

GUIDELINES FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING NOTES

Auburn University collects and retains data and information about students for designated periods of time with the expressed purpose of facilitating the student's educational development. Advising contact notes are considered to be part of the student's educational record regardless of format (electronic or paper), and should follow the guidelines below. Students should be informed that as a network of continuous support, advisors and other staff keep contact notes, and those notes transfer with the student if they change advisors or majors. Contact notes are visible to advisors, faculty and staff that interact with students in an academic capacity.

Privacy

AU recognizes its duty to protect the privacy rights of individuals while balancing the institution's need for information relevant to fulfilling its educational missions, and its obligation to abide by University policy and state and federal regulations.

As stated in the Auburn University policy on the confidentiality of student records, the university recognizes its obligation to exercise discretion in recording and disseminating information about students to ensure that their rights of privacy are maintained.

[AU Policy on the Confidentiality of Student Records Pursuant to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act](#)

It is important to know that advising notes, whether they are hard copy or electronic, are part of the student's educational record to which the student has a right to access and which can be subpoenaed.

Academic advising notes should be retained as specified in the *General Records Schedule for Alabama Universities, section 3, Advising and Assisting Students* found at http://www.lib.auburn.edu/archive/records_schedule.htm

Definition and Purpose of Contact Notes

Advising contact notes are documentation by the academic/faculty advisor of all interactions with an advisee including in-person meetings, phone conversations, email messages, or other electronic mediums. These notes should be descriptive but concise in nature and provide a map of student progress for advisors and other University staff who may work with the student.

Contact notes documenting advising services are a core element in providing excellent service to students. These notes should be descriptive but concise in nature, serving several purposes including:

- Building a network of continuous support for students, the information in the notes provides a map of student progress for advisors and other University staff who may work with the student. It also allows for a holistic approach to individual progress as students move between advisors, majors, departments, colleges and other service offices.
- Giving advisors context and history that allows them to focus on key issues for students rather than repeating or revisiting the same information each visit.
- Providing a record of students' individual curricular development and learning. This may take on additional importance where colleges, programs or majors have specific benchmarks, progression standards or prerequisites to meet. Contact notes can also be valuable in noting or documenting patterns in individual student behavior.
- Being a depository of documented official decisions.

- Providing historical information on student progress and official communication for advisors or administrators. This can include federal or state data reporting, or the review of an individual student question or issue.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics are the rules and standards governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession. Advisors have two associations to which they can look for guidelines on ethical standards for the profession. These include the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), which developed its own Core Values to guide the profession:

- Advisors respect student confidentiality rights regarding personal information;
- Advisors practice with an understanding of the institution's interpretation of applicable laws such as the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA);
- Advisors seek access to and use student information only when the information is relevant to the advising process;
- Advisors document advising contacts adequately to meet institutional disclosure guidelines and aid in subsequent advising interactions.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

Auburn University advisors must record a summary of the content of their discussions with students regarding the student's current curricular goals, as reviewed in the advising interaction, and issues related to their progress toward those goals. While decisions regarding the content of advising notes are made by the advisor, critical elements for documentation include:

- Summaries of advising and career counseling contacts relevant to student progress toward degree/career.
- Information that will help colleagues to understand the student's situation as well as advice given.
- A focus on facts and events. Use descriptive comments to summarize conversations and interactions.
- Action items requested/required of the student and the follow-up timeline.
- Descriptions of when and why exceptions have been made, or note if a form documenting/approving such exceptions has been filed.
- Any discussion in which a student chooses either to adopt or reject a recommendation you have made along with possible consequences for students of not following advice given.
- Referrals made to campus or community offices, campus services, or specific staff members should be as complete as possible so others can interpret who/what was shared.
- When professional judgment suggests that you provide an analysis of a situation that goes beyond simply reporting facts and details, comments should be well grounded in fact and reflection. Focus on observation and reaction rather than accusation. For example, "The student spoke in an angry tone that made me very uncomfortable" vs. "She was a bully and rude in the meeting."

DOCUMENTATION PROCEDURES

The expectation for advisors at Auburn University is that every substantial contact with a student, or relating to a student is recorded. A "substantial contact" is one in which information is communicated that can have an impact on a student's academic progress. In all cases, documentation should be the minimum necessary to adequately document the interaction. In order to document a student's past

behaviors, "no shows" for appointments should also be documented. If colleges/units are using an appointment system that tracks "no shows," it is not necessary to document in contact notes.

Who Documents and Why?

All advisors, faculty and staff that work with students in a capacity directly related to academic advising and academic progress should document student interactions. Because academic advising is a collaborative process between students, advisors, faculty, and academic staff, it is extremely important to document all advising or advising related interactions, noting the decision making processes and ultimately, charting the student's academic progress. Contact notes can serve as a tool to help build rapport between the advisor and the student, and can provide important information that helps advisors to be more effective in guiding students as they explore.

What to Document?

The expectation for advisors at Auburn University is that every substantial contact with a student, or relating to a student, must be thoroughly documented including appropriate details and the date of the interaction. This includes telephone conversations, e-mail interactions, walk-in/quick question advising, pre-arranged advising meetings, and no shows. Other interactions are up to the discretion of each advisor, but in general, staff members are encouraged to document when in doubt. Advisors are reminded to keep in mind the "need to know" basis when considering content to summarize in the documentation.

CONTACT TYPES

In Person Contacts

- All meetings with students should be documented and summarized to include any information that will assist current or future advisors in guiding the student to successful degree completion. Refer to General Guidelines for help in determining what information should be included in the notes.

Telephone Contacts

- All telephone contacts should be documented electronically. Phone contacts of substance should be summarized, including general purpose and recommendations made. Document any contact or interactions with a parent about their student. (FERPA).

E-mail Contacts

- E-mails of substance should be archived in the student's electronic file. The date, topic, and summary or a copy of the actual e-mail should be included. In rare cases involving sensitive topics, it may be appropriate for the e-mail itself to be printed and kept within the unit's paper files.
- In evaluating whether to keep email messages in the notes, the same threshold of value or significance should be used for email as it is for regular notes. If it has a bearing on the student's progress toward career or degree, it should be kept.

NOTE TYPES

eNotes

- All substantial contacts with or about a student must be recorded electronically in the university advising software system (*to be determined*).
- These notes are accessible within the university system, so care should be exercised in this documentation. Please see Ethical Considerations, What to Document and Sensitive Subject

Matter for additional guidelines.

- Only in rare cases is it appropriate to keep additional documentation in the student's paper file. In these cases, non-sensitive information should be recorded electronically (i.e., schedule plan, academic progress checks, etc.) and a reference to additional information in paper notes should be made.

Paper Files

- While all contacts need to be recorded electronically, in rare occasions sensitive topics arise that need to be summarized and documented on paper to insure the information will not be widely shared. This type of interaction should be documented in the student's paper file/educational record, and the eNotes should refer to the paper file.
- The paper entry should follow the same ethical considerations as eNotes and document the minimum necessary to show a problem was assessed and an appropriate referral was made. This practice will ensure that thorough documentation is being kept, and will minimize the risk associated with sharing the content through widely accessible electronic notes.
- Examples of sensitive topics that should be documented and kept in paper files would include referrals for student in distress, confidential medical information or diagnoses that relate to academic decisions, etc.

Personal Notes

- While personal notes (electronic or paper) are not part of the educational record, they may be subpoenaed in court cases or seized under the Patriot Act. For these reasons, Auburn University recommends that advisors not maintain personal notes about students.
- If advisors maintain some data relating to students, these should never be kept to the exclusion of formal records and should never contain information that would be inappropriate for the formal record.
- The keeping of personal notes should be minimized, and a great deal of judgment and caution should be used when personal notes are kept.
- The standard for the content of private notes should be the same as 'public' notes. They should be limited only to information that you don't think should be shared with others.

SENSITIVE INFORMATION

Academic advisors should exercise caution when documenting topics that contain sensitive information. Subjects considered sensitive include disability, religious and/or political affiliation, perceived or disclosed sexual orientation, any medical diagnoses, or information that could be potentially detrimental to the student if it were revealed to a third party. If a student discloses personal information or personal circumstances of a sensitive nature, do not include the details in comments. Instead, write that "personal information" or that "personal circumstances" were disclosed.

Recording Sensitive Information

- When recording information about conversations or interactions of a sensitive or very personal nature, care should be exercised with the language employed; report academically relevant facts. Focus on steps already taken or steps that are necessary to address the circumstance. Do not diagnose, assess, or offer judgment on the student or circumstances.
- When referring students to campus resources, always list the office(s) involved (e.g. Academic Counseling and Advising Center (ACAC), Academic Support, Student Counseling Services, Career Center, etc.) as this information can be used as a cue concerning the issues and a prompt for future follow-up or check-in.

- Keep the records fact-based, and, if in doubt, have a discussion with the student about what she or he is comfortable having a fact recorded. Indicate the student's agreement to include this information in his/her record.

Students Who Pose a Risk to Themselves or Others

- If a student demonstrates behaviors that would indicate he/she could pose a danger to themselves or others, the advisor should document this in the notes and report incident to the Threat Assessment Team, <https://cws.auburn.edu/rms/threatAssessment.aspx>.
- When a student who has demonstrated these type of behaviors transfers to another college/unit on campus, for example ACAC, the advisor should notify the appropriate individuals in that college/unit and document this action.
- Continue to document when in doubt. This could be useful if a situation ever arose.
- If an advisor ever feels in imminent danger during an advising session, he or she should dial 911.

Self-Check Questions When Entering Notes

When entering your notes, assume others will read your notes and ask yourself:

- Is this something the student would want other people to know?
- Is this something another advisor would need to know? Why?
- Are the details in my notes based on fact and expert opinion, and not self-perspective?

Always be sure to check your notes for accuracy before saving them.

Helpful suggestions for creating and managing contact notes:

- Keep current on updating student file contact notes - letting time pass can mean a loss of important details.
- Narrative notes are helpful and readable, but concise, bulleted statements/summaries are also very effective, and often make it easier to scan the notes in preparing for an appointment.
- The content of advising or other student service unit contact notes will be different, but the concerns and the standards for privacy, sharing and confidentiality are the same. Stay current on and abide by FERPA. Take a regular refresher course or participate in sessions that might focus on any changes to these standards.
- Consult with supervisors and colleagues when there is a question about what information to include in a contact note or summary.
- In email and personal communication with colleagues regarding students, use the same standards as for contact notes. Editorial comments should be offered only during in-person communication.
- Keeping personal notes outside of the approved Auburn University system or other college data/notes systems does not mean they are private. Personal notes are not immune from subpoena or review for grievance or student request. They must be kept separate from regular student files (hard copy and electronic). They must never be shared with others. They should be kept in a very secure place and use password protection when stored digitally. They should be properly destroyed when no longer needed.

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