

Documentation in Pathways: Best practices, guidelines and sensitive situations

Michael Brubaker, Advising Technology Manager
Maggie Dykstra, Academic Coordinator

Today's Objectives

- Understand why documentation and student records are important
- Review best practices for writing advising reports, notes and referrals
- Review guidelines and differences between advising reports, notes and referrals
- Discuss documenting sensitive situations in Pathways

Importance of Documentation and General Don'ts and Do's



Why Document Advising Interactions?

- Creates "institutional memory" of contact with students that is critical for Dean of Students Office and Office of the Provost
- Document student progress for you and others to reference
- Track recommendations and/or referrals and their rationale
- Support students through transitions (either from advisor-to-advisor or other campus offices)
- Build rapport with students by allowing for easy recall of interesting, compelling, or unique facts/interests/goals of students
- Remind students of advice they received during a previous advising appointment

Documentation Don't and Do's

Don'ts	Do's
Summarize everything that was discussed. Notes are intended to be a brief record of advising contacts highlighting recommendations, referrals made, and follow-up plans.	Briefly summarize what was discussed as it related to student success for future reference by the student, other support staff, and future advisors
Report problems with specific instructors	Summarize specific course recommendations
Use acronyms students and other staff may not understand	Spell things out for a general audience
Include speculation, subjective opinions, or judgments	Write fact-based academic-related notes
Include sensitive information, personal concerns, private matters, or details around sensitive referrals	Use general or coded language concerning sensitive material and referrals made when discussed with the student
Include notes about negative student behaviors	Include notes about positive student behaviors
Attach emails with sensitive/private content that the student likely didn't intend for other staff to read	Attach important emails

Different Types of Documentation in Pathways



1. Advising Reports

- Documents your interaction with students from within an appointment setting
- Should only include information related to that specific appointment
- Privacy: hidden from student view, but other faculty/staff with access to the care unit can view reports
- These reports are part of a student's official record and may be *subpoenaed by a student, as outlined in FERPA*

Sample Advising Report Outline

- ✓ **Summarize** reason(s) for meeting and the objectives of the advising session
- ✓ List **information** you provided to student (e.g., how to change major, academic planning, satisfactory academic progress, etc.)
- ✓ Note possible **consequences** discussed with student related to action or inaction, as well as pros and cons of options if applicable
- ✓ List all the majors, minors, certificates that are of **interest** to the student and you discussed
- ✓ List **classes** you suggested/discussed for enrollment
- ✓ List the ways that the student has been **involved**/wants to get involved on campus that you discussed
- ✓ Note all **referrals** that were made and use the referral process functionality in Pathways to connect students to resources
- ✓ Consider **consistency** within department/school

2. Notes

- Offer an additional mechanism to jot down information about a student and collaborate across care units
- Allow faculty/staff to document any information about a student that should be visible to anyone working with the student
- Not restricted to a specific care unit and are not tied to student appointments
- Privacy: can be viewed by any faculty/staff who have permission to view Notes (this currently includes all professional and faculty advisors)
 - Visibility can be (sort of) limited to only yourself

3. Referrals

Advisor Issued Referrals

- Offers an intentional way to connect students with other staff and departments across campus
- Able to track the progress and outcome of referrals that generate a case

Academic Referrals Issued to Advisors

- Typically submitted by instructors
- Additional comments left should follow best practices
- Privacy: can be viewed only by faculty/staff who are assigned to the case and because of this has a more limited audience than summaries and notes

Summary of Guidelines for documentation in Pathways

- Remember why documentation is important
- Write fact-based, descriptive notes that convey the unique dynamics of each student
- Be specific when describing what was discussed and agreed upon between you and the student
- Consider consistency within department/school
- Be mindful of FERPA

More information:

<https://www.pathways.pitt.edu/resources/documentation-guidelines>

https://www.pathways.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/pathways_documentation_guidelines.pdf

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*?

Documenting Sensitive Scenarios



Example Scenarios

- Scenario 1: Student discloses a learning disability
 - Scenario 2: Mental health (or physical or mental illness)
 - Scenario 3: Death in the family (or other family emergency)
 - Scenario 4: Challenging student advising appointment
 - Scenario 5: Student discloses they feel suicidal
 - Scenario 6: Potential behavioral issues
 - Scenario 7: Reported sexual assault
- https://www.pathways.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/advising_documentation_in_pathways_sensitive_situations.pdf

Scenario 1: Student discloses learning disability

A student informs you that she is not doing well in coursework despite the fact that she is using every tutoring/learning assistance resource available. After you learn that she is indeed trying and that she seems to lose concentration very quickly, you decide to refer her to Disability Resource Services



“Jane came in to discuss her lack of success in her coursework this term. After an extensive conversation of how she is approaching her schoolwork, I decided to refer her to Disability Resource Services for consultation because it’s clear to me that she has attention deficit disorder.”

“Jane came in to discuss her lack of success in her coursework this term. After an extensive conversation of how she is approaching her schoolwork, I referred her to Disability Resource Services for consultation.”

Scenario 2: Mental Health

A student disclosed an illness (mental or physical) that is affecting schoolwork.



“Met with Joe to reduce his course load because he indicated that he is suffering from bipolar disorder and cannot handle five courses this semester. Joe stated that he is working with a psychologist and is currently taking medication. Joe will consult with me for future term scheduling.”

“Met with Joe to suggest ways that he could reduce his course load due to a health-related situation. Joe will consult with me for future term scheduling. I also connected Joe to campus resources for additional support.”

Scenario 3: Death in Family/Family Emergency

A student discloses that their grandfather has passed away and that they will need to be absent to attend the funeral.



“Alex had an unfortunate familial matter come up and has to travel to California. They will miss the next week of classes. I connected them to the Associate Dean’s Office for possible notification to their instructors. I made sure to discuss support services on campus should they wish to make use of services upon their return.”



“Alex’s grandfather died this weekend after a long battle with Alzheimer’s Disease. Alex will miss class this coming week to attend the funeral in California. I extended my condolences and contacted the Associate Dean’s office so that they might send out official notification to Alex’s professors. I asked if Alex wanted me to refer them to the UCC for grief counseling after they return. They will let me know.”

Scenario 4: Challenging Student Advising Appointment

You met with a student after they requested to discuss adjusting their course schedule. He was very rude and inflexible; the scheduling process was very difficult



“Met with Mark related to his request to adjust his schedule. He resisted many of my suggestions. I explained the potential impacts of his preferences on his academics. We worked out his schedule after much deliberation. He elected not to take a math course against my guidance.”

“Met with Mark related to his request to adjust his schedule. Mark demanded to have all of his courses after 12:30pm and would not take a math course despite my suggestions. Mark was extremely rude and told me that I was no help.”

Scenario 5: Student discloses that they feel suicidal

A student verbally says to you during an advising appointment, "I'm thinking about committing suicide before the semester is over."



"Met with student to talk about next semester's classes. Recommended he gets started on his foreign language requirements. At the end of our meeting, when I asked him how things were going, John said "I'm thinking about committing suicide before the semester is over". I immediately walked John to the University Counseling Center (UCC)."



"Met with student to talk about next semester's classes. Recommended he get started on his foreign language requirements. At the end of our meeting, when I asked him how things are going, John disclosed a serious personal situation, so I immediately walked John to the University Counseling Center (UCC)."

Possible Referrals: University Counseling Center, Pitt Police, Care Referral

Scenario 6: Potential Behavioral Issues

An instructor emails a student's advisor to let them know the student has not attended class in two weeks and has not responded to their emails. No academic referral has been submitted in Pathways.



“Professor Jones reported to me that Sara has missed 2 weeks of classes and has not responded to emails. After meeting with the student, she disclosed some challenges with the course. I advised her to drop the class.



“Professor Jones reported to me that Sara has missed 2 weeks of classes and has not responded to emails. After meeting with the student, she told me she has been avoiding class because she doesn't like the instructor and thinks the class is pointless. I advised her to drop the class.

Scenario 7: Student discloses sexual assault

During an advising appointment, a student discloses to you that she was the victim of sexual assault



“Jane disclosed that she was raped at an off-campus party this weekend. I confirmed that the alleged perpetrator has been arrested and does not pose a continuing threat to Jane’s safety. We discussed the communication of excused absences to her professors for the duration of her hospitalization. To fulfill my Title IX reporting obligation, I contacted in Student Affairs immediately after our advising meeting. I also set up a meeting for Jane with a member of the Care and Resource Support Team for ongoing support.”

“After Jane disclosed a recent incident of a serious personal nature, I connected Jane to the Associate Dean’s Office to talk about outreach to her instructors. I also spoke to appropriate staff in student affairs and made sure that Jane was aware of campus and community resources that are available for continued support and connected her to them.”

Summary

- Advising reports, notes and referrals serve as three different ways to document interactions and comments about student progress
- Be mindful to the level of detail included, and use coded language if necessary - Use caution when documenting any other information that could potentially disadvantage a student if released to others
- If you are unsure about what you should document or how to document an interaction or sensitive situation, then seek guidance before doing so - The documentation is secondary to the actions you take, and the time you spend listening to and supporting the student

Links and information about resources mentioned today

- Disability Resources and Services (DRS):
<https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/disability-access/disability-resources-and-services>
- University Counseling Center (UCC):
<https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/counseling>
- Pitt Police:
<https://www.police.pitt.edu/>
- Care and Resource Support Team:
<https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/care-and-resources>
- Office of Student Conduct:
<https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/conduct/>
- Title IX:
<https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix-compliance>