

Advising Notes and Documentation Guidelines

Overview

Comprehensive documentation is required for all mandatory advising appointments and any other appointments/contacts (including email) where important and/or relevant information is discussed or delivered. Documentation must be input into the electronic system. The Pathways platform provides several different ways for faculty and staff to document a student interaction. Regardless of the way a faculty or staff member utilizes the platform, it is important to keep in mind that any record maintained in Pathways is part of the student's educational record, is viewable by others in the platform, and a student could request access to this information under The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Expectations

To promote the most comprehensive and accurate reports/notes possible, complete them as soon as you can after meeting with the student. Many advisors include a gap between advising appointments to complete notes before the next student arrives. Others dedicate time throughout the day to ensure they are completed in a timely fashion. Regardless of your strategy, it is expected that all documentation is input into the system in a timely fashion.

Why Keep Reports/Notes?

Comprehensive documentation is a vital element of quality advising programs. Advising notes and reports can serve many purposes, depending on the situation. Maintaining records of interactions with students is essential for a variety of reasons:

1. It creates an "institutional memory" of contacts with students, which allows for enhanced collaboration and communication between advisors and other campus partners to provide consistent messaging to students.
2. It personalizes the advising experience by refreshing the advisor's recollection of previous conversations they had with the student or alerting them to previous conversations the student had with another advisor.
3. You can document your recommendations and/or referrals and the rationale for those recommendations/referrals.
4. It provides support to students going through transitions (either from advisor-to-advisor or other campus offices).
5. You can remind students of advice they received during an advising appointment, if shared with the student after the meeting occurs.

Remember, this information is invaluable to administrators and dean's office staff who often need to recreate a student's contacts with advising staff. Every substantial contact with a student or relating to a student should be documented, and should include appropriate details and the date of the interaction. Typically, this documentation includes:

- The content of the discussion with student
- Interpretations of policy
- Issues raised
- Recommendations made

Specific Ways to Document a Student Interaction in Pathways

Report/Appointment Summary: Summary reports allow you to document interactions with a student, whether the appointment was scheduled, a walk-in, or the student was a no show. Appointment Summary Reports should only include information related to that specific appointment.

Privacy: This report is hidden from student view, but other faculty and staff within the same care unit are able to see these reports. However, please keep in mind that any information you enter pertaining to a student becomes part of their official student record and may be subpoenaed by that student, as outlined in FERPA.

Notes: Notes offer an additional mechanism to jot down information about a student and collaborate across Care Units. Notes allow faculty and staff to document any important information about a student that should be visible to anyone working with the student. Notes are not restricted to specific Care Units, nor tied to student appointments. Therefore, they are accessible to any staff or faculty in the platform who have permission to view Notes, which currently includes all professional and faculty advisors.

Privacy: Notes can be seen by anyone in the platform. If the student's name is checked within the note, the student can't actually see the note.

Alerts/Cases/Referrals: When submitting a referral, comments can be added to assist the office to which the student is being referred. Once the referral office gets the Alert, a Case is opened, and once it is closed, any final comments can be added to the Case to inform the individual who made the initial referral the outcome of the Case. Please note that depending on the referral office and the nature of the case final comments may be minimal.

Privacy: Comments for Alerts and Cases are only viewable by professional and faculty advisors and are not viewable by students.

Tips for Documentation

1. Ensure that statements you make are objective and based on facts. Avoid statements that are judgmental, value-laden, or based on your own guesses, predictions, diagnoses, assumptions, etc.

Instead of: "Student is avoiding math because of fear of not passing."

Consider: "Student has not taken math since high school and expresses concern about succeeding. Referred student to the Math Assistance Center and Study Lab for additional support."

2. Try to be as clear, concise, complete, and professional as possible.
3. When possible, minimize the use of acronyms, abbreviations, and jargon. Try to use only those that are "universally" understood within the advising or University community.
4. Be sensitive to presumptions of gender. Refer to the student by the preferred name, pronoun used by the student, or by the word "student"

5. Include enough specific information to be useful for future advising appointments (yours or other advisors) with the student.

Instead of: "Student might want a W this semester."

Consider: "Advised student against a withdrawal from BIOSC 0150 at this point in the term and encouraged the student to talk with the professor before deciding. Advised student of the March 8th Monitored Withdrawal deadline and explained the process for submitting the Monitored Withdrawal Form to the Student Records Office, should the student decide to pursue this option."

6. Document specific information you give to the student about policies, requirements, or deadlines.

Instead of: "Two more CS courses to go and then okay to apply for admission to SCI."

Consider: "Assuming successful completion of current CS courses (CS 0401 and CS 0441), student will have to complete CS 0445 and CS 0447 to be considered for admission. Advised student of the March 1st deadline to apply to SCI and informed student that they could apply while enrolled in the CS 0445 and CS 0447 courses next semester."

7. Include information relevant to a student's academic progress, questions, or situation and document all academic suggestions and/or referrals and the rationale for such.
8. Document possible consequences related to student action or inaction, as well as pros and cons of options if applicable
9. Include information that reflects a holistic approach to advising (i.e.: discussions around personal, social, or career interests/goals).
10. Document referrals to other offices on/off campus.

IMPORTANT NOTE: If the referral made is of a "sensitive" nature, you may record, "Referred to appropriate resources" if you choose. However, it also okay to be more specific about the referral office (ex: Disability Resources or Counseling Center). What you should avoid including is very specific and/or in-depth details about mental/medical conditions/diagnoses or personal issues/situations that the student reports to you. Use caution when documenting anything related to political or religious affiliation, disclosed or perceived sexual orientation, or any other information that could potentially disadvantage a student if released to others.

TIP: "When in doubt, leave it out."

Sensitive Subject Matter

Caution should be exercised when using Pathways to document topics that contain sensitive or time-sensitive subject matter. Do not use Pathways to document emergency situations. If a student issue is an emergency or requires an immediate response, please call the Pitt Police: 412-624-2121. The [CARS Team](#) will continue to respond to student behavior identified as reasonably causing concern for students' health, welfare, and safety.

If you believe it is important document sensitive subject matter, use general or coded language. Below are a few examples of ways to communicate this information:

- Student reported extenuating circumstances related to his academic progress this term
- Student discussed a difficult situation and requested help from a campus support service
- Student disclosed a personal situation that is having an impact on how things are going this semester

Considerations for Documentation in a Shared System

1. When deciding whether or not to access a student's record, ask yourself: Do I have a specific, job-related need to access this record? Or am I just satisfying my curiosity?
2. As was discussed at the end of the required FERPA training video (before receiving access to the Pathways Production Site), when writing a note, avoid making funny and/or sarcastic comments. Ask yourself:
 - Is this something another Pathways user connected with the student would need to know?
 - Are the details in my notes based on fact? Or are they observational and personal? Is the distinction clear and written in a non-judgmental tone?
 - Are my notes interpretable by someone else? Did I provide enough information for another person to understand the substance and context? Did I avoid using jargon and acronyms?
 - Would I be okay with this information being on the front page of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*?
3. Electronic reports and advising notes are considered "education records" and, as such, students have the right to inspect them under FERPA. Student education records are also subject to disclosure in certain legal contexts. Assume that students, parents, other University faculty/staff, and/or the general public will read anything and everything you write.
4. It is not uncommon for students to disclose issues of a "sensitive" or confidential nature to you. In those instances, it is best to use non-descript language and your own best judgement when documenting in the shared system. In some instances, it may not be appropriate to include detailed documentation about specific disclosures or discussions in the electronic system. In those instances, if you deem the information important enough to keep note of but too sensitive to include in the shared system, it is permissible to create your own private notes (i.e. notes that are securely stored and not accessible to others). Those notes should be used only to reinforce your memory of specific student cases, kept in your sole possession, and only as long as they are useful.