

Advising v. Counseling:

# The Blackberry

evocative  
open-ended  
counseling  
listening

Long-term  
promotes  
self-discovery

offers advice  
talking

advising  
seeks closure  
prescriptive

short-term



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# River Approach

*by Anne Macleod Weeks*

**When I was in prep school in the early seventies, my college counselor, who was primarily an English teacher, gave me a list of colleges. The list had seven schools, all female, commonly referred to as the “seven sisters.” I promptly threw the list away—enough eastern preppiness! I planned to embark on a new, adventurous life that flew in the face of my debutante/cotillion upbringing and the pressure to marry well. My mother died during my junior year and, while on a path of questioning all my parents had taught me, I was still seeking an adult mentor. I wanted to break the mold and if that meant some rules too, well, so be it. Though my college counselor had “advised” me well, had he really “counseled” me?**

In those days, little thought was given to the role of the college counselor in independent schools. Often they were English teachers who wrote well and by default were asked to take on the daunting task of shepherding students through the process of choosing a college. After all, they could whip off a recommendation and help with essay writing. As faculty, they had little training in the development of adolescents and often resorted to a “toughen up” attitude when confronted with an anxiety-ridden student. They did not discuss match, support or need. You went to college where everyone in your community did—in New England.

#### **Humanizing the School Environment**

At the Stanley H. King Counseling Institute (MA), independent school administrators and faculty were encouraged to learn basic counseling skills in an effort to humanize their school environments. Bill Poirot, director of major gifts at the Brooks School in North Andover, Massachusetts, was an early conference participant who recalls the initial resistance to the counseling piece at Stanley King. This changed when conference graduates began to move into positions of leadership at their prep schools. The change “happened so gradually and so below the radar screen,” said Poirot, that it “probably couldn’t be documented. But prep schools are now healthier places to send your children and these schools have survived, despite high tuitions, because of this change.”

One evening, after a successful institute, a few college counselors were visiting colleges in Maine. Over a beer in Freeport, the discussion turned to the unique counseling dilemmas that emerge with families in today's college process. As the competition increased for the same number of spots at selective colleges, college counselors were found searching for skills that went a step beyond advising. The pressure college counselors face from many constituencies, the head of school, the board of trustees, parents, students, coaches, alumni, and faculty, as well as an increasing tendency to judge a prep school by its college acceptance profile, had landed counselors in a unique role, needing more counseling skills. The plan put forth that evening by Sarah Hecksher, Jake Dresden and Robin Mead centered on a smaller retreat that would employ the skills necessary for success, specifically in college counseling in independent schools.

These three seasoned educators nurtured the seed that has become the Blackberry River Retreat, currently held at Mt. Holyoke College (MA) every January. They drew on experienced facilitators from Stanley King and successfully convinced two, psychiatrist Preston Munter and clinical social worker/psychoanalyst Jane Leavy, to lead discussions and role playing, specific to independent school college counseling. Each year, a theme is introduced, partly participant-suggested, which encompasses areas in which counselors are frustrated and seeking guidance in reducing stress, while revisiting basic counseling theory and its application in the private school setting. The retreat lasts for two and a half days, with approximately 30 participants, many of whom are frequent returnees.

The intensity and power of this retreat is hard to adequately characterize. Most participants leave feeling as though they are awakened to the skills necessary to make their job more effective in counseling the whole student and often the student's family. The role-playing and small group discussions employ the professional skills introduced through large group discussions and the ample free time allows for collegial sharing and reflection.

In the early years of the retreat, the issues that arise in the college process and the many venues a college counselor is beholden to, in both the process and the outcome, startled Pres Munter and Jane Leavy, who commented that the "particular set of issues that were surprising were the pressures on college counselors to do the bidding of so many people... the accountabilities that conflicted with really working with the student, ethical binds, answering the school (not college) admissions people for marketing purposes, dealing with the board, and so on. We were struck by the multiple constituencies in the picture and were impressed by the ingenious ways counselors dealt with that. We were moved by the wish people expressed to, as Pres Munter would say, draw a 'magic circle' around the counseling encounter to protect it from these incursions." When faced with a less competitive class and a Board of Trustees expecting an Ivy League list or a significant donor's child's disappointment in not gaining admission to an elite school, a way to humanize this process became a clear goal for both leaders and participants.

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### **Advising v. Counseling**

The heart of the conference became Pres Munter's explanation of the differences between advising and counseling. (See sidebar). A leprechaun of a man at barely 5'3", Pres's sense of humor, insight into adolescence, patience, and professionalism guided the retreat for many years. Pres was always willing to listen and learn while offering wisdom that he would willingly qualify to meet the needs of this unique counseling situation. His student-centered approach and belief that time can always be found for a student who needs help, even between classes, reassured us that we could be effective within the boundaries of our profession. Most importantly, Pres would openly admit that he was learning from us as well, fostering a sense of shared professionalism throughout the retreat. Pres would say, "start wherever the student is; learn some basic principles of counseling, so you can talk usefully to the children under your care." The term leprechaun is appropriate for Pres, for he gave many of us the treasure of being valued as counselors and people, and as Carl Bewig, director of college guidance at Andover comments, "he was always willing to call the question and valued honesty and commitment to one's ideals and principles as among life's noblest goals." And Pres would call the question, pushing us to address such difficult topics as sexuality and race, and to stretch ourselves to step beyond our own perceived limitations in meeting the needs of the individual student. Each of us leaves this conference having been "Blackberried" and we find ourselves applying this student-centered approach in our individual offices, sometimes with a student who feels lost in the process or one whose stress level is beyond the norm.

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Though Pres has retired, Jane Leavy and psychiatrist Irvin Allan have continued to lead the retreat with Sarah Heckscher, Carl Bewig and Bill Poirot. Pres's legacy remains the foundation upon which each retreat builds its questions and answers. At a time when independent school college counselors are, as Sarah Heckscher says, "feeling restless, burned out in our jobs, under terrific pressure to produce snappy college lists (which we can't control), and sensing there is more to college counseling than simply imparting information," the Blackberry River Retreat provides us with the assurance that we are more than list-makers. We are pivotal administrators in the lives of our schools; we are pivotal counselors in the lives of our families; and most importantly, we are humans and educators who want the very best for all of our students.

### **A New Approach**

Several years ago, the participants at Blackberry, under the direction of Pres Munter, developed a job description for a new approach to college counseling:

- Build genuine, honest relationships with students and their families
- Empower students to direct their own lives
- Help students develop self-awareness
- Provide students with a safe, comfortable physical environment in which to talk
- Educate students, parents, administrators, faculty, and trustees to understand that college counseling is an educational and developmental process
- Develop strong communication skills
- Listen with care and empathy, clarify with understanding, respond non-judgmentally
- Understand and support the ethical, legal and confidential issues of our profession
- Know how and when to use resources
- Support students through a period of transition and separation
- Identify students in trouble
- Recognize and honor the boundaries of counseling
- Continue to grow in knowledge of the educational and developmental issues of late adolescence

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The Stanley H. King Counseling Institute continues to provide an enriched forum for discussion of independent school issues and needs, and as its step-child, the Blackberry River Retreat, provides an invaluable resource for independent school college counselors, the Blackberry approach could be easily implemented into the structure of larger guidance offices in the public system for the only keys are time, patience and a willingness to listen. It is through resources such as these conferences that, as Bill Poirot commented, we continue to build the skills necessary to keep our schools healthy and thriving, supported by educators who are invested in the children and families under their care. Counseling, like teaching, needs to be refreshed. Though we may all have mastered the skills necessary to be effective, renewing our vision, sharing with colleagues, and testing our perspective, can only strengthen our roles in guiding students and families.

*\* Pres Munter died December 16, 2003. His passing has caused great sadness within a large population of independent school counselors and administrators, who he has guided for many years.*

#### **Other Workshops Counselors Rave About**

##### **NACAC's Secondary School Counselor's Institute: Tools of the Trade**

This workshop is designed for new counselors. It is a "how to" with an emphasis on the role of counseling.

##### **NACAC's Advanced Secondary School Counselor's Institute**

This workshop focuses on issues in admission and counseling, exploring ethical questions, grappling with challenges in the profession, while always keeping counseling at its core.

"I highly recommend both workshops and encourage counselors to participate in individual ACAC's offerings, many of which are great professional development opportunities."

—Joan Mudge/ Garrison Forest School/ MD

"I came away from the Advanced Counselor's Institute having had some serious discussions about the state of college admission with an excellent faculty."

—Bill Dingle/ CEP/ SC

##### **Harvard Summer Institute**

This six-day program is designed to bring you the very best of admission ideas: procedures for recruiting, decision-making and helping students make enlightened choices.

"The faculty is great and very hands-on. I especially enjoyed the break-out groups to share ideas and found the quality of engaged individuals quite good."

—Laura Legg/ Asheville School/ NC

##### **No-Name Conference**

The No-Name Conference provides a valuable opportunity for college admission deans/directors and secondary school and independent counselors to meet in a small group, open forum setting to review and make sense of the admission year coming to a close. It is held in late May at the St. Michael's Harbour Inn on the Chesapeake Bay, by invitation only. The conference is made up of one-third college participants and two thirds high school and independent counselors. Typically, two-thirds of the participants are No-Name alumni and one third is first-timers.

"No-Name has a great mix of college admissions, high school counselors and independents. I find it beneficial to hear from others around the table on different issues, problems and solutions. I learned a great deal about enrollment management as well as counseling issues."

—Leigh Lowe/ Roland Park Country School/ MD

**Taft Educational Center Workshop for Teachers/  
College Counseling**

“A week-long nuts and bolts workshop that covers the basics and includes visits to some area colleges and universities. It is an intense program and a wonderful way to gear up for a new job and school year.”

—Darnell Heywood/Columbus School for Girls/OH

**F.A.C.T.S. Summer Institute, sponsored by TEACH**

This workshop offers intensive interaction between counselors and deans of admission from highly competitive institutions. Small groups discuss recommendations, profiles and other pertinent issues.

What sets the institute apart from others is “a rarefied atmosphere of intensive interaction with deans who represent not just the pinnacles of excellence in higher education, but also the finely ground prisms through which the most angst-inducing minutiae of the current admissions scene are filtered and examined by elements of an often critical and even hostile public. For instance, one minute you are discussing what makes a good recommendation; the next, your small group leader is interrupted for a call from the *New York Times*. At night, you head to the lounge and just play pool together!”

—John M. Evans/ Columbus Academy/ OH

For other professional development programs, go to [www.nacac.com](http://www.nacac.com).

**Advising Versus Counseling**

Advising is task-oriented	Counseling is process-oriented
Advising is talking	Counseling is listening
Advising sees the external reality	Counseling sees the internal reality
Advising sees behavior context - acting out - reactions	Counseling sees emotional context - self-disclosure - feelings
Advising is prescriptive - advisor has data - serves requirements/expectations	Counseling is evocative - student has data - serves developmental needs
Advising offers sympathy - reassurance	Counseling offers empathy - positive support
Advising tries to “fix it” - do something - sense of urgency	Counseling clarifies feelings - let process work - patience
Advising seeks to solve the problem - short term	Counseling seeks growth and maturation - long term
Advising sees success/failure	Counseling see enhanced self-esteem
Advising offers advice	Counseling promotes self-discovery
Advising can build/hurt a relationship	Counseling builds a relationship
Advising seeks closure	Counseling is open-ended
Advising provides confidentiality	Counseling secures and builds