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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 (SEFDA) 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.