

## Accommodating Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: Rehabilitation Counseling Perspectives

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### Abstract

Individuals with disabilities are often under presented in higher education setting in which have led these marginalized groups to problems such as having lack of access to academic services and facilities, unequal opportunities to participate in activities on campus thus, hindering their intellectual and psychological growth. As students with disabilities are anticipated to encounter many challenges throughout their academic endeavor, rehabilitation counselors can play integral roles in facilitating these situations. This paper presents the unique roles of rehabilitation counselors and identifies the required competencies to accommodate the academic needs of university students with disabilities. Rehabilitation counselors work collaboratively with the university faculty, staff, and administrators to ensure students with disabilities acquire equal access to academic services

and facilities on campus. The required competency when working with students with disabilities in higher education setting is to have a substantial knowledge in psychosocial and medical aspect of disability, vocational rehabilitation counseling, and rehabilitation technology. To create an inclusive and integrated counseling service for student with disabilities, training in the core knowledge area of rehabilitation counseling must be provided to the existing counselors. The inclusion of rehabilitation counseling in the counseling education curriculum will drive the emergence of the field in higher education.

**Keywords:** Students with Disabilities, Academic Accommodation, Rehabilitation Counseling, Disability

## Introduction

The needs for educational accommodations have become more salient as the number of the students with disabilities grows in the Malaysian higher education system. The provision of educational accommodation is reinforced through the establishment of the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2008 as it quotes “education for persons with disabilities should form an integral part of national educational planning, curriculum development and school organization”. These legislations delineate that students with disabilities should not be discriminated based on their disability and are mandated for any educational settings that offer services for this population.

Rehabilitation counseling approach is not uncommon in the American higher education. The two primary federal laws that protect people with disabilities from discrimination in higher educational settings like colleges and universities are the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Universities are mandated to provide students with disabilities reasonable accommodations for their disabilities and to ensure that their programs and activities are fully accessible to students with disabilities (Expert, 2013). In order to provide support for students with disabilities at higher education, disability personnel with rehabilitation counseling background are appointed for this purpose.

In Asia region, South Korea has adapted rehabilitation counseling approach in the disability provision for students with disabilities at higher education. The Special Education for Persons with Disabilities Act (SEPDA) of 2007 and the Anti-discrimination and Rights Remedy for Persons with Disabilities Act (ARRPDA) of 2007 guarantee students with disabilities the right to request and receive reasonable accommodations for their college education (Kim et al., 2012). Universities are obligated to establish disability support centers staffed by administrators to work exclusively with the students with disabilities.

Though the disability support services have been established at certain Malaysian universities such as University of Malaya (UM) and University of Science Malaysia (USM), the rehabilitation counseling perspective has not been fully infused in the system. Rehabilitation counselors should be inclusive (although it is not being stated clearly in the legislation) in the disability support service network as part of their professional and social responsibilities for students with disabilities at higher education. The roles of rehabilitation counselors is imperative to drive the students toward goal achievement for academic success and one of the means to achieve it is by facilitating the counseling process with the students with

disabilities, thus resulting in equal opportunities with their peers to participate in any educational activities.

### **Roles of Rehabilitation Counselors**

Rehabilitation counseling can be defined as a collaborative work between the counselor and the client to understand existing problems, obstacles, and potentials in order to facilitate the effective use of personal and environmental resources for career, personal, social, and community adjustment following disability (Leahy, 2004). The difference between rehabilitation counselors and other types of counselors is they have a specialized knowledge of disabilities and environmental factors that interact with disabilities, and skills to deal with individuals with disabilities apart from the ability to draw on knowledge from several fields including counseling, psychology, medicine, psychiatry, social work, education, and law to support their rehabilitation counseling practices (Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, 2010).

The responsibilities of rehabilitation counselors in the context of higher education are mostly focused on their professional relationships with the university staffs and administrators, faculty members, students, and their parents/guardians with the objectives of accommodating students with disabilities' educational needs as outlined in the following descriptions:

*Rehabilitation counselors provide disability-related counseling and advising.* The tasks involve evaluating eligibility for disability-related services and accommodations, determining reasonable accommodations, and individualize a service plan for the students. For example, a student with speech impairment undergoes a functional evaluation to assess the student's needs for accommodation such as an augmentative communication device that provides speech for individuals who are not able to communicate verbally.

*Rehabilitation counselors provide advocacy to students with disabilities.* Apart from the nurturing traits in the study about the characteristics of an ideal counselor, another most desired counselor characteristic included commitment to advocacy for the client (McCarthy & Leierer, 2001). Many people with disabilities are likely to seek affirmation and support from helping professionals like rehabilitation counselors given the personal condescension and societal discrimination that they continue to experience. For instance, students with psychiatric disabilities such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are those with heavy duty types of disabilities. Their reactions to learning may fluctuate and change drastically overtime from agreeing to attend an examination to deciding to isolate them at home on the same day of the examination being held due to the manifestations of their symptoms. Therefore, the rehabilitation counselors will act as an advocate for these students in which they have to mediate the discussion process between the students and faculty on how to initiate a means to accommodate the students. The rehabilitation counselors may recommend for a take home examination as a solution to ensure the students still acquire an equal access to learning with their peers.

*Rehabilitation counselors consult and collaborate with university faculty, staff, and administrators to provide assistance, advice, and information on providing students with*

*equal access to educational activities and opportunities.* Lack of awareness of the plight of students with disabilities continues to be a problem even for academic professionals who require a reform in changing their attitudes through educational programs such as training, seminar, or workshop. Murray et al. (2010) reported that disability-focused training has a positive effect on the faculty attitudes and perceptions. Hence, rehabilitation counselors should serve as a referral on disability issues.

*Rehabilitation counselors provide guidance and on-going support to students with disabilities.* The profession builds bridges between the often isolated world of students with disabilities and their families, communities, and learning environments (Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, 2010). Rehabilitation counselors are not only connected with the students but also their parents or guardians. Given a scenario of parents who have to endure the challenges of being stigmatized because having a child with disability, rehabilitation counselors should anticipate certain situations such as dealing with protective parents of students with developmental disability (i.e.; autistic, Asperger syndrome) by teaching them to overcome their anxiety and doubts on their children's ability to adjust with the university life. Making follow up (such as a simple task like making phone calls) on the progress of the student after reasonable accommodation is part of the working alliance process to ensure the students meet the needs necessary for access to learning and adaptation to campus life. Rehabilitation counselors provide current and accurate information on disability products, programs, and services to all inquiring students such as addressing the various types of educational accommodations including but not limited to adapted materials, testing accommodations, interpreting and captioning, note taking, and document conversion which brings out the idea of the importance of the profession to be well-versed in the area of assistive technology.

Rehabilitation counselors' competencies should be expanded to different areas related to disability world. They must move forward from the counseling field to various fields such as disability management, job accommodation, private rehabilitation, and assistive technology as means to diversify their skills. These multi-competencies are vital to the profession as it formalizes rehabilitation counselors as unique from other counseling disciplines.

### **Rehabilitation Counselors' Competencies in Addressing Students with Disabilities' Needs**

Rehabilitation counselors at the higher education setting must have the following competencies to assist college students with disabilities:

*Psychosocial and medical aspect of disability.* Rehabilitation counselors must have an understanding in reviewing medical and psychological reports, assessing functional abilities of the students, and examining the adjustment to the disability and its psychosocial impact on the students.

*Rehabilitation technology.* Familiarity with the current technology used for improving the lives of students with disabilities is indispensable. Technology has become a route to break the barrier for students who have physical, visual, speech, and hearing impairment. Rehabilitation counselors with this competency would be able to advise the faculty on which assistive technology that can be utilized in their teaching and learning.

*Career development for students with disabilities.* Having the ability to access learning facilities would bring about the students' sense of belonging to the college community. Rehabilitation counselors can obtain insight from the vocational issues highlighted by the students with disabilities to recognize the unique needs of the students (Plotner et al., 2012). There is no difference in terms of the career-related needs among students with disabilities with their counterpart (Enright et al., 1996). Therefore, career-related issues must be addressed to mitigate the adjustment process to the college environment, thus allowing the rehabilitation counselors to ensure the acquisition of appropriate accommodations during academic years and facilitate students' career development.

*Disability attitude education.* It would be very beneficial for rehabilitation counselors to design programs at the college level for increasing education and awareness about disabilities among university students. The training should not only be a knowledge-based type of training but also a practice-based training where students can apply their knowledge about disability and interact with other students with disabilities to bridge the gaps between these groups. Some of the popular interventions include simulations and providing opportunities for contact with people with disabilities and knowledge about their disabling conditions. Field work experiences and increased training on some of the more stigmatizing disabilities (such as cognitive and psychiatric disabilities) as well as ongoing education may also lead to more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities.

*Social justice and advocacy.* Rehabilitation counselors with advocacy orientations are able to recognize the impact of social, political, economic, and cultural factors on students' development. Higher education demands some degree of self-advocacy as it serves as a critical component in a university student's life (Foley, 2006). Self-advocacy training for students with disabilities should include educating students about their rights and responsibilities, communication, leadership and how to successfully request accommodations. Students should be taught about strategies on understanding how their disabilities affect their academic learning and access to other facilities on campus. They have to be empowered through communicating their needs to increase their level of social competence. A study on 50 college students with disabilities has reported a significant positive change in the students who participated in the self-advocacy and conflict resolution training (Palmer & Roessler, 2000) resulting in a reduced involvement from the professionals who have to advocate for this group. It would raise the level of independence among the students with disabilities as they require less staff assistance and as a result, it would elevate their visibility and bridge the gap with those without disabilities. Social justice in the perspective of counseling provides a theoretical framework to understand the detrimental effect of discrimination has on individual's ability to reach their potential (Lewis et al., 2011).

### **Rehabilitation Counseling: The Way Forward**

Currently, the unique challenges of most counseling services in the Malaysian higher education system are not exclusively designed for students with disabilities. In addition, many students with disabilities have to thrive and survive on college campus despite the struggles and challenges because they share similar ambitions and goals with their peers. Alternatively, the existing counselors must receive training in rehabilitation counseling to advance the

counselors' knowledge and related skills in formulating an individualized plan for assisting students' with disabilities.

Counseling services should be intertwined with the counseling curriculum in the Malaysian higher education system. To date, rehabilitation counseling has not yet been offered as a specialization at the graduate level in Malaysia. Hence, academics should identify which of the knowledge areas in rehabilitation counseling necessary to be included in the existing counseling curriculum.

What makes the situation unique is the sheer number of existing government policy and system that needs to be considered. It has been further challenged by the flexibility of the campus community to accept and address the students with disabilities' needs. The swing toward using the rehabilitation counseling approach in accommodating students with disabilities will not be commonplace in the absence of the university administrators supports. A paradigm shift is needed in both counselor and university roles and functions. Developing a culture of collaboration at the higher education level will unite counselors, faculty, staff, and student community in a common vision to create equal opportunities for the students with disabilities.

### Conclusion

Rehabilitation counseling field has a window of opportunity to evolve in the Malaysian higher education system. Collaborative efforts when properly initiated and carefully nurtured will improve counseling services for students with disabilities and promote rehabilitation counseling professions.

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