



HERDWORK HUMANITIES

August 2025 Mentorship Workshop: Summary of Findings

Themes, practices, and implications for community-based internship mentorship

Workshop held August 26, 2025

Context and scope.

This synthesis captures the central themes from the HerdWork Humanities Mentoring & Humanities in the Workplace Workshop, facilitated by Michael Tierney with faculty mentors, site mentors, program leaders, and an intern participant.

The workshop took place during HerdWork Humanities' first cohort. The findings therefore describe the mentoring philosophy, intended practices, and hoped-for outcomes expressed by participants. They should not be read as measured program results.

Executive Summary

The workshop presented mentorship as a relational and reflective learning partnership, not simply supervision or task assignment. Effective mentorship helps an intern connect academic learning, community knowledge, workplace experience, personal development, and future career possibilities.

- Approach the internship as an apprenticeship to a community or organization, with openness to learning from many people.
- Build reflection into the experience through journaling, note-taking, conversation, and intentional processing time.
- Establish trust through clear expectations, confidentiality, boundaries, and shared agreements.
- Pair high expectations with the tools, context, feedback, and support interns need to succeed.
- Help interns recognize, name, and communicate the transferable skills they demonstrate.
- Treat relationship building, networking, contextual thinking, empathy, confidence, and initiative as central learning outcomes.
- Create reciprocal learning relationships and opportunities for interns to present what they have learned.

Major Findings

1. Community-based experience is a distinct source of knowledge

The workshop challenged the idea that academic knowledge is always more valuable than knowledge gained through community relationships, workplace practice, conversation, and lived experience. Academic study remains important, but community experience gives it context and exposes interns to insights that may not emerge in a classroom.

Participants encouraged interns to enter a placement with an apprenticeship mindset: confident in what they bring, yet humble enough to learn from the organization, the community, and the culture surrounding the work.

2. Mentorship is broader than the assigned mentor

The designated mentor is an important guide, but interns may learn just as powerfully from coworkers, other interns, volunteers, clients, community members, board members, and professional partners. Mentors can strengthen the experience by introducing interns to the wider learning network around the organization.

3. Reflection turns activity into learning

Being busy or productive does not automatically help an intern understand what the experience means. The workshop emphasized journaling, maintaining a portable "memory bank," and making time to process observations, questions, accomplishments, feedback, emotions, and changes in perspective.

Reflection should occur throughout the internship rather than only at the end. Mentoring conversations can help interns connect daily tasks to organizational purpose, academic learning, professional identity, and evidence they can later use in resumes, interviews, portfolios, or presentations.

4. Trust and confidentiality require explicit attention

Mentors and interns benefit from a shared agreement about communication, confidentiality, boundaries, feedback, and how concerns will be raised. 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 as a privilege.

"Everyone owns their own story."

- Michael Tierney, presenter & faculty mentor

5. Challenge should be paired with support

Growth often requires interns to speak, present, meet new people, attempt unfamiliar work, or take greater initiative. The workshop supported purposeful challenge while cautioning against unnecessary embarrassment or unsupported performance. Effective mentors establish high expectations and provide the information, resources, feedback, and encouragement needed to reach them.

Manageable mistakes were described as an expected part of learning. The goal is not error-free performance, but stronger judgment, accountability, communication, resilience, and the ability to apply a lesson the next time.

6. Interns need help recognizing what they contribute

Students often see the expertise of people around them more readily than they see their own developing knowledge and abilities. Appreciative questions such as "How were you open to that learning?" and "What did you bring?" help an intern recognize that learning is participatory, not passive.

The workshop recommended helping interns identify skills demonstrated by others and then "turning the mirror" toward the intern. This practice can reveal evidence of communication, research, interpretation, creativity, collaboration, judgment, perspective-taking, persistence, leadership, and other transferable skills.

7. Career development requires translating experience into a story

Completing meaningful work is not enough if an intern cannot explain what the work demonstrates. Mentorship can help students move beyond listing a major, a placement, or a set of tasks. Interns should learn to describe the need they addressed, the actions they took, the skills and humanities perspectives they used, the contribution or result, and what they learned.

"I think that's a huge part of this mentorship: connecting what they're learning in the classroom with what they're going to be doing on the sites and then how they can share that story to future employers."

- Kelli Crabtree, HerdWork Internship Experience Director

8. Relationship building and networking are core learning outcomes

Participants noted that interns may feel nervous in professional settings or assume they have little to offer. Mentors can prepare interns for introductions, model professional curiosity, make connections, debrief interactions, and encourage thoughtful follow-up. Networking was framed as participation in a professional community, not simply collecting contacts or asking for opportunities.

9. Contextual thinking and empathy are workplace abilities

Community-based work requires interns to consider the circumstances, experiences, communication needs, and perspectives that may shape another person's behavior. Looking beyond the immediate interaction can help interns adapt communication, avoid premature assumptions, and respond with stronger judgment. Understanding context does not require excusing harmful behavior; it supports a more informed response.

10. Mentorship should connect work to purpose, place, and impact

Participants hoped interns would develop an appreciation for the purpose of nonprofit and cultural work, the vitality of West Virginia's community infrastructure, and their own ability to contribute. Meaningful mentorship helps interns see how a particular task connects to an organization's mission and how local work can resonate beyond a single project or placement.

11. Mentorship is reciprocal

The workshop did not describe mentorship as a one-way transfer of wisdom. Mentors bring experience and organizational knowledge, while interns bring academic learning, questions, creativity, technology skills, and fresh perspectives. A reciprocal relationship preserves professional roles while remaining open to co-learning and mutual contribution.

12. Presenting learning helps interns consolidate it

When interns explain what they have learned to staff, peers, mentors, or a public audience, they must select what matters, organize the experience, name their contribution, and communicate clearly. Presentations can reinforce learning and affirm that the intern's work and insights are valuable to others.

Implications for Mentoring Practice

At the beginning

- Discuss what the intern and mentor each hope the intern will gain.
- Clarify communication, feedback, confidentiality, boundaries, and decision-making expectations.
- Explain the organization's mission, culture, and broader community context.
- Encourage a journal or other reflection practice and a dependable system for capturing notes.

Throughout the experience

- Meet consistently and discuss learning as well as task progress.
- Introduce the intern to people across the organization and community.
- Ask appreciative and reflective questions that help the intern recognize personal contribution.
- Offer clear feedback, purposeful challenge, and opportunities for increasing responsibility.
- Help the intern translate projects and experiences into evidence of transferable skills.

Near the conclusion

- Review accomplishments, challenges, mistakes, changes in perspective, and evidence of growth.
- Identify how the intern contributed to the organization or community.



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- Help the intern prepare to describe the experience in professional materials and conversations.
 - Discuss relationships the intern should maintain and create an opportunity to present learning.

Conclusion

The workshop established a clear vision of mentorship within community-based internship learning: students grow when meaningful work, trusted relationships, thoughtful challenge, structured reflection, and opportunities to communicate learning are intentionally connected. The mentor's role is not to provide every answer or remove every difficulty. It is to create the conditions in which an intern can observe closely, contribute meaningfully, learn from mistakes, recognize strengths, build relationships, and take greater ownership of learning and professional development.

Source note. Prepared from the transcript of the HerdWork Humanities "Mentoring & Humanities in the Workplace" Workshop held August 26, 2025, and the accompanying "Key Take-Aways from Mentorship Workshop" notes.