



Northern Illinois University

Guidelines for Academic Advising Reports

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Introduction

This handbook contains a set of general expectations for academic advisors and academic support staff in creating academic advising reports. The information presented in this handbook is intended to provide you an overview of how to accurately and effectively document your interactions with students. While this handbook does not cover the entire scope of advising, it serves as a helpful resource.

Any need for revision or clarification should be brought to the attention of [Michelle Pickett](#), Director of the Academic Advising Center. This handbook will be revised periodically; additions and revisions will be made as necessary.

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Guidelines for Academic Advising Reports

Northern Illinois University collects and retains data and information about students for designated periods of time for the express purpose of facilitating their educational development. The university also protects the privacy of these records in accordance with FERPA and NIU official policies and procedures. Advising reports are considered to be part of students' educational record regardless of format (electronic or paper), and should follow the guidelines detailed in this handbook. Students should be informed that as a network of continuous support, advisors and other staff retain access to contact reports. These reports transfer with students if they change advisors or majors. Furthermore, they remain on file for a period of time following graduation or withdrawal from the university. Advising reports are visible to advisors, students' instructors and staff who interact with students in an academic capacity who have a legitimate educational interest to review.

Privacy

NIU 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 as well as state and federal regulations. The university also recognizes its obligation to exercise discretion in recording and disseminating information about students to ensure that their rights of privacy are maintained. For additional information, refer to the [Undergraduate Catalog](#); chapter on [Legal Notices](#); section titled "Student Information and Records."

It is important to know that advising reports, whether hard copy or electronic, are part of a student's educational record to which they have a right to access. These records can also be subpoenaed.

Academic advising reports should be retained as specified in the NIU [Records Retention and Administration Guidelines](#).

Definition and Purpose of Advising Reports

Documenting advising services is a core element in providing excellent service to students. These reports should be descriptive but concise in nature, serving several purposes including:

1. Building a network of continuous support for students. The information in the reports provide a map of student progress for advisors and other university staff who may work with a student. It also allows for a holistic approach to individual progress as students move between advisors, majors, departments, colleges and other service offices.

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2. Documenting student interactions including in-person meetings, phone conversations, email messages or other electronic mediums.
3. Giving advisors and academic support staff context and history that allows them to focus on key issues for students rather than repeating or revisiting the same information each visit.
4. Providing a map of a student's 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. Advising reports can also be valuable in noting or documenting patterns in individual student behavior.
5. Being a repository of documented official decisions.
6. Providing historical information on student progress and official communication for advisors, academic support staff or administrators. This can include federal or state data reporting, or the review of an individual student question or issue.

Definition of a Student Record According to FERPA

Advising reports are governed by the applicable Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations. These guidelines do not address treatment records governed by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). FERPA is a federal law designed to protect the privacy of education records; to establish the right of students to inspect and review their education records; and to provide guidelines for the correction of inaccurate and misleading data through informal and formal hearings. Designated university employees, including academic advisors, have access to student educational data in order to perform valid job duties, and therefore have a legal responsibility to protect student education records in their possession. What this means is that, in general, you may not release information from the student record to a third party, including parents, without written permission from the student. The [NIU FERPA Authorization Form](#) (PDF) is available on the [Office of General Counsel](#) website.

Legally, all information we maintain about a student that contains personally, identifiable information (e.g., name, student ID number, etc.) is considered part of the educational record. One exemption to this is “sole possession reports” where the report is maintained by the creator of the report and only accessible to that person – the intent of this portion of FERPA is to allow for “memory jogger” type reports, not as a way to generally maintain reports on students. All information, whether part of the educational record or “sole possession reports” are subject to subpoena and must legally be released.

If you have any questions or need additional clarification, please contact the [Office of General Counsel](#) at 815-753-1774 or the [Office of Registration and Records](#) at 815-753-1681.

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.

Sensitive Information

Academic advisors and academic support staff should exercise prudence and professional judgment 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 upon the student or circumstances.
- When referring students to campus resources, always list the office(s) involved (e.g., ACCESS/Tutoring, Counseling and Consultation Services, Disability Resource Center, Career Services, etc.) as this information can be used as a cue concerning the issues and a prompt for future follow-up or check-in. Indicate date when referred and if you called that office ahead of time or walked the student over.

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- Keep the records fact-based, and if in doubt, have a discussion with the student about what they are comfortable having a fact recorded. Indicate the student's agreement to include this information in their record.

Students Who Pose a Risk to Themselves or Others

- If a student demonstrates behaviors that would indicate they could pose a danger to themselves or others, you are to report the incident using the [Student of Concern Report](#) available on the [Student Conduct](#) website.
- In your advising report, you are to note that the Student of Concern Report was submitted and the date it was submitted. You do not need to state any medical or personal information in your advising report as this will be recorded in the Student of Concern Report.
- Continue to document when in doubt. This could be useful if a situation ever arises.
- If a staff member ever feels in imminent danger while meeting with a student, they should dial 911.

Meeting 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 and academic support staff in guiding the student to successful degree completion. Refer to General Guidelines for help in determining what information should be included in the reports.

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).

Email Contacts

- Emails of substance should be archived in the student's electronic file. The date, topic and summary or a copy of the actual email should be included. In rare cases involving sensitive topics, it may be appropriate for the email itself to be scanned and attached to an SSC Advising Report, uploaded to OnBase or printed and kept within the unit's paper files.
- In evaluating whether to keep email messages in the reports, the same threshold of value or significance should be used for email as for regular reports. If it has a bearing on the student's progress toward career or degree, it should be kept.

Advising Report Types

Student Success Collaborative (SSC) Campus Reports

- All substantial contacts with or about a student must be recorded electronically in the SSC Campus platform.
- These reports are accessible within the university system, so discretion should be exercised in this documentation. Please see the Ethical Considerations, General Guidelines and Sensitive Information sections of this publication for additional assistance.
- Only in rare cases is it appropriate to keep additional documentation in the student's paper file. In these cases, nonsensitive information should be recorded electronically (i.e., schedule plan, academic progress checks, etc.) and a reference to additional information in paper reports should be made.
- All advising report types will be retained as specified in the NIU [Records Retention and Administration Guidelines](#) found on the NIU [Human Resource Services](#) website.

Paper Files/Reports

- While all contacts need to be recorded electronically, on rare occasion sensitive topics arise that need to be summarized and documented on paper to ensure the information will not be widely shared. This type of interaction should be documented in the student's paper file/educational record, and the SSC Campus platform should refer to the paper file.
- The paper entry should follow the same ethical considerations as SSC Campus Reports 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. It will also minimize the risk associated with sharing the content through widely accessible electronic reports.
- Examples of sensitive topics that should be documented and kept in paper files include but are not limited to referrals for student in distress, confidential medical information, diagnoses that relate to academic decisions, etc.

Personal Reports

- While personal reports (electronic or paper) are not part of the educational record, they may be subpoenaed in court cases or requested under the Illinois Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or Patriot Act. For these reasons, NIU recommends that advisors and academic support staff not maintain personal reports about students.
- If advisors and academic support staff maintain reports relating to students, these reports should never be kept to the exclusion of formal records. These reports also should never contain information that would be inappropriate for the formal record.

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- The keeping of personal reports should be minimized, and a great deal of judgment and caution should be used when personal reports are kept.
- The standard for the content of private reports should be the same as public reports; they should be limited only to information you don't think should be shared with others.

General Guidelines

General guidelines when documenting a student advising reports:

- If in doubt, leave it out.
- Describe. Do not evaluate, judge or include your opinion in these reports.
- Keep it simple.
- Do not include disability and/or medical information (unless a student specifically requests that it be part of their educational record).
- Leave out information NOT part of the educational record (i.e., law enforcement records, medical records, employment records).
- Consult with a supervisor or colleague(s) when questions arise about what information to include in an SSC Campus advising report or contact note.

Guidelines	Examples
1. Include reports that will help the student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student should remember to take math placement exam before registering for the next semester.• Asked student to bring list of 10 possible courses for next semester to our advising session.• Student did not come to scheduled appointment. Needs to reschedule as soon as possible.• Discussed importance of repeating MATH 210 in spring semester.
Guidelines	Examples
2. Include reports that clearly explain what occurred during your contact with the student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student requested a late withdrawal for extenuating circumstances.• Student was asked to leave the office due to disruptive behavior.

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3. Include reports that will help future advisors and other academic support staff understand the student or the advice that you gave.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraged student to enroll in PSYC 102 because of interest in nursing. • Student enrolled in PHHE 206 because they thought the class was interesting. Understands this will be elective. • Explained general education courses and overlap with major.
4. Include list of courses approved, along with alternatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We agreed to the following 15 hours for spring semester: MATH 210, COMS 100, PSYC 102, ENGL 204 and THEA 203. Will take another course in creativity and critical analysis if COMS 100 closed. • Summer classes we discussed were CHEM 210/211. Will take MATH 155 if CHEM fills.
5. Include reports that will facilitate the relationship with the student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraged student to make an appointment to come see me before the withdrawal deadline. <i>(List specific deadline date.)</i> • Reminded student to schedule their appointment well in advance of their registration date for summer and fall. <i>(List specific deadline date.)</i>
6. Include possible consequences of not following advice given.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussed need to take CHEM 210/212 during spring semester so CHEM 211/213 can be taken in fall and student can stay on path for major. • Student wants to enroll in 18 hours. Cautioned regarding heavy academic load.

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Guidelines	Examples
7. Include referrals to other offices or programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraged student to make an appointment with a career counselor. • Student is interested in becoming a Student Orientation Leader; referred to Orientation Office about application process.
8. Include comments that help you in future interactions with student. (Perhaps in helping students with reference letters or scholarship applications.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student was well-prepared for advising session. Had tentative schedule already prepared. • Student has consistently expressed an interest in applying to multiple DPT programs.
<u>Exclude</u> your subjective judgments about the student, especially when they are negative. (In some cases, you may wish to use personal reports. In most cases, you should probably omit altogether.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student is not motivated to succeed in classes this semester. • Student struggling in all classes; I think they would have been better off at a community college. • I doubt student's ability to succeed in this major.
<u>Exclude</u> comments regarding student's instructors, especially when they are negative. (May wish to use personal reports.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student is having a personality conflict with COMS 100 instructor. • Student is considering dropping HIST 110 because of a problem with the professor. • Student indicated that they are considering filing a sexual harassment charge against their political science professor.
<u>Exclude</u> personal concerns of the student. (May wish to use personal reports.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents are going through a divorce this semester. • Sister has cancer; student is having a very difficult time staying focused on academics. • Student has to go to court next week; will miss classes. • Student shared problems they are having with motivation.

So How Do I Really Write Appropriate Reports?

Self-Check Questions

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

1. Is this something you think the student would want other people to know during their academic endeavor at NIU?
2. Is this something another advisor would need to know? Why?
3. Are the details in my reports based on fact or expert opinion, and not self-perspective or hearsay?

It is important to maintain accurate, effective reports pertaining to students. Effective reports allow advisors and academic support staff to easily recall the nature of their discussions and interactions with students, as well as actions taken on behalf of students. They also help personnel throughout the university understand the history of communications with students as well as the nature of assistance provided to them.

When creating advising reports, staff should create *process notes*. Process notes most comprehensively document the delivery of service (advising), clearly document the nature of the interaction with the student and outline the process involved in delivering service to the student. In addition, process notes can most effectively protect advisors, academic support staff and the institution from the claim that “No one told me,” or “I didn’t know.”

Examples of Process Notes:

- Returned student’s call regarding desire to withdraw from math class. Left message and informed student the withdrawal deadline is March 10. Invited in for advising session. Sent follow up email with links to financial aid and academic standing. Suggested student contact me prior to withdrawing to discuss options.
- Student called to discuss their academic standing. Confirmed for student that they are on academic warning, and explained that they must obtain a 2.0 during the spring semester in order to get back in good standing. Discussed reasons for academic difficulty. Student stated that their mother had surgery during the semester and had to commute from home for several weeks. Student stated that she could not catch up, but that they did not contact professor. Suggested that they keep in close contact with faculty member and advisor if they experience future challenges. Developed academic plan which includes repeating ENGL 103 in the spring. Provided student information about Financial Aid’s satisfactory academic progress (SAP).
- Student came in to discuss commencement. Reviewed academic record and informed student that, upon successful completion of current semester’s coursework, they will be

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eligible to participate. Informed student that they have not applied for graduation; provided instructions on how to do so and encouraged the student to apply ASAP. Instructed student to let me know when their last grade is posted so that I can expedite degree conferral.

As you create advising reports, make sure to use objective language and accurately document the content of the advising session.

Advising Reports Do's and Don'ts

Do	Don't
Student has not had a math class in five years and is concerned about ability to succeed. Discussed importance of starting math sequence ASAP.	Student is scared of math and is avoiding it.
Student withdrew from ANTH 120.	Student dropped ANTH 120 due to unfair grading policies of instructor.
Referred to financial aid counselor.	First generation college student. Widowed mother. No financial support from family. Referred to financial aid counselor.
Student wanted it noted that they missed two weeks of classes as a result of hospitalization.	Student missed two weeks of classes because of hospitalization for cancer treatment. <i>Note: Advising reports <u>should not</u> include specific medical or diagnosis information.</i>
I asked the student to return for another advising session when they have prepared a list of courses for next semester.	Clueless.
Student may be overextended with classes, work and activities.	Student should get priorities in order and quit that job!
Student requested tutoring support. Referred to ACCESS.	Student in financial and academic distress. Referred to ACCESS for help.

Adapted from "No One Ever Told Me: How Advisors Can Maximize Service and Minimize Risk through Effective Documentation" (Academic Impressions article), Auburn University, Maine's Public Universities, Missouri State University and University of Nebraska-Lincoln.