

Proactive Advising for University Students with Disabilities in the Global South: Applying Basic Counseling Responses

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Abstract

From the framework of the proactive or intrusive advising approach, this paper presents a plausible method for addressing the academic and social issues stemming from being a university student with a disability and living in an under-resourced country. This paper will 1) address the necessity of support services for students with disabilities on university campuses in the Global South; 2) present proactive advising as a mechanism for university student advocacy and support at universities in the Global South; 3) highlight policy obligations of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) regarding the education of students with disabilities; and 4) introduce basic counseling responses as a culturally appropriate approach for university professionals to build rapport, actively engage, and promote reflection with students with disabilities in their pursuits of optimal academic achievement. Recommendations will be provided for sustainable top-down and bottom-up approaches for student support and faculty development.

Keywords: Proactive Advising, University, Higher Education, Disability, Global South

1. Introduction

“I am facing many challenges due to my disability in my society... I need some information and guidance if you can help me, please...” As a university professor of rehabilitation and human services in the United States, receiving this email from a student thousands of miles away, who I didn’t know, in a country that I had never been to, didn’t surprise me but it did concern me. I have spent years collaborating with colleagues around the world for the purposes of addressing issues such as these – raising disability awareness, combatting stigma, sharing research, and promoting inclusion and belonging within cultural contexts. I was grateful to be sought after as a resource and provided the student with some ideas for addressing the situations that he faced on his university campus and within his society. But I know that a systems approach to improving the circumstances of people with disabilities within societies requires multi-level

interventions, including top-down and bottom-up changes that are rooted in local, sociocultural contexts, and in legislative spaces (Akanke, 2023).

In this paper, I will focus on the dynamics of the relationships between university students with disabilities and academic advisors in under-resourced countries. I will explore specific barriers to academic success and social engagement for students with disabilities in the Global South; present proactive advising as an evidence-based, bottom-up, and culturally appropriate approach to meeting academic support needs of minoritized student groups; discuss the research-to-policy-to-practice needs regarding the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) to support educational access from the top down; and then introduce basic counseling responses as a non-therapeutic approach to facilitating advising and the development of rapport within student/faculty relationships.

1.1 Students with Disabilities in the Global South

A disability in an educational setting is a permanent physical, developmental, psychiatric, emotional, or intellectual health condition that limits a student's ability to access or succeed in their studies without intervention in the form of reasonable accommodations. A person's environment plays a large role in the severity of the disability experience (World Health Organization, 2023). Examples of reasonable accommodations for university students with disabilities (SWDs) are extended time during examinations, personal notetakers, printed copies of PowerPoint presentations or lecture notes, and flexibility with assignment due dates (Jansen et al., 2017; Schwartz, 2016). Within these prescribed accommodations, students and instructors can take time to specifically define how these adaptations will look in a course or which of them the student will ultimately need. In the Global South, university students face frequent difficulties as a result of not having pervasive access to such accommodations (Carlisle, 2022; Lord & Stein, 2018).

Clarke (2018) presented three of the various definitions that exist for the term "Global South." The first and most traditional descriptive includes countries categorized by the World Bank as low or middle income. These countries might also have been labeled less popularly as "developing" or "third world," carrying negative undertones because of the intrinsic comparison to countries in the Global North as the presumed gold standard. Definitions of Global South used by other scholars appreciate more complex dynamics that exist within country borders and capture how people can experience poverty within wealthy countries because of globalization. In other words, individuals can be Global Northerners or Global Southerners within the same country. And other definitions acknowledge similar dynamics that occur as a result of political subjugation, without 'South' necessarily being defined by geographic location and draw attention to disempowered social groups. Technically a misnomer, the Global South is not inherently a regional descriptor (i.e., northern hemisphere vs. southern hemisphere), but a designation within a hierarchy denoting the absence of certain privileges. For the purposes of this paper, I will be referencing aspects of all of these definitions, appreciating

how socioeconomic status, geographic location, and social class within countries disproportionately impact people with disabilities. I will examine specific cultural, legislative, and socioeconomic contexts related to people with disabilities and their access to post-secondary education.

About 80% of the 200 million adolescents with disabilities in the world reside in the Global South (Gregorius, 2017). Approximately 98% of these individuals do not attend school and are chronically unemployed and underemployed. Lord and Stein (2018) addressed the elusiveness of higher education for students with disabilities in under-resourced countries, due to social, legal, and environmental barriers. And Yilma et al. (2023) found a significant number of Ethiopian universities SWDs who had unmet needs regarding assistive technology. Baloyi (2019) explained the widespread discrimination against people with disabilities in higher education institutions in South Africa, even though there has been political pressure to address this since 1994. Social, financial, accessibility, environmental, cultural, religious, and institutional impediments constitute reasons for low enrollment, limited engagement, and other barriers to success for students with disabilities in Ethiopia, Ghana, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa (Abrahams et al., 2023; Ajaj, 2022; Gregorius, 2017; Manase, 2020; Madhesh, 2023; Sipuka, 2021). In India, social discrimination and employment opportunities for university SWDs were areas noted as needing attention (Kunnath & Mathew, 2019). In fact, Indonesian university graduates with disabilities expressed dissatisfaction with their educational experiences and a need for post-graduation vocational training, due to a lack of preparation for competitive employment and limited academic accommodations at their universities (Lessy et al., 2021). Chiwandire and Vincent (2019) noted decreased funding as an underlying cause for numerous barriers experienced by university students with disabilities in countries such as India and South Africa. In Ghana, researchers reported university SWDs' sentiments toward university administrators. The students' concerns related to transportation, communication, and other accessibility issues, were perceived by them to be disregarded by the powers that be at their universities (Tudzi et al., 2017). In Indonesia, research has elucidated limitations in infrastructure and a lack of competence among educators at the university level, which the authors expressed had constituted a violation of ethics (Barida et al., 2020).

Limited studies specifically explore the impact of academic advising principles on students with disabilities in the Global South. And there is no research that explores the impact of proactive advising and the basic counseling responses among university students with disabilities in these parts of the world. One study of higher education in Uganda suggested a need for “proactive planning for students with disabilities” (p. 9) and “for institutions to adopt a proactive approach of avoiding discrimination” (p. 2) (Emong & Eron, 2016).

1.2 Student Disability Awareness

Instructors and advisors of SWDs may not always be immediately aware of their students' disabilities, especially invisible disabilities, unless the student voluntarily

discloses. This is due in part to varying definitions of disability around the world and certain biases against health conditions that are unseen (Jokinen & Caretta, 2016; Moasun, 2023). For instance, some higher education institutions in the Global South may be more inclined to neglect the needs of students who don't have physical conditions (Carlisle, 2022). And developmental or intellectual disabilities are less often accommodated, such as those that impact learning, or speech and language (Carlisle, 2022; Marshall & Wickenden, 2018). Further research is needed to explore the types and prevalence of disabilities within universities in the Global South, by utilizing all-encompassing definitions of disability (i.e., including pervasive developmental disorders, depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, psychotic disorders, and substance use disorder).

Another reason for lack of awareness could be that the disability or chronic health condition has not been diagnosed and is also unknown to the student. Depending on the severity and type of symptoms, the student may not yet have experienced any significant barriers to education attainment, or they might be ignoring, minimizing, or oblivious to those barriers. Schizophrenia for example, is not typically diagnosed in males until late adolescence or early adulthood, which coincides precisely with typical post-secondary education years (Gomes et al., 2016; Ohi et al., 2013; Yeiser, 2017). If a student with a disability attends a university in the Global South that does not have support services, then they may also be less inclined to disclose (McKinney & Swartz, 2020).

Socioeconomic factors can limit access to diagnostic or rehabilitation services. In other cases, a student may be fully aware of a chronic health condition but is not receiving any clinical treatment for it. Depending on the diagnosis, this treatment could include medication, mental health counseling, physical therapy, dietary re-strictions, and a variety of additional interventions. And if a student is receiving clinical treatment for a disability, it may have no bearing on whether they receive academic accommodations. A study at an Indonesian university showed that SWDs are sometimes unaware that their universities do have support services for academic accommodations – which is sometimes accompanied by non-inclusive campus cultures (Rrofiah et al., 2023).

2. Proactive Advising

Proactive advising was developed by Robert Glennen in the 1970s. It differs from typical advising in two specific ways. First, advising is coupled with counseling into one approach. The second difference is that it is not the counselee or the student who is seeking help or information, but the advisor proactively seeks out the student to provide information and assistance before the student requests it (Glennen, 1976). White and Massiha (2015) stated:

Intrusive advisors start from the premise that most students do not know what they need in order to finish college and that the advisor must step in to direct through the various offices and services available to them, to help them along. (p. 91)

Glennen conducted a study in 1975 with a volunteer advisor group comprised of university faculty members with course releases. Their responsibilities included pre-admission and matriculation advisement, assistance with student scheduling, review of academic, physical, and mental health records, and inquiry into students' interests and goals (Glennen, 1976). He stressed the importance of advisors building rapport with students, which is a key component of a successful counseling relationship (Harris, 2018; Thomason, 2012). These advisors were not professionally nor academically trained as counselors, but the training that they did receive, and the resulting intervention demonstrated effectiveness. Intrusive counseling began at the beginning of the semester. Faculty met with all students again at least once during the semester and made a concerted effort to meet at the midpoint of the semester if students' grades were considered to be low. By the end of the academic year, 74% of the students who had low mid-semester grades and met with their advisors subsequently passed their classes. In addition, students who made the Dean's Honors list were met with for congratulatory purposes or to share information about scholarships, independent studies, or other academic opportunities. It's also important to mention that these advisors encouraged the use of supplementary campus services, such as the tutoring center. After two years, overall results from Glennen's study showed a decrease in attrition by 39% and a Dean's List growth of nine percent. There were also significant rises in GPAs, decreases in students on academic probation, and less suspensions and withdrawals (Glennen, 1976). The study shows a clear support for the effectiveness of proactive advising as a student improvement and retention tool among American students.

There is some evidence in the research literature of the importance of advising for students with disabilities in colleges and universities in the Global South (Muchineripi, 2022). Baloyi (2019) mentioned the need for "working proactively" to provide academic and psychosocial support for university students (p. 101). This is an especially important concept at universities that do not have counseling centers, disability resource offices, or academic accommodation policies for students with disabilities. Research and principles in the Global North typically serve as starting points for evidence-based practices internationally. Yet it is important to consider supportive mechanisms for students with disabilities in the Global South that are decolonized and do not present Eurocentric solutions to their problems. According to Araneda-Urrutia and Infante (2020), an example of this misstep is the application of the models of disability. "...Southern disabled bodies are constituted in much more complex ways than those represented by globalized models of disability" (Araneda-Urrutia & Infante, 2020, p. 340). These models represent frameworks with a level of rigidity and universality, "as a political problem, research object, biosocial event, and possible way of inhabiting the world" (Araneda-Urrutia & Infante, 2020, p. 340). The authors propose de-modeling. Advising university students varies procedurally, depending on the particular academic setting. But both proactive advising and the use of basic counseling responses with students could offer

individualized approaches, with opportunities for the incorporation of cultural nuance and tradition.

Collectivist cultures that predominate the Global South embrace social hierarchies that are based on age and levels of experience (Aubel, 2021; Hugman, 2009; Kamuya et al., 2015). An older university professor of greater academic achievement than their students will likely carry assumed levels of respect and reverence, that warrant advice-giving. In the Global South, "...elders are teachers of younger generations..." (Aubel, 2021, p. 9). In fact, in this cultural setting, proactive advising may not be considered intrusive after all. Individualistic and autonomous approaches to academic success that prevail in the Global North cannot be carried out in every part of the world. As a result, it may also be beneficial and culturally appropriate for a student to have a family member involved in the proactive advising process. From a sociological systems perspective, family members constitute micro-level actors with fundamental roles in personal and social development (Kitchen et al., 2019; Robledo et al., 2022). From a collectivist perspective, family and student are one unit and family are the main source of support (Ma et al., 2020; Siu & Chang, 2011). Family engagement can be helpful for the student, by providing more accountability and opportunities for advocacy.

Universities in the Global South that do not have official offices or resources dedicated to supporting students with disabilities put their students at a disadvantage. But if just one faculty member on a campus decides to provide academic accommodations, it's an important start. Empathizing with students with disabilities can lead to advocacy within individual classrooms and within individual advising relationships. Faculty can communicate their support of SWDs in their courses and make information about accommodations available in course syllabi. Advisors who would like to engage in proactive advising with students should disclose this to them and explain the potential benefits and structure. Intrusive advising helps students to foster connections and deeper roots with their faculty and campus communities (Vianden, 2016). Depending on the student's needs and the advisor's abilities, proactive advising could include periodic check-ins, course accommodations, discussions about academic/health records, exploration of educational and career goals, and family meetings. The goal is whole student advising (Earl, 1988). Communications can occur via email, phone call and/or videoconference. Advisors should endeavor to meet with students at least twice over the course of the semester. And it is important that these meetings are not only to discuss concerns, but also to celebrate student successes.

Eventually, these advisors can serve as catalysts on their campuses by engaging more faculty, communicating with university administration, liaising with community service providers, and advocating for the creation and implementation of university policy to encourage top-down interventions. An example of a potentially useful policy would be to prohibit discrimination against SWDs in the admission process. Some countries in the Global South that have ratified treaties, such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), easily ignore these macro-level policies that in

some cases carry no direct penalties (Azizi et al., 2021; Mir & Waheed, 2022). However, rules and regulations within the microcosm of the university campus, delivered by university administration (who are employers and supervisors) might carry more weight, as they are readily positioned to exact consequences for violations of such policies.

Academic and social marginalization of people with disabilities are human rights violations that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was formulated to combat (Harpur & Stein, 2022). This international law has been adopted into national level legal systems of some countries in the Global South, and as of November 2023, has been ratified by 188 countries – not inclusive of the United States (United Nations, 2023). Unfortunately, in the Global South it is not uncommon for there to be a disconnect between the establishment of a law and its subsequent implementation (Harpur & Stein, 2022; Stein, 2022). And while 80% of people with disabilities in the world live in the Global South, actual reports through census only fall between 0.17% and 9.76% of the Global South population (Jenks, 2017). When compared to rates in Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States – which fall between 11.6% and 20% – these rates appear contradictory. From one perspective, the discrepancy has been attributed to non-uniform definitions of disability in the Global South, the inconsistent definitions' implications on self-report, and the limited disability competencies of census workers. Harpur and Stein (2022) also noted:

...the treaty has yet to be as influential as it ought to be for 80 percent of the world's more than one billion disabled people living in the Global South (or developing world) relative to those living in the Global North (or developed world). (p. 77)

Barriers to implementation in the Global South were initiated by the gradually shrinking presence of Global South states in the spaces where the CRPD was initially being drafted – which shifted priorities away from them and toward the Global North (Harpur & Stein, 2022). The obstacle of limited government allocation of funding, also led to a lack of teachers with specialized training to instruct student students with disabilities, low prioritization, slow policymaking, societal discrimination, and mis-conceptualized models of disability within Southern contexts (de Beco, 2018; Lop-er, 2010; Murungi, 2015). In the Global North, examples of policies in place that are shown to be effective in supporting the education of students with disabilities include the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Equality Act of the United Kingdom, the Disability Discrimination Act of Australia, and the Act on Equal Treatment on the Grounds of Disability or Chronic Illness of the Netherlands (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). State parties of the CRPD tend to cite the international treaty as applicable law as well. Since countries in the Global North tend to have histories of disability legislation and related experience, they also tend to have local laws that precede the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Carlisle, 2022). Further research is needed to explore barriers to the implementation of the CRPD in the Global South, along with how proactive advising can support the sustained integration of people with disabilities into academic

settings. University SWDs are capable of explaining the implications of their disabilities on their educational success (Mir & Waheed, 2022). Their voices and stories are of primary importance. Faculty and staff may lean on basic counseling responses to provide a framework to initiate their advising conversations with students.

3. Basic Counseling Responses

The basic counseling responses, established by Haney and Leibsohn (1999), serve as an adaptable skillset for allied health professionals that facilitate the formation of healthy therapeutic relationships (Hunting Pompon, 2021). The flexibility of the approach also allows for modification based on culture and professional setting, including proactive advising relationships at Southern universities. Basic counseling responses and

...techniques include the essential responses of opening/closing and attending; the passive responses of empathizing, paraphrasing, giving feedback; and the active responses of clarifying, directing, and questioning. Interpretive or challenging responses include playing a hunch, noting a theme, noting a discrepancy, noting a connection, and reframing. (Akande, 2017, p. 41)

Opening and closing deliberately mark the beginning and end of a counseling session, and orient parties to time allotment, agenda, purpose, or next steps. The action of attending by providing students with an undistracted presence can help them to feel heard and seen, along with empathizing, or attempting to understand their perspectives. “You’re getting emotional. I can see that this issue is really upsetting to you.” Paraphrasing allows everyone involved to ensure that they understand and are being understood – by restating what was said. Giving feedback is a way to acknowledge important observations about verbal and non-verbal behaviors (Haney & Leibsohn, 1999). “You have been yawning a lot during our meeting. I’m wondering if you’re getting enough sleep.” To clarify is to ensure understanding. “If I’m hearing you correctly, you are saying that...” Directing involves guiding a person back to the topic at hand, perhaps if they appear to venture off onto a tangent or to a topic that will require more time than is currently available. And questions, open-ended or close-ended, can be used to clarify, direct, or challenge. Counselors can play hunches as they piece information together that could possibly lead to a revelation or the root of an issue. Noting a theme allows for the identification of trends or habits – both positive and negative. Noting a discrepancy is an opportunity to acknowledge a contradiction, or even an untruth. “The last time we met, you said that you have perfect attendance. But today, you’ve stated that you missed a few classes.” Noting a connection can involve relating perceived causes to their effects in a person’s life. And reframing encourages the student to see the silver lining, or possible benefits, in what they are seeing as a problem or obstacle.

For academic advisors, these are not techniques to be used with the intent of treatment of psychiatric conditions. These skills provide purposive structure to conversations with the goal of helping. They promote reflection and problem-solving for students with marginalized experiences related to disability. Ultimately, the use of basic

counseling responses in proactive advising can promote academic success and a sense of belonging. Students with demonstrated or expressed symptoms of serious pathology should be referred to appropriately trained and credentialed professionals for treatment in a clinical setting.

Baloyi (2019) explained that to promote student retention, interventions that are learner-centered must be employed, such as “intrusive advising” (p. 128). Person-centeredness is also an important component of counseling (Hunting Pompon, 2021). Therefore, applying basic counseling skills within proactive advising relationships can further facilitate positive student outcomes.

4. Discussion

The needs of young adults with disabilities at universities in the Global South are many. In the meantime, supporting access to education and exploring reasonable accommodations and assistive technology (no-tech or low-tech) may be a responsibility of individual faculty and advisors. Engaging in proactive advising can be the first step in bottom-up advocacy for students with disabilities in university settings in the Global South and can serve as a starting point for organizational improvements to meet these needs at a greater scale, from the top-down. The basic counseling responses can help faculty to structure and navigate proactive advising, by building rapport and exploring student needs, experiences, and solutions.

The idea of providing such a comprehensive form of advising might seem daunting. Professional development opportunities through continuing education, academic conferences, and self-study can help advisors to develop their skillset and further explore mechanisms for establishing support services at their universities. Also, not every student with a disability will need or want to receive proactive advising. Counseling is more beneficial when it is mutually agreed upon (Adigwe & Okoro, 2016; Frey, 2013). Students who feel like their privacy is being invaded or who do not want to take time for additional meetings may simply say no. Also, the nuances of proactive advising point to the fact that just as the approach is not appropriate for every student, it is also not appropriate for every advisor. Willingness, personality, cultural perspectives, experiences, and additional job duties all play a role in an advisor’s potential to provide the quality and depth of advising that would be needed in these cases.

Proactive advisors should pursue strong partnerships with other faculty and staff at their universities for support and sharing of resources. There should be bi-directional open communication among staff and faculty for educational purposes, while also respecting the confidentiality of their students. Counseling and advising practices around the world differ in their philosophies regarding ethical principles like confidentiality. But a common experience among people with disabilities across cultures is stigma and shame. For this reason, academic advisors are discouraged from sharing disability information about students without their expressed knowledge and consent. Faculty and staff should understand disability culture in their respective countries, visible and

invisible disabilities, and laws related to teaching students with disabilities (Abu-Hamour, 2013; Sniatecki et al., 2015).

There are advisors and faculty members who are already engaging in proactive advising, and using some of the basic counseling responses, but don't realize it. Students and faculty/staff have been naturally connecting and forming worthwhile bonds since formal education began. Those in this position should seek to obtain quantitative and qualitative feedback from students and advisors about their experiences (Vianden, 2016).

Lastly, researchers have noted that the enrollment of SWDs in higher education in the Global South is on the rise, in part because of the accessibility that remote learning options provide. Proactive advising efforts can also occur virtually. And university degree programs that are completely remote can promote increased inclusivity, with accommodations for distance learning (Pudaruth et al., 2017).

5. Conclusions

In order for a university student with a disability to obtain a quality education, successfully graduate, and become a contributing member of society, the appropriate resources and supports should be made available to them as early as possible in their academic journeys. A university accepts this responsibility for each student upon admittance. The lower attrition and student retention rates for students with disabilities in the Global South cannot be ignored. Proactive advising has been shown to be an effective and culturally pervasive technique in university settings for decades, that the right advisor can implement with the right student. And the use of the basic counseling responses can supplement this approach. Further research into academic advising practices for students with disabilities in the Global South is needed, with insight into a variety of different countries, experiences across genders, disability type, and the role of disability legislation.

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