



Mentorship Guide for Mentors

Practical guidance for supporting reflection, confidence, skill development, and professional growth

Based on the August 26, 2025 Mentorship Workshop
Presented by Michael Tierney, Step by Step and contributions from participants

Mentorship is more than assigning work, answering questions, or monitoring progress. A mentor helps an intern interpret experience, connect learning to purpose, recognize personal contribution, and grow in confidence and professional judgment.

Scope of this guide. This resource focuses on the practice of mentorship. It is designed to complement, not replace, the official program, site, academic, and administrative expectations that apply to a particular internship role.

1. Begin with a shared conversation

Early in the experience, discuss what both you and the intern hope the intern will gain. Ask about desired skills, meaningful experiences, areas of uncertainty, and preferred approaches to feedback. Share your hopes as well. Openly communicating your investment can help the intern understand that the relationship is intended to be formative, not merely transactional.

- What do you hope to learn or experience?
- What skills would you like to practice or strengthen?
- What would make this experience feel successful?
- How do you prefer to receive feedback?
- What support would help you ask questions or raise concerns early?

2. Establish expectations, trust, and confidentiality

Create a shared understanding of how the mentoring relationship will work. Clarify meeting frequency, communication channels, response expectations, decision-making boundaries, feedback practices, and what the intern should do after a mistake or concern.

Confidentiality is reciprocal. Interns may observe difficult workplace moments or sensitive organizational information; mentors may learn about challenges in an intern's academic or personal life. Both parties should treat that access responsibly and understand what may or may not be shared.

"Everyone owns their own story."

- Michael Tierney

3. Help the intern learn from the whole community

You are an important guide, but you do not need to be the intern's only teacher. Meaningful learning may come from coworkers, other interns, volunteers, clients, board members, community partners, visitors, and people whose work initially seems unrelated to the intern's assignment.

- Explain how different roles contribute to the organization's mission.
- Invite the intern to observe appropriate meetings, projects, and interactions.
- Introduce the intern to people across the organization and professional network.
- Debrief what the intern noticed and what skills or values were demonstrated.

"Open to being surprised by who they learn from."

- Michael Tierney

4. Build reflection into the experience

Interns may complete meaningful work without recognizing what it is teaching them. Encourage a journal, notebook, phone note, or other dependable "memory bank" for questions, observations, accomplishments, feedback, changes in perspective, and examples that may later support resumes, interviews, portfolios, or presentations.

Reflection should occur throughout the experience. Balance active participation with time to write, process, and connect the work to academic learning, professional identity, organizational purpose, and community impact.

5. Make check-ins about learning as well as progress

Task updates matter, but mentoring conversations should also help the intern interpret what is happening. Select a few questions that fit the current stage of the experience:

Understanding the work

- What are you beginning to understand about the organization or community?
- How does this task connect to the organization's mission?
- Who benefits from this work, and how?

Recognizing learning and contribution

- What surprised you?
- Who did you learn from?
- What did you bring to the situation?
- What skill or prior knowledge helped you?
- What part of the result can be connected to your work?

Planning continued growth

- What would you do differently next time?
- Where do you need more guidance?
- What are you ready to try independently?
- What is one next step before we meet again?

6. Pair high expectations with meaningful support

Appropriate challenge might include speaking during a meeting, introducing oneself to a professional contact, leading part of a project, sharing an idea, responding to feedback, attempting unfamiliar work, or making a decision within clearly established boundaries.

Before asking an intern to stretch, ensure that the purpose and expectations are clear, the intern has the necessary information and resources, the level of risk is appropriate, and support and reflection will be available afterward.

"Create expectations that are high, but then give people the tools to get there."

- Workshop participant

7. Treat manageable mistakes as learning opportunities

A valuable internship does not require error-free performance. Help the intern recognize the mistake, communicate it promptly, understand its effect, take responsibility, correct what can be corrected, and identify what should change next time. Respond proportionately so accountability is clear without making the intern less likely to raise future concerns early.

8. Develop contextual thinking and empathy

Community-based work often involves people whose backgrounds, experiences, needs, or communication styles differ from the intern's. Help the intern ask what information may be missing, what circumstances may be shaping the interaction, whether communication should be adapted, and how to respond with empathy while maintaining appropriate boundaries. Understanding context does not require excusing harmful behavior.

9. Help the intern recognize and communicate transferable skills

Students may describe what they completed without being able to explain what the work demonstrates. For significant tasks or projects, help the intern identify:

The need, problem, or goal.

- The intern's specific responsibility.
- The actions, choices, and judgments involved.
- The skills and humanities perspectives applied.

- The effect on the organization or community.
- The evidence that could support a resume, interview, portfolio, or presentation.

Relevant skills may include communication, critical thinking, contextual thinking, research, writing, interpretation, collaboration, perspective-taking, cultural awareness, organization, initiative, adaptability, creativity, and professional judgment.

"Why not just turn the mirror on yourself? ... Oh, yeah, I guess I know how to do some things, too."

- Michael Tierney

10. Support relationship building and professional participation

Interns may feel intimidated when meeting professionals or may assume networking requires self-promotion. Prepare them for introductions, explain why a connection may matter, help them develop one or two thoughtful questions, invite them into appropriate conversations, debrief afterward, and encourage professional follow-up.

The objective is not simply to collect contacts. It is to help the intern learn how to participate responsibly in a professional and community network through curiosity, listening, reliability, and follow-through.

11. Allow the relationship to be reciprocal

Mentors bring experience and organizational knowledge, while interns may bring fresh questions, academic knowledge, technological abilities, creativity, and perspectives that benefit the mentor and organization. Reciprocity does not remove professional roles or boundaries; it means remaining open to co-learning and recognizing that the intern can contribute ideas and insight as well as labor.

12. Create opportunities for the intern to present learning

Ask the intern to explain, demonstrate, or present what has been learned through a staff update, project summary, written resource, completed product, reflective conversation, or public presentation. Explaining the experience helps the intern select what matters, organize the learning, name personal contribution, and communicate clearly.

A Simple Mentoring Rhythm

At the beginning

- Discuss what both of you hope the intern will gain.
- Establish communication, confidentiality, feedback, and decision-making expectations.
- Explain the organization's mission, culture, and context.
- Identify initial learning goals and encourage a reflection practice.
- Introduce the intern to the wider learning network.

During the experience

- Meet consistently and discuss learning as well as assignments.
- Give clear, specific, and timely feedback.
- Ask reflective and appreciative questions.
- Create appropriately challenging opportunities and increasing responsibility.
- Normalize questions and manageable mistakes.
- Help the intern identify skills, contributions, and professional relationships.

Near the conclusion

- Review significant accomplishments, challenges, and changes in perspective.
- Identify evidence of skill development and community or organizational contribution.
- Help the intern prepare to describe the experience to others.
- Discuss relationships the intern should maintain.
- Offer constructive closing feedback and create an opportunity to present learning.

Final Perspective

The mentor's purpose is not to provide every answer or remove every difficulty. It is to create the conditions in which an intern can participate meaningfully, learn from others, reflect on experience, recognize personal strengths, respond professionally to challenges, and gradually take greater ownership of the work. Effective mentorship helps an intern leave with stronger confidence, clearer evidence of transferable skills, meaningful relationships, and a deeper understanding of how individual work can contribute to an organization and community.

Source note. This guide is based on themes and recommendations from the HerdWork Humanities "Mentoring & Humanities in the Workplace" Workshop held August 26, 2025, and the accompanying workshop notes. It focuses on mentoring practice and does not replace official program, site, academic, or administrative requirements.