

From Outcome to Individual: Reclaiming Humanistic Counselling in a High-Pressure Admissions Landscape



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Speaker Introductions



Chandni Singh
College Counsellor, Vasant Valley School



Rashi Thakur
College Counsellor, Vasant Valley School



Katherine Ernst Mehta
IEC, Edvanta Consulting



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COUNSELLOR REALITY BINGO

How many of these sound familiar?

Mark a square every time you recognise a conversation you've had with a student or family.

"But what is the ranking?"



Student has 10 activities but struggles to name the one they actually enjoy.



Parent answers the question you asked the student.



"Everyone else is doing research..."



Student arrives with advice from five different sources.



"Is this university prestigious enough?"



Another paid programme presented as a must-do.



"I feel like I haven't done enough."



Parent arrives with their university shortlist.



Every school break needs to become 'productive'.



An activity chosen primarily because "it will look good."



"Should we add just one more extracurricular?"



Do you think visiting the university will make a good impression?



Student is overwhelmed by conflicting admissions advice.



"Will this look good on my application?"



Parent knows every deadline better than the student.



"Why this university?" ... followed by a long pause.



"My friend's child got into..."



Yet another profile-building opportunity lands in your inbox.



University search begins — and sometimes ends — with the brand name.



Student feels guilty about taking a break.



Parent emails about something the student could handle themselves.



Student has gone down an admissions-content rabbit hole.



"What else should I be doing?"



You find yourself asking: "But what do YOU want?"



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The Pressures Shaping Admissions

PRESTIGE

- Rankings become shorthand for value.

OVERLOAD

- More information, less interpretation.

OPTIMISATION

- “Will this look good on my application?”

COMPARISON

- “Everyone else is doing...”

CONTROL

- Adult anxiety can displace student agency.

RESULTS

- “Where did your students get in?”



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The Invisible Backpack



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What Is in YOUR Backpack?



Outcome pressure

- Pressure to deliver results



Workload

- Too many demands



Knowledge

- Need to know every answer



Conflict

- Fear of difficult conversations



School expectations

- Institutional priorities



Prestige bias

- Assumptions about success



Past experiences

- Previous family interactions



Urgency

- Need to “fix” things quickly



The Invisible Backpack



The Student

ACADEMIC & PERSONAL
WEIGHT

The Parent

EXPECTATIONS &
PROTECTION

The Counselor

SYSTEMIC &
PROFESSIONAL
DEMANDS



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The Invisible Backpack



The Student

ACADEMIC & PERSONAL WEIGHT

What are they carrying?

Performance anxiety & grade pressure

Social comparison and peer expectations

Uncertainty about identity and future path

Fear of disappointing family and mentors

Overwhelming information overload

The Parent

EXPECTATIONS & PROTECTION

What are they carrying?

Prestige bias and ranking focus

Anxiety over financial & emotional investment

Desire to control & secure outcomes

Comparison with other families

Fear of missed life opportunities

The Counselor

SYSTEMIC & PROFESSIONAL DEMANDS

What are YOU carrying?

High workload & outcome pressures

Institutional & school expectations

Fear of conflict during tough talks

Internal urge to "fix" things quickly

Past challenging family experiences

Key Insight: Recognizing what every person carries transforms difficult counselling conversations into constructive, empathetic dialogue.



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Communication: Respecting the Individual and their language



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Case 1: Directing | Discussion

The situation

- Highly accomplished, commanding family
- Strengths: Excellent academics and substantial involvement
- Decision point: Which activities matter most for highly selective universities?

Discuss with a partner

- What might the student, parent and counsellor each be carrying?
- Which communication approach would help most?
- How could you return ownership to the student?

REFLECT FIRST • RESPOND SECOND



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Case 1: Directing | A Humanistic Response

Student's backpack

- Identity tied to achievement
- Exhaustion may be hidden
- Prestige as a measure of worth

Parent's backpack

- Strong investment and sacrifice
- Fear of regret
- Comfort with taking charge

Counsellor's backpack

- Pressure to guarantee results
- Risk of résumé-first thinking
- Need to hold boundaries

Counsellor response

- Shift from “Which activities?” to “What matters to you?”
- Offer a decision framework, not a prescribed answer
- Protect space for the student's voice; normalise uncertainty



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Case 2: Questioning | Discussion

The situation

- Curious student and highly involved parent
- Strengths: Strong academics and athletics
- Decision point: Athletic recruitment or regular applications, with financial constraints

Discuss with a partner

- What might the student, parent and counsellor each be carrying?
- Which communication approach would help most?
- How could you return ownership to the student?

REFLECT FIRST • RESPOND SECOND



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Case 2: Questioning | A Humanistic Response

Student's backpack

- Pressure to choose correctly
- Uncertainty about sport
- Admissions anxiety

Parent's backpack

- Fear of missing an opportunity
- Limited recruitment knowledge
- Financial uncertainty

Counsellor's backpack

- Pressure to provide certainty
- Repeated questions
- Risk of being too directive

Counsellor response

- Welcome questions without reading them as mistrust
- Clarify recruitment pathways and financial trade-offs
- Agree on check-in points and student-led next steps



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Case 3: Observing | Discussion

The situation

- Quiet, hesitant, dependent student and parent
- Strengths: Open to input and advice
- Decision point: Feeling overwhelmed and seeking clear direction

Discuss with a partner

- What might the student, parent and counsellor each be carrying?
- Which communication approach would help most?
- How could you return ownership to the student?

REFLECT FIRST • RESPOND SECOND



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Case 3: Observing | A Humanistic Response

Student's backpack

- Academic disruption and anxiety
- Identity and confidence challenges
- Need for psychological safety

Parent's backpack

- Concern for the student's wellbeing
- Guilt and past expectations
- Uncertainty about next steps

Counsellor's backpack

- Pressure to take charge
- Need to respond sensitively
- Coordination with support systems

Counsellor response

- Use open questions and allow reflective silence
- Consider qualified mental-health support where appropriate
- Coordinate with school stakeholders; explore flexible pathways
- Build decisions around the student's wellbeing and agency



Ask Yourself...

MENTORING

- Builds student capacity
- “What do you think?”

MANAGING

- Provides useful structure
- “Here is what happens next.”

REACTING

- Allows anxiety to lead
- “Fine, let’s just do it.”

**Am I mentoring the student, managing the process,
or reacting to pressure?**



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Small Shifts, Meaningful Change

01

- Respond to emotions before facts

02

- Replace correction with curiosity

03

- Name the fear beneath the concern

04

- Collaborate before concluding

05

- Move emotionally charged conversations into meetings



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What Will You Change?

STOP

- What reduces student agency?

START

- What could I introduce?

CONTINUE

- What is already working?

Choose one conversation, one language shift, or one boundary to strengthen.



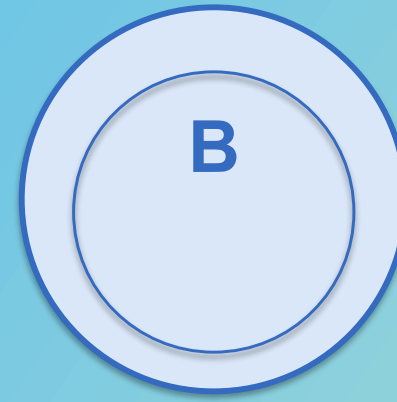
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Concluding Thoughts



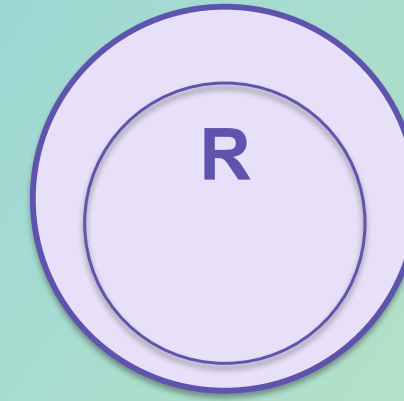
UNDERSTAND

Before reacting.



BALANCE

Empathy and boundaries can coexist.



RETURN

Keep the process centred on the student.



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