

Wir sind UP – The Podcast

Guest: Dr. Lucas Mielke

Episode Title:

Inclusive Study Design

Description:

Dr. Lucas Mielke, together with Ulrike Sträßner, works as a student advisor for inclusive study design at the University of Potsdam. In this episode, he offers deep insights into his work, including the associated opportunities and challenges.

But who exactly are Ulrike Sträßner and Dr. Lucas Mielke?

Dr. Lucas Mielke:

Dr. Lucas Mielke studied German Studies, Political Science, and Education at the University of Potsdam. Since 2016, he has been advising prospective students, current students, and doctoral candidates in the Central Student Advisory Service on issues of inclusion, motivational challenges, as well as methods and difficulties in academic work. What he enjoys most is discovering new perspectives on a topic together and sharing his enthusiasm for writing. His own academic work focuses on aesthetics, psychoanalytic cultural studies, and political theory.

Ulrike Sträßner:

Ulrike Sträßner studied History and German for secondary school teaching at the University of Potsdam and is pursuing a PhD in Early Modern History, at the intersection of regional, gender, and Reformation history. Since 2016, she has been advising prospective students, current students, those re-entering university, and teaching staff on how to make academic studies more inclusive. She especially enjoys helping students rediscover and sustain lost motivation, encouraging reflection on acquired skills, fostering a love for academic writing, and supporting them in preparing for exams with as little stress and anxiety as possible.

Important Links:

<https://www.uni-potsdam.de/de/studium/beratung/behinderung/beratung-inklusive-studiengestaltung>

Transcription:

Erika: Hello and a warm welcome to everyone to today's episode of Wir sind UP. I'm Erika, a student and student assistant at the University of Potsdam in the "Barrierefrei" (Accessible University) team, and today I'm joined by Lucas Mielke. Lucas works as a counselor focusing on inclusive study design.

The counseling service is not only available to students at the University of Potsdam, but also to prospective students and doctoral candidates who find themselves in special life situations. What

such special life situations might be and what exactly the counseling services involve – that’s what today’s episode is about.

Before we get started, just a quick note: Lucas and I already know each other through our work at the university, because the Barrierefrei team is also part of the Central Student Advisory Service (ZSB), and that’s why we’re on a first-name basis in our conversation. So don’t be surprised! Thanks again for tuning in and listening, and let’s jump right into the questions. My first question for you is:

As I already mentioned in the introduction, your counseling services are aimed at people in special life situations. What are such special life situations? Who exactly is your offer aimed at?

Lucas: Hello, and yes, thank you for the invitation. I'm happy to be here today. So, special life situations – what does that mean? On the one hand, it can refer to a disability or chronic illness, acute stress situations, a conflict that might be study-related, or conflicts arising from balancing different areas of life – things that aren’t only related to studying, but are still relevant. That’s where we come in.

Our services are therefore aimed at all students who are currently facing a problem and might not yet know who the right person to contact is – or who maybe can’t even clearly articulate the problem, but have a vague feeling that something isn’t quite right. So in that sense, our offer is open to everyone, though it is part of the university’s inclusion efforts.

Erika: Okay, and what exactly does such individual counseling or support look like? In what kinds of topics or problems can you help? And what does that look like in practice?

Lucas: Right, well – it’s the two of us, myself and Ulrike Sträßner. You can reach us through all the usual channels – email, phone, or in person. The issues we deal with might include requests for accommodations – so questions about inclusion and related administrative measures. These conversations are usually not very long and are often resolved within one or two sessions.

Another major area is academic work – cross-disciplinary issues related to academic writing or study planning, motivational challenges, things like procrastination, exam anxiety – all the things that aren’t directly related to the academic subject matter but may still have an impact on it. That’s where we come in.

Erika: Okay, thanks. And I saw on the university homepage that there are also group offers. Could you describe what kinds of group sessions are available and how students can take part? Should they contact you directly if they’re interested, or how does it work?

Lucas: Yes, exactly. There’s a fairly comprehensive overview page from the Central Student Advisory Service with lots of group offerings – for students, for teachers, and for prospective students. You’ll also find our offers there. For example, one current activity is the intensive writing week, a format we offer in February and March and again in August and September each year.

We invite students from all disciplines to work on their writing projects together over five days in a structured environment. We’re present on-site to support with questions related to the writing process.

The nice thing about this format is that working together fosters exchange. Students may discover resources together that they wouldn’t have found alone. They can also realize that their problems

aren't unique, but that many others face similar challenges – and that they can be tackled together. That's something we really want to highlight.

We also offer workshops on topics like procrastination, exam anxiety, or decision-making. These group sessions are always designed to not only provide input, but also to give students opportunities to actively engage, try things out, and work together. And we also always learn something from them.

These offers take place regularly, but we also try out new things. For example, in coordination with the psychological counseling service, which we work closely with, if we notice a new need or issue that hasn't been addressed yet, we develop new concepts. Actually, we don't just try – we do it, and we test it out. We always incorporate student feedback: what they liked, what they found less helpful, what they'd like to see in the future.

So after every event, there's an evaluation phase, and we use that to further develop our concepts. We're quite satisfied with that approach. It's nice to be able to incorporate experience from several semesters and years and to see these concepts grow and mature.

But maybe I can come back to what an individual counseling session can actually look like. I've really only talked about the topics, not how the sessions are structured. Because that also varies a lot.

An individual session could be someone coming in, calling, or setting up a Zoom appointment, and then having one or two very specific questions resolved. But it could also turn out that long-term support is needed – and we can provide that too.

For example, a student struggling with severe writer's block, or questioning the meaning of their studies, or someone trying to return after a long break due to illness – we can accompany them over a longer period of time, such as weekly or biweekly sessions, depending on what works best for them.

This way, different kinds of counseling settings and relationships develop, which allow for deeper work and often lead to meaningful relationships that are beneficial for everyone involved. We're really glad we have the capacity to offer that.

Erika: Okay, thank you very much. I have an organizational question now, for those who may have become interested in these group offers. If students want to take part in these offers, do they need to contact you first, or are these often cooperations, for example with the Feelgood Campus or stress management initiatives? How can one participate in such an offer?

Lucas: Students can talk to us in person if they see us, but usually, registration is done via email. That means each event listing also includes a clearly visible way to sign up. This could be the "Eine Uni für alle" email address—those emails go to Ulrike Sträßner and me—or it could be a personal email. You can also express your interest through the general student advisory service email, and then we internally forward it to the most suitable contact person.

We also have open consultation hours where you can bring up your concerns spontaneously and ask about what offerings might be suitable for you.

So, it's definitely helpful to keep an eye on the event announcements from the student advisory service, which we publish in various newsletters, on social media, and on our homepage.

Erika: And probably also in the university event calendar?

Lucas: Yes, of course, there too.

Erika: Great. What challenges do you see in connection with your work as an advisor? Not just personal ones, but maybe structural ones as well. Are there barriers you perceive here at the university that make your work more difficult?

Lucas: Definitely. When I think of challenges, the first thing that comes to mind are societal structural problems, which, of course, also manifest in our everyday work on a smaller scale.

The first thing I think of is the housing crisis. It often results in students having unreasonably long commutes, which, for example, become an even greater burden when someone has a health condition.

Another major issue—something we experience directly—is the limited availability of psychotherapy. This becomes especially problematic when students need medical statements for requesting compensation for disadvantages, which are often hard to get due to the therapy shortage.

We're also still dealing with the aftereffects of the pandemic. The social challenges that came with it caused many people to become isolated or withdrawn. Some students even started their studies during the pandemic and have never experienced university as a social space. That makes it hard for them to connect or even know how to study properly. Then, access to support at the university can also be difficult.

Another challenge is the increasing economization of universities and attacks on academic freedom, particularly from the political right.

Also, many lecturers are simply overburdened. They often don't have the capacity to engage with students the way they might want to. That's not true everywhere, but it's a real problem.

These are broader, systemic issues. But to say something positive as well: here at the university, and especially in the student advisory team, we're fortunate to have a large, supportive, and trusting team. We receive support and also have the freedom to try out new things. That allows us to face many of these challenges in creative ways.

When it comes to inclusion, though, I'd say there's still room for improvement.

Erika: Okay, thank you. I think that was a very comprehensive view of the barriers and obstacles. Thank you. But let's look at the flip side now—what opportunities does your work offer to students and also to you as an advisor?

Lucas: Sure, I'll start with the students. What I hope or imagine they gain is this:

First, we want to be someone to talk to—a person who listens, asks questions, and helps to make sense of overwhelming situations or find words for feelings that are hard to articulate.

Our aim is to be a point of contact during potentially overwhelming times.

We try to approach problems from multiple perspectives, helping students see things from different angles. That also helps break down the idea that you're solely responsible for everything bad that happens to you.

Instead, we help students realize they are embedded in relationships and institutional structures, and guide them in analyzing what's working, what isn't, and why.

And without praising ourselves too much: one big strength is that we can offer long-term support. That leads to a deeper understanding—not just of problems, but also of how a student works and thinks.

Ultimately, my main goal is to help students understand and reflect on what they're doing and then decide how they want to move forward. It's about gaining autonomy—and ideally, sharing that experience with others.

We also have a very flexible approach to compensation for disadvantages, which I think is wonderful. It's a very responsive way to acknowledge the diversity of students' life situations.

And I think a big opportunity—for both students and ourselves—is the chance to gain new and positive experiences. Especially in the writing support we offer, we also learn a lot ourselves: the theses we see, the topics students are passionate about, the challenges they face—these enrich our own lives too.

We get to experiment with new methods and share a love of thinking and learning.

Especially with students who don't enjoy writing term papers, our goal isn't to make them love writing overnight. Sometimes just helping them build a neutral relationship with writing is already a win.

But sometimes—more often than you'd think—students begin to enjoy their work, even when it was once a major source of stress or insecurity. And when that happens, it's a wonderful thing.

Erika: Yeah, I can imagine. And how is the general demand? I mean, just to ask bluntly, do you have a lot to do, or is it more like you really have to reach out to the target group?

Lucas: I'd say we definitely have enough to do. Of course, there was a time when we had to do more promotion, and there are still students who say, "If only I'd known about this earlier." So there's definitely a gap between the services that exist, their visibility, and whether the target group actually feels addressed by them. That remains a challenge.

The question is, how can we promote services in a way that makes as many people as possible who might benefit from them feel like they're meant for them? These are all ongoing challenges. But since we're embedded in this productive ecosystem between central academic advising and psychological counseling, the referral process works quite well.

Once a concern becomes clearer, we pass students along or structure the services in a way that makes it obvious who the best contact person is. Just to give an example: our intensive writing weeks are usually fully booked. And the workshops on decision-making and procrastination always have double-digit registration numbers. There's always some dropout, of course, but lately, that's been minimal—just a few who don't show up.

So yes, it's a lively and dynamic space, and students are actively coming to us. That said, I always caution against getting too comfortable or stopping our outreach or failing to promote and explain our work transparently—especially across departments within the university. It's important to make it clear: this exists and it could be helpful.

Another part of our work involves talking to instructors about inclusion issues. In March, there will be a workshop for faculty on how to handle certain challenges in that area and also as a space to exchange best practices for inclusive teaching. And we feel like we still need to do more promotion there to show that this exists and can be a valuable opportunity for them.

I also always tell the students who come to us: if you think some of your peers might benefit from this, feel free to talk to them about it. So this isn't a plea for less promotion—but we're definitely not sitting around bored either.

Erika: Okay, good. Since you just mentioned faculty—there are also services for instructors. How do you perceive the demand for those? I’ve heard, also through my work with the Accessibility Team and from Robert Meile, the university’s representative for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses, that when there are workshops or info sessions for faculty on inclusive teaching, there’s often low turnout and little interest. Would you agree?

Lucas: That used to be the case, but it’s changed with the workshop we’re currently offering—mainly because we approached promotion differently this time. We created email lists instead of relying on the hope that people would just find the information online. We actively reached out to specific departments, and the response has been really positive, which is great.

I think it’s important to keep in mind that instructors are really busy too. The university offers a huge amount of information online, and navigating through it can be overwhelming. That’s why I think it’s better to approach people directly—those you think might be interested—and say, “Hey, we have something that could be useful for you.”

I think that’s the way forward.

Erika: Yeah, I agree. If we want to achieve more inclusion, it’s important to address both sides—not just the students, but also the faculty, who are the ones teaching and shaping the day-to-day academic experience. You briefly mentioned earlier that if someone comes to you but you’re not the right contact, you refer them to someone else. Would that be the psychological counseling service or Robert Meile, for example?

Lucas: Exactly. Or the Career Service, depending on the issue, or the International Office. That usually becomes clear during the first conversation. Sometimes it turns out that multiple services are relevant.

So someone might go to psychological counseling for one issue and come to us for another—and both are absolutely appropriate. But we never leave anyone hanging. Even if we’re not exactly sure who the right contact is, we work together to figure it out.

And we have such a large, competent team with so many years of experience—that really helps. I can’t actually remember a case where we didn’t eventually figure out whom to refer someone to or how to address the problem.

Erika: So in other words, students should definitely feel free to reach out to you at any time, and you’ll take it from there. That’s great to hear.

Lucas: Exactly. That’s what academic advising is for—first and foremost, to help sort things out.

Erika: Okay, last question. How and when can students reach you?

Lucas: The classic way is via email: eineunifueralle@uni-potsdam.de. Students can suggest their own appointment times, and Ulrike Sträßner and I will check availability and set something up. We also have open phone hours—Mondays from 10 to 11 a.m., and Thursdays from 1 to 3 p.m. People can call without making an appointment, and we’ll either handle the issue right away or schedule a follow-up.

There's also a form on the Central Academic Advising page where students can indicate they'd like a consultation. If certain topics are selected there, it gets forwarded to us. So we're reachable through various channels.

The only thing we don't offer in our inclusive study design focus area are walk-in office hours, meaning times when students can just drop by without notice. That turned out not to be very effective.

Erika: Well, thank you so much, **Lucas**, for this conversation—for your openness, for the input, and all the information. Thank you. I wish you all the best with your work, and thanks also to everyone who listened. Until next time!