

PowerPoint Slides

How Should I Handle Pushy Parents?

Presented by:

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Presenter Bio:

Dr. Brian Van Brunt, the president-elect of the American College Counseling Association, currently serves as director of Counseling and Testing at Western Kentucky University. He was the director of Counseling at New England College from 2001-2007. In 2007 he was awarded the American College Health Association Innovation Grant for his work on New England College's website. Brian has presented nationally on counseling ethics, mandated counseling, testing and assessment at the American College Counseling Association, Association of College and University Counseling Center Directors, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and the National Association of Forensic Counselors. He has taught graduate classes in counseling theory, ethics, testing and assessment, and program evaluation.



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**How Should I Handle
Pushy Parents?**

Brian Van Brunt, Ed.D., LPCC

Dr. Van Brunt currently directs the Counseling and Testing at Western Kentucky University. He is the president-elect of the American College Counseling Association and a consultant with National Center for Higher Education Risk Management. He is a senior trainer in Aggression Management.

Brian has taught psychology courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels at four different colleges and universities. Over the past ten years, he has had his fair share of conversations with parents at orientation events, meet-and-greets, and surprise office phone calls.

Agenda

- Introduction
- Problem definition
- 5 Key approaches
- Role play

Introduction

Many faculty have been confronted by the parent of a student who was worried about their student's performance (or lack thereof) in the classroom.

These conversations may occur during summer orientation, meet-the faculty get-togethers, or one of those unscheduled phone calls during office hours.

Faculty are faced with frustrated, worried, scared, belligerent, yelling and aggressive parents who think they are helping their students by "going right to the source."

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For example:

Parents think they must tell you:

- "If you only knew! It would make all the difference,"
- "My daughter had an IEP in high school. And you need to know how to teach her to get through to her."
- "You don't understand the family circumstances. We've had some emergencies. My son can't be expected to write a paper with all we have going on."

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Problem definition

- Faculty are often challenged to respond to these demands placed on them by parents, which often happen at the most inopportune times.
- This 20-Minute Mentor program will focus on offering 5 key approaches to responding to parents. The goal is to help you set limits while keeping a balanced, gracious and level-headed approach.
- Faculty who adopt an aggressive or dismissive approach end up making the situation worse.

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5 Key approaches

These 5 approaches are designed to help you develop a response to parent demands that helps support the student and is within the college and university's educational process.

The key is to develop a heightened understanding of "**why** (the message underneath)" parents are asking questions, instead of being distracted by the "**what** (the content of what they are asking)" of their questions.

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1. Understand their motivation

Understanding **why** parents are upset is the first step.

Parents worry. They may be concerned about the student's relationships, academic standing, or living arrangements.

Previously, parents may have helped their student by talking/advocating with their teachers.

That behavior is no longer appropriate in college. You have to show them another approach.

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For example, when a parents says:

"I need you to make sure my student isn't falling behind in your class. I think he has the textbooks, but I need to make sure he is reading them and taking notes. How are you going to help?"

Understand that they're concerned about their student being far from home and not doing assignments. They are worried and looking for advice.

Try, "It sounds like you're worried about your son following through with his assignments for my class. Has this been a problem for him before?"

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2. Consider it a “Teachable Moment”

When a parent pulls you aside, see this as a teachable moment for the parent. As a faculty member, your skills as a teacher can be applied to create a better result.

Understand the content and process of the conversation:

- **Spoken:** “You need to help Justin with your assignments more! You aren’t being clear in your grading!”
- **Unspoken:** “I’m far away. And I’m scared no one is helping my son!”

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3. Set expectations in syllabus

One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome. If you have a problem with a parent who becomes over-involved, you should develop a plan.

During the first class, outline your expectations in your syllabus, and clearly describe your approach to working with parents.

Collecting your ideas and sharing your philosophy early will prevent you from being caught off guard.

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4. Consider re-directing

Kung-Fu and aikido are based on the idea of re-directing negative energy towards a neutral source.

When talking with a frustrated parent, consider referral options to help redirect their frustration:

- “Can we schedule a time to sit down with you and your daughter to discuss this?”
- “Has your son explored peer tutoring at Academic Affairs as an option?”
- “Perhaps it would help if our Dean talked to you about our attendance policy.”

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While you're within your rights to say:

- "I don't talk to parents of my students..."
- "I'm not responsible for your son's study habits..."
- "Putting my notes online isn't something I do..."
- "I don't have the time to talk with you..."

Consider other ways to communicate and offer solutions. The parent is already upset, so try to refer them in a way that is seen as helping. Your referral, redirection or advice should not make things worse.

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5. Build good karma

Professors willing to handle difficult conversations with grace, patience and equanimity will benefit from those conversations.

My parents still think fondly on Dr. Cook from my undergraduate days. Their conversations probably totaled 25 minutes over 4 years, but 19 years later, they still think she walks on water.

Don't underestimate the power of your position and the impact a few minutes of understanding can have.

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For example, you could respond:

"It seems to me that we are both worried about how your student is doing in class. You are most worried she won't pass the next test. Is that right?"

- Take the extra time to ensure you are understanding their concerns. Clarify what they are asking.
- Clarifying questions and listening to parent's concerns will help them feel you are on their side and willing to work with them toward a common solution.

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Another example:

"I'm also worried about your student. What can we do to help her improve in my class?"

- Try listening to a parent's concerns without trying to make your own points. Ask an open ended question and really listen to their answer.
- Too often we try to solve their problems. We forget the simple art of listening will make you seem wise, patient and graceful. And couldn't we all use some of that good press?

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Role play

Nancy stops by your office to talk about her daughter's grade. Her daughter has been handing in papers late all semester and has scored poorly on the midterm. She will be lucky to earn a C.

Nancy is worried that her daughter will not be able to enter the nursing program with a C in your class. She demands help and questions your competency.

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Thank you!

We would like to hear from you! Please consider completing an evaluation form found at www.surveymonkey.com/mentor6
Special thanks to Kate Stover for role-playing the part of the worried parent.

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