

## WORKING WITH PARENTS

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Practically speaking, how does one distinguish the overbearing, interfering “helicopter parent” of legend from the concerned parent who might help administrators successfully intervene on behalf of a troubled student? Here are a few suggestions.

### **1. Consider carefully the issues at hand.**

Is it about a parking permit or violation? An unavailable course? An unresponsive faculty member? These topics may hint at a parent with a tendency to be too involved in the daily challenges of a student’s life. But even these issues require careful listening for the undercurrents beneath surface rhetoric. The parent worried about parking may have a student with a physical disability, for example, and that’s far different from the parent whose child would prefer to walk less than a block but is quite capable of doing so.

### **2. Develop questions and a communication style that help elicit useful information.**

One problem with a too-easy label is that it can keep us from hearing subtle messages. Beginning a conversation with “How can I help?” or “Why don’t you tell me about the problem you’re having?” rather than “Here’s how I see your situation” will invite more revealing narratives and keep defensive postures at bay. The micromanaging parent will just want you to do his or her bidding. The concerned parent will welcome your effort to help solve a problem.

### **3. Do your homework.**

Often there will be something in a student’s record that provides a helpful context. There may be a recurring history of a certain kind of trouble, a casual mention of an event that could help explain subsequent reactions, or a pattern of behavior that sheds light on current problems. Check the written record and confer with others who may have experience with the same student. (I am not a fan of consulting social networking sites, but that is another topic for another time.)

### **4. Be willing to decide that the parent really does need to let go.**

Sometimes a helicopter parent is a helicopter parent. When this is the case, part of an administrator’s job is to help the parents trust that you are acting in their child’s best interest, and help the students trust themselves to be confident in their own decisions.

Discerning the line between the overinvested “helicopter parent” and the concerned parent is more art than science, of course, and it requires being attuned to the subtleties of both parents’ and students’ language and manners. It probably takes more time than most of us think we have. But it also just might be the difference between losing a student and alienating parents, who already may wonder what it is that colleges and universities actually do with their tuition, and guiding the student and parents toward the independent decision-making that is part of a college educational. Call it a teachable moment.