



# 1 Challenge, 3 Solutions

## A student confides a secret to you during one of your meetings and asks you not to reveal it to her parents. How would you handle this?



In my initial consultation with prospective clients, I outline my admissions philosophy, strategy, and immediate next steps, which includes a strategy session. I tell both the student and the parents that the strategy session is for the student and me—no parents allowed—and that anything the student tells me is completely confidential, with one big

exception. I follow mandatory reporting guidelines, which means that if the student tells me anything that leads me to believe that she or anyone else may be in danger, it is not confidential. Anything else, such as that the student doesn't really want to go to college, that she secretly despises her stepfather, or that she doesn't share her parents' political beliefs, is between us. Everyone agrees before we move forward.

At the end of the strategy session, I am sure to honor the student's confidence by asking her if there is anything she said that she doesn't want me to include in my written report that I share with parents. Ninety-five percent of the time, there is nothing they want to keep secret. This not only helps me build trust with my new client but it also helps to establish boundaries with the parents.

—Stef Mauler (TX)



Anything I hear from a student in private is just that—private. The only exception I would make is in the case that the student is suicidal or planning a homicide, which fortunately has not ever happened. According to Michigan law, I need to report both.

—Terry Lloyd (MI)



When I take on a new client, I discuss the policy for confidentiality upfront with both the student and the family, which is that I maintain confidentiality with students unless they share something that suggests they or someone else may be in danger. This is consistent with the law. I further explain that if a student shares something with me outside of these parameters, such as "I am failing Spanish," that I would work with the student and help him or her share that information with the parents.

If a student asked me if I could keep a secret, I would never agree, but rather say something like, "I cannot make that promise; however, I do promise that I will work with you to find a solution and that might mean involving your parents or other professionals."

—Joan Casey (MA)

Send us a challenge that you'd like feedback on from your peers:  
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*Essay Season, from page M4*

not know the student) and get unbiased feedback you could share with the student and parent.

### If a student has a learning disability, is it okay to reveal that in an essay?

There are different places on college applications where students have an opportunity to disclose a learning difference. I think it is important to share that information with a college, but it isn't always best to put it into the narrative essay. I hope that students don't define themselves only by a disability, but rather can use the narrative to talk about many other aspects of their life experience. If a student is skillful, she may be able to weave in the learning difference within another topic. I had a great essay about learning sign language written by a student who had dyslexia. She simply mentioned she chose to learn sign language because of her learning difference; although the dyslexia was not the focus of the story, it provided context.

### How do you handle a student who just won't open up to you and appears very shallow?

A student may appear shallow because he or she has limited social cognition. If you are able to assess that, then start where the student is and work toward building higher levels of understanding. That may take more time than you have available, so you can also look for ways to use what I call "categorical" essays, which rely more on presenting opinions and facts. If the student has good insights but just isn't talking, be sure you aren't setting up a situation where the student doesn't have privacy (i.e., the parent is in the room). Equally important is to establish trust and privacy

between student and counselor away from parents (don't try to do this at Starbucks) and to provide more than one meeting to discuss the essay. Do the best you can. There will always be a few kids who just aren't introspective or don't want to share—in those cases, choose categorical questions rather than dynamic questions. So glad the Common App has added one this year!

### Do you have any tips on how to help a student edit their paper without having the student become defensive?

Generally, I think the less marking up of the essay, the less defensive the student becomes. Using nondirective mentoring (such as editing without a pen) and having time to work on drafts without the student feeling rushed helps tremendously. Students need to know from the beginning that it's a process and there is no expectation that they are going to get it "right" the first time. I show all my students a sample of another student's list of essay drafts (which numbered 15!) so they know from the beginning that they might be doing 8–10 drafts of the essay. Setting expectations at the onset of the process helps a lot.

### A good essay is the one that takes time to write and finalize. When do you decide a given iteration of draft is the final one? Is it when the student is satisfied by his/her draft or when the mentor is satisfied?

I think most students would be happy writing one draft! We usually stop when I'm satisfied or I believe the student has reached their limit—not so much with the writing itself, but when we are at the highest level of Person Conceptualization they can achieve. ✎

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