of the acculturation process and refers to the experience of individuals or groups moving from a familiar culture to an unfamiliar one (Demes & Geeraert, 2015). Culture shock is commonly characterized by negative physical and psychological symptoms—such as loneliness, anxiety, and confusion—experienced because of radical cultural change (American Psychological Association, n.d.; Oberg, 1960). Many different factors contribute to how an individual experiences culture shock, and common factors are related to communication, dress, ethics, cultural orientation (e.g., individualism or collectivism), food, language, structure, perception, power distance, religion, rules, time orientation, traditions, and weather (Rajasekar & Renand, 2013). Cultural adjustment occurs in various ways, including both positively and negatively valenced emotional, psychological, behavioral, cognitive, and physiological aspects of acculturation (Pedersen, 1994). Culture shock is part of overall acculturative stress and can vary in intensity and duration, often described as occurring in waves of cultural stress

and cultural adjustment (Demes & Geeraert, 2015). In other words, individuals may experience periods of intense distress followed by periods of adaptation and relative comfort depending on a variety of personal and social factors.

For international students, the level of acculturative stress can be influenced by differences in language and cultural distance between their home country and the host country. Cultural distance refers to the dissimilarities between the home culture and the host culture (Takayama, 2013). For example, Kim (2011) indicated that international students from Asia who study music therapy were under greater pressure than students from Europe because Asian students experienced more problems with language proficiency (e.g., differences in tone, sentence structure, building words with letters vs. characters, etc.) and cultural distance between the East and the West (e.g., values, norms). The limited shared cultural experiences and use of a second language may cause international students from Asia to find it harder to fit into domestic students' conversations. This difficulty, in turn, may lead to higher possibility of prejudice, neglect, loneliness, and misunderstanding when interacting with domestic students (Lan, 2020), which further increases the probability of being discriminated against (Kim, 2011).

International students from the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, Latin America, and India endure greater difficulties than students from Canada and Europe because of their perceived cultural differences (Lee, 2007). *Neo-racism* is discrimination or prejudice due to cultural differences rather than race (Buchanan, 2018). Although international students have reported high satisfaction with their educational experience abroad in Western countries, they also report mistreatment, including biased treatment from faculty, feelings of unacceptance from peers, and disrespect toward one's ethnicity (Lee et al., 2017). Some international music therapy students experience frustration because many Americans may not be as open-minded and globally aware of other cultures as they expected, which can increase the difficulty of building friendships with domestic students (Lan, 2020). In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020, international Asian students experienced specific hardships due to xenophobic attitudes, harassment, and assault against people of Asian descent (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). These difficulties were compounded by the unprecedented challenges and stressors that all students faced during this period.

Financial and psychological issues

International music therapy students may encounter various financial and psychological stressors during their studies. Studying and living in the U.S. is costly for most international students. Many universities and colleges in the U.S. charge higher tuition fees for international students compared to local domestic students. While these fees can vary greatly depending on the state, institution, and program of study, international students at state universities are typically classified as "out-of-state" or "international students," which results in higher tuition rates (e.g., \$23,630 for out-of-state/international vs. \$10,662 for in-state domestic students; Kerr & Wood, 2023). In addition to high tuition fees, some international students are under financial pressure, especially if they do not have enough support from family, scholarships, or assistantships (Lan, 2020). Restrictions on F-1 student visas limit international students to work available on campus, except for CPT and OPT (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2020). The on-campus work limits international students to fewer open positions, limited eligibility (e.g., only accepting work-study students), and restricted work hours that may limit the amount of income they can earn through employment. For instance, unlike domestic students, F-1 students are only allowed to work part-time hours (up to 20 hours per week) during the academic year and full-time during scheduled breaks or holidays (Castonguay, 2021; Federal Student Aid, n.d.). Restricted work hours can result in financial constraints, as

they must rely on limited resources to cover their educational and living expenses, including housing, meals, textbooks, transportation, and other essential needs. Furthermore, restrictions on off-campus work can limit students' opportunities to gain practical experience in their field of study or in other areas of interest, which may affect their future career prospects and ability to compete in the job market.

For those who have work commitments, international students can struggle balancing their academic responsibilities with work demands because they may need significantly more time to study if English is not their first language (Lee, 2020). While restricted work hours may help the international students prioritize their studies and maintain academic progress, they still need to allocate their time and energy to meet academic requirements. Some international music therapy students also report that taking prerequisite or remedial English courses because of language challenges means extra time and money, even before beginning the degree program (Kim, 2011). Overall, financial stress is unavoidable for some international students, and heavy financial pressures may affect students' studies and life experiences in the U.S.

Another factor that makes adaptation challenging for international students is psychological stress. In a study by Kim (2011) involving 97 international music therapy students studying in the U.S., the average total score on the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS) ($M = 83.04$) was significantly higher than the global mean ($M = 66.32$). Among the participants, 12.9% scored above the "warning sign" and needed psychological help (Kim, 2011). These results indicate that international music therapy students need to pay attention to their mental health and seek outside help, such as counseling, especially during stressful times (e.g., final exams) or social disruptions (e.g., global pandemic). However, cultural stigma (e.g., societal prejudice and discrimination) may cause some international students to refrain from seeking assistance from faculty or mental health professionals (Ahad et al., 2023). Some symptoms of acculturative stress include physical complaints such as cognitive fatigue or difficulty concentrating, and psychological symptoms such as feelings of isolation, sadness, loss, burnout, homesickness, resentment, and frustration (Levine et al., 2016). These symptoms are considered common experiences when acculturating to another country because of the lack of common ground and unfamiliarity with the new culture (Lee, 2020). However, addressing these symptoms early can prevent them from escalating and impacting students' well-being and academic performance.

Academic difficulties

International music therapy students in the U.S. may face academic difficulties due to language proficiency and educational system differences. International students report difficulty with the English language, even though many of them had taken preparatory English language courses before arrival (Gomes, 2020). Difficulties with English proficiency not only increase acculturative stress—due to general difficulty communicating in their daily lives—but also increase academic stress. For example, reading in English may take more time for some students. Writing, reading, presenting, and discussing in class may all be stressors for international music therapy students; among these, class discussion and presentations are tasks that stress many international students the most (Kim, 2011). International music therapy students who had participated in Lan's (2020) study report that the fast pace of class discussion makes it difficult for them to respond, and that limited English oral expression can lead to misunderstandings by classmates and professors. In addition, learning to read and write using field-specific vocabulary—such as terms in music therapy and related professions—can also be a challenge.

U.S. educational practices may differ greatly than those practiced in international

students' home countries. Teaching styles and professor expectations can be vastly different (Abu Rabia, 2017). For example, in some Asian countries such as Japan and China, students tend to focus on listening to lectures rather than discussing and writing their opinions. However, in the U.S., professors may value class discussions and written reflections as part of assessment and grading (Lan, 2020). In another example, Kuo (2011) identified that students from some Arab nations (i.e., countries in the Middle East, Arabian Gulf, or North Africa who use Arabic as their primary language; Abu Rabia, 2017) may struggle with U.S. professors' expectations of class participation and note-taking. International students may need to overcome fears about sharing opinions and being misunderstood by others and establish new learning habits to adapt to academic practices in the U.S. (Lan, 2020).

For international music therapy students, clinical fieldwork may be another major academic challenge. Language and cultural differences may affect international students' interactions with clients and relationships with supervisors. Some students struggle leading sessions in a second language and choosing songs that are familiar to Americans (Lan, 2020). Others may have difficulty understanding cultural differences between the home country and the U.S., as well as cultural differences between various regions within the U.S. (Lan, 2020). These language and cultural differences may also affect the supervisory relationship between international music therapy students and their clinical supervisor (Edwards & Daveson, 2004). For example, cross-cultural music therapy supervision may cause numerous misunderstandings between student and supervisor due to cultural barriers, racial and gender issues, power imbalance, different perspectives and expectations, and other issues in the supervisory relationship (Kim, 2008). Thus, the difficulty of clinical field work may be increased for international music therapy students and affect their learning process.

Music skills and repertoire

In addition to challenges with clinical fieldwork, international music therapy students may have difficulties with developing their musical skills and building their music repertoire. AMTA has established lists of professional competencies for students and educators, which includes three main areas: music foundations, clinical foundations, and music therapy foundations. In music foundations, students need to demonstrate skills in voice, piano, guitar, and percussion, as well as playing and singing a basic repertoire of traditional, folk, and popular songs with and without printed music (AMTA, 2021).

International music therapy students may experience difficulties in developing these skills for several reasons. Some students may struggle due to differences in style and structure of western music compared to music of their home country. Others may struggle because English includes phonetic sounds that are unfamiliar to non-native speakers; thus, articulating lyrics may be difficult (Chang, 2000). International music therapy students may also have difficulty choosing songs because they do not know songs that are familiar to Americans (Lan, 2020). Students who did not grow up in the U.S. may have a limited repertoire of familiar and preferred songs across generations. As a result, building familiarity with music repertoire and styles, expanding their repertoire list, and incorporating songs into therapeutic interventions to meet the competency requirements may require additional effort, time, and energy for international music therapy students.

Evidence-Based Best Practices to Support International Music Therapy Students

To mitigate these challenges, the authors completed an iterative review of the literature regarding international students' transition from students to professionals. The authors

found no relevant articles discussing the transition of international music therapy students; however, several articles discussed the transition of international students in nursing, psychology, or related healthcare professions. From these articles, the authors offer the following best practice recommendations to music therapy stakeholders and international music therapy students who wish to complete their education and training in the U.S. The four best practice recommendations from the literature include: improve language competence, utilize campus support, develop social networks, and increase cultural humility.

Improve Language Competence

Language competence affects academic achievement and career success of international students. Martirosyan et al. (2015) demonstrated that higher English-language proficiency scores predict better academic achievement for international students. Researchers demonstrate that language competence is a key predictor of career success for international students (Han et al., 2022), and that limited English language proficiency restricts international students' professional employment opportunities in English-speaking countries (Pang et al., 2021). Music therapy students need to achieve a high level of language competence, including comprehension and expression, by developing communication skills of listening, speaking, reading, and clinical writing.

Fry and Mumford (2011) provide three suggestions for non-native English-speaking international students to improve communication, particularly listening and speaking. First, if a non-native speaker has a noticeable foreign accent, slowing down and maintaining good eye contact will significantly improve understanding. Second, international students can observe and pick up on verbal and non-verbal cues in the conversation. Non-verbal cues in conversations may include facial expressions, body movements, posture, gestures, eye contact, touch, space, and voice (Segal et al., 2022). For music therapy students—whose clients may not always provide clear or articulate verbal expressions—this is especially important to identify non-verbal cues to adequately understand and communicate in clinical sessions. Third, Fry and Mumford (2011) emphasize that non-native speakers commonly misunderstand or are misunderstood in a conversation; therefore, international students are encouraged to ask questions and to encourage others to ask questions of them to avoid these misunderstandings. For improving their reading and clinical writing ability, good time management and affording considerable time to compose written materials can effectively increase the quality of writing and reduce academic pressure (Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). International students may also utilize campus resources and support, such as a writing center, for help with language competence and other needs.

Utilize Campus Support

International students are encouraged to investigate campus support resources. These resources are usually listed on university student life webpages and are free and available to all students. Campus support resources may include rhetoric centers to assist with writing, speaking, and conversation in English. Writing centers are typically found in educational institutions such as universities and colleges, and they serve as valuable resources for students, helping them become more effective and confident writers. They often offer workshops, one-on-one or group consultations, and provide feedback, guidance, and support on writing projects (e.g., class papers, thesis). Speaking centers, also known as communication centers or speech labs, are another type of academic support center that focuses on improving oral communication (e.g., class presentations) skills. Through speaking centers, for instance, international music therapy students can work one-on-one

with consultants to ensure their verbal skills within music therapy sessions include clear instructions, structure, and delivery. While speaking centers focus on developing formal oral communication skills for academic or professional settings, conversation centers aim to provide a space for language learners to practice and enhance their conversational skills in a more informal setting and build confidence and fluency in social interactions. Conversation centers may also offer individual or group appointments with students or staff.

In addition to rhetoric centers, international students may use transition and career services available on university campuses. Transition and career services serve a vital role in assisting students' transition to university life, providing helpful resources during the job search process in the host country, and equipping them for successful careers after graduation (Fakunle, 2021). These resources can help international students with a range of resources and services, and some key aspects include developing knowledge about local employers, writing an appropriate resume, assisting with job application forms, practicing interview skills to increase competitiveness, and developing other skills related to finding a job and/or starting a career (John McKitterick et al., 2020). For international students, university international student services and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services are helpful resources to use if there are questions about visas, OPT/CPT, and general rules and procedures related to employment (Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). Most universities have specific services for international students, or at minimum a DSO familiar with the SEVIS system to assist students with immigration and job requirements.

Other campus support services may include academic advising centers, tutoring programs, counseling programs, and culture centers. In academic advising centers, advisors help international students plan their coursework, especially if supplemental English language courses are required. Students can also receive academic guidance on classes, curriculum, registration, scheduling, commuting distances, and anticipated graduation dates. Depending on the university, academic advisors may be situated within academic departments or in separate centers across campus.

Once involved in courses, tutoring programs can help international students succeed in their academic coursework, especially if they are struggling. Many tutoring centers also have supplemental instruction study sessions, specific help centers within departments, and online tips, strategies, and techniques to assist with coursework and acclimating to U.S. higher education. Counseling programs support the mental health of students and may include initial consultation, individual therapy, group therapy, crisis management, or referral to campus or community resources. International students who face various challenges such as stress, culture shock, homesickness, and loneliness may utilize services provided by counseling programs to receive physical and mental support and learn to take care of themselves. Culture centers may provide a familiar environment, connections with other international students, and trainings on U.S. culture, such as etiquette (e.g., greetings, social customs) and values (e.g., individualism, freedom). Overall, universities and colleges in the U.S. offer a range of programs and services to support students. Exploring and effectively utilizing the various services available on campus is important for international students as they adopt to unfamiliar cultures, environments, and educational systems.

Develop Social Networks

One key advantage of international students—compared to other migrant groups—is the opportunity to network and build relationships with other people on campus (Han et al., 2022). Universities and colleges may have international programs, nationality organizations, student clubs and organizations, affinity groups, and student life activities to help international students meet, develop, and maintain social connections with other

people. International students can also develop relationships and seek support from peers, roommates, colleagues, and professors to maintain mental health and build local social networks (Yang et al., 2021). Some professors can help ease the application, transition, and career process by providing international students with job information, support, and networking (Han et al., 2022). Role models who share experiences and contributions on campus or in the same career can inspire and support international students as well (Yang et al., 2021).

Networking—interacting with others to exchange information and develop professional or social contacts (Merriam Webster Dictionary, n.d. -a) —on campus and within communities may help international students in many ways. Networking with students from the same country can help with acculturation issues as well as career development as social contacts keep in touch after graduation (Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). Networking with other international students allows for chances to communicate and share experiences, better understand each other, and make targeted suggestions with people who are having similar difficulties (Han et al., 2022). In addition, international students may increase their social network by joining or volunteering in community, religious, or spiritual organizations (Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Yang et al., 2021). Increasing local social networks improve support opportunities and access to local culture, likely increasing the cultural competence of international students.

To expand social networks within music therapy, international music therapy students may join music therapy student clubs or associations, and attend regional or national music therapy conferences, symposiums, or workshops. Many schools have clubs that students may join to focus on student interests or majors, like music therapy. In addition, AMTA has regional and national student associations. These student associations provide opportunities to connect with other music therapy students, workshops and guest speakers to expand knowledge, and social and professional gatherings that can further growth and development. International music therapy students can also attend regional or national conferences, symposiums, or workshops. These gatherings are often great opportunities to interact with educators, internship directors, researchers, and professionals from various institutions and regions across the U.S. Students can also engage in discussions, present their own research, and exchange contact information with other students or professionals who share common interests. Through various networking opportunities, international music therapy students can broaden their horizons, build a supportive community, and foster personal and professional growth during their academic journey in the U.S.

Increase Cultural Competence, Intelligence, and Humility

Throughout international student literature, researchers introduce terms such as cultural competence, cultural intelligence, and cultural humility to describe ways students and faculty may understand, appreciate, and build relationships with people of diverse cultural backgrounds within their host countries. Although researchers differ in their definitions, descriptions, conceptualizations, and applications of these terms, they agree on the importance of familiarization, adaptation, and development of skills to better understand and improve the experience of international students.

Cultural competence refers to the “process by which individuals and systems respond effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms,” and values the worth and dignity of everyone (Earley & Ang, 2003, p. 263). Cultural competence is often misunderstood as something that may be achieved (e.g., a skill to be met), but instead, is a continuous process of development. Researchers identified a positive correlation between academic and social integration, underscoring the need for international students to acquire intercultural competence (Cheng & Liu, 2021). International students may

increase cultural competence by learning U.S. norms, customs, and values, and by interacting as much as possible with campus, local, and mainstream culture. In addition, international students must realize the variety of groups and regional differences within U.S. culture. Forinash (2001) emphasizes the importance for international music therapy students to become acquainted with both their own and clients' cultural backgrounds, norms, worldviews, gender roles, behaviors, communication styles, and socio-political histories of different racial or ethnic groups, as well as the music associated with these groups, in order to enhance their effectiveness. This familiarization does not happen in a vacuum and requires support and guidance throughout their clinical training. An important construct that may help international music therapy students understand and continuously develop cultural competence is called cultural intelligence (Wang et al., 2015).

Cultural intelligence—also known as cultural quotient (CQ)—is defined as “a person’s capability for successful adaptation to new cultural settings” (Earley & Ang, 2003, p. 9). Overall, CQ is the ability of international students to adapt to new cultural settings, situations, and interactions. Researchers demonstrate that international students with higher CQ have more positive relationships with cross-cultural adjustment, improve their acculturative process, and connect more with mainstream culture (Hong et al., 2021). Cultural intelligence is a continuous process and does not assume that international students assimilate into the dominant culture, but instead provides cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral strategies that students may use to empower themselves throughout their host country experience.

CQ is a multidimensional construct composed of four facets (a) cognitive, (b) metacognitive, (c) motivational, and (d) behavioral competences (Ang et al., 2007). *Cognitive CQ* refers to factual knowledge of other cultures including things such as values, cultural norms, and behaviors accepted in different societies (Ang et al., 2019; Kurpis & Hunter, 2017). *Metacognitive CQ* refers to an individual’s ability to consciously recognize and navigate cultural dynamics during cross-cultural interactions (Kurpis & Hunter, 2017). *Motivational CQ* refers to the drive towards learning and adapting to a foreign culture in order to effectively navigate cross-cultural situations (Kurpis & Hunter, 2017; Shu et al., 2017). Lastly, *behavioral CQ* refers to the ability to acquire or adapt behaviors appropriately in foreign cultures (Kurpis & Hunter, 2017). While metacognition, cognition, and motivation are mental capacities that reside within the mind overt actions are behavioral capabilities (Ang et al., 2019). Thus, cultural intelligence encompasses more than just factual knowledge. CQ also includes the ability to assess one’s own cultural intelligence effectively, acquire and understand cultural knowledge, function effectively in intercultural contexts, and connect cultural knowledge to verbal and nonverbal behaviors in intercultural interactions. To improve CQ, international music therapy students may focus on improving these four facets, or competency areas.

The purpose of developing cognitive (i.e., conscious mental activities) and metacognitive (i.e., thinking about one’s thinking) competencies is to expand cultural awareness (Earley & Ang, 2003). International music therapy students must consciously learn, remember, and use information about the local culture, people, and the working environment to better work within the community (Kim, 2011; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). To develop cognitive CQ, for instance, international music therapy students can engage in volunteer activities or community service projects related to music therapy. Thus, students can enhance their understanding and knowledge of cultural diversity by interacting with individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds as well as practice and develop communication skills with individuals who may have different communication styles, languages, or non-verbal cues. In addition to these conscious mental tasks, international students must also become more aware of their own thinking beyond race and ethnicity, including how they plan, monitor, and think about their own values, beliefs, bias, and life

experiences, and how these interact with and affect their experiences with other cultures (American Psychological Association, 2013). For example, international students can seek feedback from trusted clinical supervisors, advisors, peers, mentors, or music therapists who have observed their interactions in clinical settings. The feedback can help international students enhance their self-awareness and adjust their approach accordingly. These cognitive and metacognitive facets may help international students better assess their understanding, awareness, and thinking about culture, and improve cultural competence and effectiveness of cross-cultural interactions.

Regarding motivational CQ, goals and self-efficacy are important and complementary elements. International students with clear goals and confidence tend to be more motivated to handle cultural differences and unfamiliar situations (Earley & Ang, 2003, p. 282). To develop motivational competency, international students may set specific and assessable goals for themselves to increase cross-cultural interactions. For example, goals could include understanding how class discussions are carried out, practicing newly learned social gestures with a peer, or talking at least once per class by asking or answering a question. As international students accomplish these specific and attainable goals, self-efficacy (i.e., one's belief in their ability to accomplish a task or goal) increases. As self-efficacy increases, students set and attain further goals for themselves, and the cycle continues. Throughout this process, positive environments and positive social reinforcement by peers, educators, and community members can support this developing self-efficacy, and motivate international students to continue cross-cultural interactions with others. Thus, through this cyclical process of pursuing and attaining goals and increasing self-efficacy, international students develop motivational competency skills (Earley & Ang, 2003).

Behavioral competency includes skills associated with observing and recognizing meaningful behaviors and interactions in the host culture, developing new schemata (i.e., mental structures of organized knowledge) to help interpret and predict behaviors, and integrating information from subsequent cross-cultural interactions into these developing schemata (Earley & Ang, 2003). International students already have schemata based on their background and experiences in their home culture. As they observe and begin to recognize meaningful interactions in their host country, international students integrate this new knowledge into their home country schemata and develop new schemata. As cross-cultural interactions continue, international students continue to integrate this newly acquired information and adjust their behaviors accordingly. This continuous process improves behavioral competency skills and the ability of international students to adapt to the host culture environment (Earley & Ang, 2003).

These four facets—cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral competencies—can improve cultural intelligence and overall culture competence of international students. Thus, by knowing that these are skills to develop—instead of natural abilities or inherent personal characteristics—international students may be empowered to have an open mind and the courage to step out of their comfort zone to have more cross-cultural interactions that ultimately will help them adapt to studying and living in the U.S. (Yang et al., 2021). Both cultural competence and cultural intelligence focus more on individuals' outward capabilities; however, inward self-reflection and commitment to lifelong learning are equally important. Therefore, to support international students throughout this process, all stakeholders (e.g., faculty, peers, administrators, international students) can work to increase cultural humility.

Cultural humility involves a process of self-reflection and discovery aimed at building honest and trustworthy relationships (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013). Initially introduced in the healthcare environment by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998), cultural humility: (a) requires ongoing self-evaluation and self-critique, coupled with a commitment to lifelong learning; (b) strives to reduce power imbalances by creating a safe environment and

embracing humility, acknowledging that individuals are experts in their own lives; (c) underscores its community-based nature, urging advocacy from every practitioner; and (d) can be nurtured through institutional self-reflection and self-critique, a diverse faculty, and explicit educational goals addressing cultural issues. Due to increasing racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity within the U.S.—and regardless of domestic or international status—all music therapy students, practitioners, and educators must strive to develop cultural humility to decrease insensitivity and the risk of delivering unequal healthcare services (Anderson et al., 2003).

Foronda et al. (2016) developed a cultural humility analysis model—that may be helpful for international students and stakeholders—by integrating several other models from existing literature (e.g., Campinha-Bacote, 2002; Chang et al., 2012). The model includes attributions of openness, self-awareness, egoless, supportive interactions, and self-reflection and critique. *Openness* is defined as “possessing an attitude that is willing to explore new ideas,” and asserts that individuals must first be open to interacting with culturally diverse individuals for cultural humility to take root (Foronda et al., 2016, p. 211). Within the profession, “openness to new ideas” is an essential characteristic (AMTA, 2024) and “openness to change” considered one of the most important descriptive personality traits of music therapists (Vega, 2010). Openness involves cultural learning and exploration, making efforts to identify and reduce cultural bias, and being prepared to use one’s power and privilege to work toward social justice. Continuously cultivating this openness is an essential step towards achieving cultural humility in professional practice (Foronda et al., 2016) and in the education and training of domestic and international students.

Self-awareness is defined as “being aware of one’s strengths, limitations, values, beliefs, behavior, and appearance to others” (Foronda et al., 2016, p. 211). Self-awareness can be cultivated through attentiveness to “bodily cues, thoughts and emotions, and awareness and sensitivity to others” (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013, p. 254). This process of attentiveness and engagement enables individuals to experience situations more accurately and respond thoughtfully without relying on self-narratives and judgements (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013). For therapists, self-awareness is essential, as understanding therapists’ personal responses is crucial for effective utilization within a therapeutic relationship (Pieterse et al., 2013). For music therapists, Hadley and Norris (2016) suggest several strategies for improving cultural awareness, including: (a) examining the societal systems that perpetuate inequity and inequality on the ways music therapists may unintentionally support dominant Western ideas in music therapy space; (b) exploring cultural identity and engaging in constant self-analysis; and (c) delving into intrapersonal communication (e.g., self-talk) and adopting mindful practice to shift from dichotomous and hierarchical thinking to holistic thinking. For domestic and international students, practitioners, and educators, being aware of their values, beliefs, and behaviors is essential when interacting and working with diverse individuals (Hadley & Norris, 2016), as this awareness becomes a foundational element for the ongoing development of cultural humility (Foronda et al., 2016).

Egoless refers to humbleness and “viewing the worth of all individuals on a horizontal plane” without any hierarchy or power differential (Foronda et al. 2016, p. 212). This attribute of cultural humility aligns with ethics and standards within many healthcare professions, including music therapy. Music therapists are committed to providing high quality, non-discriminatory, fair, just, and respectful services for all individuals in all settings (AMTA, 2015). AMTA emphasize a policy of non-discrimination and equal opportunity against engaging in discriminating “against person, including clients and their families, other recipients of services, students, interns, supervisees, and colleagues” (AMTA, 2015, Non-discrimination and Equal Opportunity Policy, para. 3). In alignment with these ethical guidelines, music therapists are expected to operate with a belief system that

upholds equal human rights and actively works to eliminate hierarchy or power differential (Foronda et al., 2016). This belief system must also include music therapists' interactions with international students. For instance, supervisors and educators may approach their relationships with international students and clients in a humble manner by acknowledging the power differences and hierarchy, and respecting their cultures and viewpoints to avoid discrimination or assumptions. By observing and experiencing this egoless and humble manner of supervisors and educators, international students may model this attribute when interacting with others.

Supportive interactions are defined as “intersections of existence among individuals that result in positive human exchanges” (Foronda et al., 2016, p. 212). In essence, supportive interactions involve understanding one's responsibility in fostering positive interactions with culturally diverse individuals. Supportive interactions may be fostered through active listening and demonstrating empathy; paying attention to the body, mind, and soul of individuals; effectively participating in mindful communication; and taking a patient-centered approach to healthcare (Chang et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2019). Supportive interactions are essential to the formation of therapeutic relationships with clients. Music therapists demonstrate this attribute by facilitating “therapeutic, goal-oriented music-based interactions that are meaningful and supportive to the function and health of their clients” (CBMT, 2021, Potential for Harm, p. 2). Supportive interactions are also important when fostering relationships with international students. Music therapy supervisors and educators are encouraged to demonstrate active listening and empathy and take a student-centered approach for mutual and supportive exchanges that can foster cultural humility (Chang et al., 2012).

Self-reflection and critique refer to the “critical process of reflecting on one's thoughts, feelings and actions” (Foronda et al., 2016, p. 212). Healthcare professionals are encouraged to engage in self-questioning and self-critique regarding their background, identity, assumptions about the world, and the sources upon which these assumptions are based (Chang et al., 2012). By continuously observing and examining one's beliefs, identities, and biases, the projection of those ideas onto others becomes clearer. Embracing self-critique helps people accept that it is not possible to know all things about any given culture. Hadley and Norris (2016) advocate for extensive self-reflection and introspection (i.e., inward examination of one's thoughts, emotions, judgements, and perceptions; Cherry, 2023) among music therapists, emphasizing an inward focus on exploring cultural identity rather than exclusively looking outward on cultural minorities. This approach entails maintaining genuine curiosity to understand the unique perspectives of individuals and encourages stakeholders to engage in meaningful introspection and self-questioning (Hadley & Norris, 2016). For example, in music therapy education and training, Edwards (2022) advocates for the incorporation of diverse voices and authors in the curricula from a variety of cultural backgrounds and identifying whether the theories learned in class consider clients' cultural identity or norms. Although cultural introspection may be challenging (Hadley & Norris, 2016), it is necessary to eliminate practices that “do not advance the profession or adequately support clinicians and clients with the most vulnerable and historically marginalized identities” (Edwards, 2022, p. 34). Therefore, in education and training, supervisors, educators, international students, and peers must approach relationships in a similar manner of curiosity, introspection, self-reflection, and self-critique to appreciate the unique perspectives of all involved and practice cultural humility.

The attributes of openness, self-awareness, egoless, supportive interactions, and self-reflection and critique help improve cultural humility, the outcomes of which include “mutual empowerment, partnerships, respect, optimal care, and lifelong learning” (Foronda et al., 2016, p. 213). These attributions serve as foundational elements and enable students, therapists, and educators to continually learn and grow both personally

and professionally (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999). For music therapy students and stakeholders, a conscious cultivation of all the attributed elements of cultural humility becomes imperative. Cultural humility results in the establishment of respectful and trustworthy partnerships and the delivery of effective treatment and improved care—all of which necessitate a commitment to a life-long learning process of self-reflection, inquiry, and learning (Foronda et al., 2016).

Implications for Music Therapy Education and Training

Music therapy educators and supervisors may support international students as they adapt to their coursework and environment and support their skill development for future clinical practice. Research strongly suggest that educators improve international students' understanding of their educational path, encourage them to develop bicultural competence, recognize their uniqueness as individuals with diverse backgrounds and multilingual abilities, and create safe, supportive, welcoming and culturally responsive environments to increase their self-confidence in performing well in their studies (Christidis, 2021; Fry & Mumford, 2011; Sangganjanavanish et al., 2011). Thus, music therapy educators may support international students in a variety of important ways.

Music therapy educators may create a supportive environment where international students feel connected to the program and community. To do so, educators can meet with international students to discuss specific challenges they are encountering and identify potential solutions and resources to mitigate those challenges. These solutions and resources may be as simple as encouraging international students to use the writing center, or as complex as systemic changes that may need to occur in their classroom teaching or music therapy program. For example, underrepresentation in the classroom and identity conflict may cause international students to feel lonely and like an outsider to the program (Yang et al., 2021). Music therapy educators may structure classroom activities to encourage positive cross-cultural interactions and support team building so international students feel engaged with their peer cohort and music therapy community. Such interactions may contribute to enhanced cultural understanding and appreciation, allowing international students to share their unique perspectives and experiences while gaining insights into the local culture and feeling supported by peers. However, educators are encouraged to avoid positioning international students as cultural experts of their home countries. They have unique interpretations or viewpoints about certain cultural practices, and do not speak for an entire national or ethnic group. For instance, Korean students do not represent the full spectrum of Korean or Asian culture, nor are they universally knowledgeable about it. Music therapy faculty, internship directors, and supervisors should keep in mind that these students hold their own unique interpretations and perspectives on Korean values, traditions, and customs.

In addition, music therapy educators, supervisors, or internship directors should take seriously the potential for discrimination and microaggressions (i.e., a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group, such as a racial minority; Merriam Webster Dictionary, n.d. -b) that international students may experience within the program. For example, music therapy educators could improve cultural sensitivity for both international and domestic students by designing and incorporating cultural workshops to encourage meaningful conversations and interactions between students (Christidis, 2021; John McKitterick et al., 2021; Sangganjanavanish et al., 2011). They can also foster more inclusive and safe learning environments by discussing and describing clear expectations for classroom and clinic behavior, providing examples of inclusive behaviors, and creating a sense of belonging for all students, regardless of their various backgrounds.

Developing appropriate music repertoire may be challenging for international students due to cultural distance and language barriers; therefore, music therapy educators can provide starting repertoire lists of common songs students may use in clinical practice. Some repertoire lists are already available online through different universities, and educators may tailor these lists according to their areas of expertise and specific client preferences in their region of the U.S. Educators may also provide international music therapy students with research articles that identify music used in different age groups, including music used for children, adolescents, adults, and older adults. For example, Schwartzberg and Silverman (2014) provide lists of pre-existing songs commonly used for children between birth and 19 years old, arranged in categories of hello/welcome, instrumental, behavioral/psychosocial, communication, cognitive, sensory integration/exploration, body regulation, goodbye/closure, and transition songs. Silverman (2009) identified songs psychiatric music therapists use during lyric analysis interventions when working with adults. Several authors share music therapy repertoire recommendations for older adults (Belgrave et al., 2011; Cevasco-Trotter et al., 2014; VanWeelden & Cevasco, 2007, 2009, 2010; VanWeelden et al., 2008). Educators can also encourage students to investigate the historical background of songs and genres to better understand the sociocultural significance. All of these may be useful resources for international students to develop their repertoire during pre-departure preparations or during their music therapy program coursework.

Music therapy educators may be a safe and consistent support person for international students and help them navigate all the complexity of various systems. For example, international students may share with educators that they are frustrated by the constraints imposed by U.S. immigration law when seeking opportunities for work experience in the U.S. Music therapy faculty and advisors are encouraged to plan with students and initiate conversations about student goals after graduation, work options, and visa options/process, even before students depart from their home country. These conversations may continue throughout students' time on campus and adjust according to progress. In summary, music therapy faculty members, department heads, and internship directors and supervisors all play a significant role in supporting international students' academic success and adjustment in the U.S. They can provide support and access to programs and services available either on campus or in the community, covering cultural adjustment, academics, immigration, visa support, language assistance, networking opportunities, professional development, and mental wellness resources.

Suggestions for International Music Therapy Students

The authors provide several suggestions for international music therapy students. First, if possible, learn basic guitar, piano, and voice skills before entering a music therapy program. By learning these basic skills beforehand, students may focus on understanding, articulating, and memorizing lyrics in English, as well as developing their clinical verbal skills. Second, research and prepare repertoire lists before beginning practicum fieldwork. The language barrier increases clinical difficulty in many ways, so having foundational song lists can reduce stress, and allow students to focus on developing therapeutic relationships and higher-level clinical skills. Third, structure a manageable personal schedule to balance repertoire learning and other schoolwork. During this intense learning time, schedule daily music practice and repertoire development along with other course responsibilities. Fourth, develop personal strategies for learning repertoire quickly and efficiently. For example, the first author would listen to an authentic recording three times, divide the song into small sections and practice them section by section, then practice larger sections such as the verse or chorus, and repeat and reinforce difficult or challenging

sections. Fifth, develop a song listening schedule. Listening to authentic recordings during spare moments, such as commuting or breaks, could significantly shorten the time required to learn new repertoire. Sixth, gather feedback on the quality of song presentation. Students can record and view their performance themselves, or share and seek feedback from trusted peers, educators, and supervisors in their support network to identify their strengths and areas for improvement.

Seventh, be kind, patient, and validate. International music therapy students may feel a variety of emotions and experience significant stressors during this exciting and challenging journey. Students must be kind and patient with themselves and validate even the smallest of accomplishments. Eighth, practice self-care and develop adaptive coping strategies. Experiencing stress is common for international music therapy students; developing coping skills and participating in self-care strategies may decrease or mitigate stress (Moore & Wilhelm, 2019). Ninth, self-advocate and seek support in times of need. When international music therapy students encounter academic, personal, and professional challenges, they may need to advocate for themselves by communicating and sharing their needs. International students can educate themselves about available support services, resources, and policies within their institution, professional associations and organizations. Tenth, build support networks and community, and seek allies as needed. This may involve establishing connections with fellow international students or local community members, and among faculty members, staff, or peers.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

All three authors have different backgrounds, experiences, responsibilities, bias, and assumptions associated with international music therapy students. These may be different than other students, educators, clinicians, supervisors, and administrators. As such, the authors worked together to shape the lens for this paper. We only used peer-reviewed publications in English available in the U.S. and so we may have missed important materials from other countries and languages. We also did not assess the quality of research articles used in this paper. English is second language of both the first and second author so some expressions may not be accurate despite editing and revision.

Future Research Recommendations

More research is needed to better understand the experiences of international music therapy students in the U.S. Future research could involve interviews with international music therapy students, graduates, and clinicians to gather information about their experiences, strategies, and advice to gain a better understanding of this topic. Further research could also investigate potential differences in students' experiences and challenges based on their home countries, cultures, and languages, as students from diverse cultural backgrounds may encounter distinct challenges. Overall, future researchers are encouraged to add their voices to this much-needed scholarly conversation.

Conclusion

International music therapy students may experience a variety of challenges throughout the process of becoming practicing professionals in the U.S. By understanding the overall process and common challenges, international music therapy students and key stakeholders can better navigate and proactively mitigate typical stressors and concerns. To do so, international music therapy students are encouraged to focus on language competence, utilize campus support, develop social networks, increase cultural humility,

and develop strategies for building their music skills and repertoire.

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Appendix

Summary Overview of the Process from Pre-Departure to Music Therapy Professional Practice

| Pre-Departure Processes | |
|---|--|
| Information | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify interest in music therapy and investigate profession Research education options (e.g., visit government websites, AMTA website, and university websites) Complete and submit all application forms, requirements, and fees for the selected institutions Apply and gain admission to a Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) certified school Accept admission offer from a SEVP music therapy university Register in the Student Exchange Information System (SEVIS) |
| Finances | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gather proof of financial ability (e.g., bank statement, letters of grants, scholarships) for tuition, fees, and living expenses for at least one academic year Submit financial documents to the designated school official (DSO) |
| Visa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Receive a Form I-20 or DS-2019 from the SEVP-approved school Pay the I-901 SEVIS fee at FMJfee.com Apply for a visa at a U.S. embassy or consulate Schedule and attend the visa interview, bringing necessary forms Get approved and receive or pick up their passport with visa Enter the U.S. no earlier than 30 days before the start date of their program |
| Mid-Education Processes | |
| Immigration and Customs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete the immigration and customs admission procedure at the initial port of entry Visit www.cbp.gov/I94 to retrieve or print a copy of Form I-94 electronically Report to the university DSO within a specific timeframe after entering the U.S. |
| Compliance with University and Program Requirements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Check-in with the university international student office Attend orientation organized by the educational institution Complete additional English proficiency tests as necessary Complete music proficiency requirements if required Complete curricular requirements of the university and program |
| Compliance with Immigration Regulations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have a valid passport for at least 6 months into the future at all times Maintain full-time status during the academic year and meet required curricular expectations Follow all on-campus or off-campus employment regulations and restrictions Maintain satisfactory academic progress toward completing a course of study Keep the form I-20 or DS-2019 valid at all times Promptly report any changes to personal, program, and financial information to the international student office |
| Post-Coursework Processes | |
| Curricular Practical Training (CPT) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand eligibility and reporting requirements for CPT If undergraduate or equivalency, meet the CPT requirement to be a full-time student for at least one academic year prior to beginning the internship Apply and interview for music therapy internships/jobs Receive and accept a music therapy internship offer/job Use the internship/job offer letter to apply for CPT with the DSO |

| | |
|---|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with your internship director and academic advisor to complete any required documentation for the internship/job site • Receive a new I-20 with work authorization for the music therapy internship/job • If undergraduate or equivalency, enroll in the university internship course • Begin the internship only after the CPT is approved by the DSO |
| <p>Music Therapy Board Certification Exam</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete the music therapy internship and all degree requirements • Apply for the national board certification exam through the Certification Board for Music Therapists (CBMT) • Become familiar with the exam format, content areas, and question language and structure used in the exam by practicing with sample questions and study materials • Pass the board certification exam and obtain the MT-BC credential or retake the exam in 30 days • Complete at least 100 continuing education credits within five years to maintain the MT-BC credential |
| <p>Optional Practical Training (OPT)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check eligibility and reporting requirements for OPT • Consult with the DSO about OPT plans, the application process, and complete necessary documents • DSO recommends OPT in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) • Apply for OPT (job offer not required) up to 90 days before the program end date • File the Form I-765 online for OPT and submit supporting materials • Get approved and receive an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) • Update the university DSO with any changes related to OPT • Keep accurate and updated records of employment history • Upon completion of OPT, students have a 60-day grace period to prepare for a new program, apply for a different visa status, or leave the U.S. |
| <p>H-1B Visa</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply and interview for jobs that meet the criteria of a specialty occupation (i.e., music therapy position) • Receive and accept a job offer in a specialty occupation from an employer who can be an H-1B sponsor • Employer files for and receives the certified Labor Condition Application (LCA) • Employer, with the assistance of an immigration attorney, prepares the required H-1B petition documents, including the Form I-129 Petition for a Nonimmigrant Worker, supporting documents, and fees • Employer files an H-1B petition with USCIS and receives an approval notice • Student works for the sponsoring employer and must maintain compliance with the conditions of their H-1B visa • Upon completion of an H-1B visa, students may choose to leave the U.S., apply for a different immigration status, or apply to become permanent residents of the U.S. commonly through employment-based or family-sponsored immigration |

Note: This table provides a summary of the general process as identified at the time of this publication. This information is not intended to be an inclusive guide or replace an immigration attorney. International students are encouraged to check government websites for the most current information about the overall process and follow directions and instructions exactly as specified by the appropriate U.S. government departments.