



HERDWORK HUMANITIES

JANUARY 2026 MENTORSHIP WORKSHOP

Summary of Findings

Building Strong Mentorship for Humanities Interns

A synthesis of practical insights shared by interns, internship site mentors, faculty mentors, and HerdWork Humanities program leaders.

January 13, 2026

HerdWork Humanities | Marshall University College of Liberal Arts



Executive Summary

The January 2026 HerdWork Humanities Mentorship Workshop presented mentorship as a developmental partnership rather than simple task supervision. Participants consistently described effective mentorship as a combination of clear expectations, meaningful work, individualized support, honest feedback, increasing responsibility, and respect for the intern as a contributing colleague.

Interns need enough structure to understand an organization and its workplace culture, but they also benefit from opportunities to explore interests, make decisions, and take ownership of work. Participants emphasized that internships should produce tangible evidence of accomplishment while also making the learning process visible. Revision, uncertainty, false starts, observation, and reflection are not side effects of the experience; they are central to professional growth.

The workshop also identified the importance of coordination among the intern, site mentor, faculty mentor, and program. Earlier communication, explicit guidance about workplace customs, and regular conversations about skills and progress can strengthen the experience for both interns and partner organizations.

CENTRAL FINDING

Effective mentorship combines structure with agency, meaningful contribution with learning, accountability with support, and tangible outcomes with reflection on the process.

Workshop Context

The workshop was held on January 13, 2026, and centered on three questions:

- What practices help mentors build strong relationships with interns?
- How should mentors respond when challenges arise?
- How can mentors help interns recognize and apply humanities skills - including critical thinking, collaboration, cultural awareness, and self-awareness - in the workplace?

The featured panel included Dr. E. Del Chrol, a faculty mentor; Kate Long, a site mentor with Voices of West Virginia; and Dominic Reed, a returning intern with the Huntington City Mission. Faculty mentors, site mentors, and program leaders also contributed examples and recommendations throughout the discussion.

AT A GLANCE

Four ideas appeared throughout the workshop:

1. begin with context;
2. design meaningful and manageable work;
3. make feedback and reflection ongoing;
4. coordinate the intern's mentoring team early.



Major Findings

1. Effective mentorship balances structure with intern agency

Interns often enter an organization without enough knowledge of its mission, operations, culture, funding, or current priorities to make an informed choice about what they want to do. Site mentors therefore need to provide an initial framework before inviting the intern to identify interests and possible projects.

At the same time, interns differ in the amount of direction they need. Mentors can ask directly what kind of supervision helps the intern do their best work, then adjust the level of structure while still encouraging appropriate growth and increasing independence.

Strong mentorship is neither entirely prescriptive nor entirely open-ended. It provides enough structure for interns to understand the work and enough flexibility for them to develop judgment, confidence, and ownership.

2. Meaningful assignments should serve both the organization and the intern

The strongest assignments address a legitimate organizational need while connecting to the intern's interests, goals, or emerging professional identity. Mentors described learning about an intern's experiences and aspirations before assigning substantial work and offering choices within the organization's actual needs.

Participants also recommended designing projects that can be completed or meaningfully advanced within the placement. Even partial progress should be useful to the organization, and the intern should leave with a recognizable accomplishment that can be discussed in a resume, portfolio, graduate-school application, or interview.

Intern engagement is strengthened when the intern understands why the work matters, can see a connection to personal goals, and can identify a clear contribution.

3. Interns should be treated as developing colleagues

Participants repeatedly distinguished between treating an intern as a colleague and treating the intern merely as someone available to complete undesirable work. Interns need training and supervision, but they also benefit from inclusion, trust, appropriate access, and recognition of their contributions.

Being welcomed as a peer helped the intern panelist build confidence in a setting where his academic background differed from that of his coworkers. Mentors also emphasized that collegiality does not erase the power difference between mentor and intern; it means using that authority responsibly while giving the intern real opportunities to step forward.

A sense of belonging is a developmental resource. Interns who are included and taken seriously are more likely to take appropriate risks and see themselves as capable professionals.



4. Feedback is most effective when it is relational, specific, and forward-looking

Feedback works best when trust has already been established and expectations are clear. Mentors described using practice, humor, encouragement, brief consultations, and repeated revision to help interns develop confidence and transferable skills.

Participants recommended asking interns what level and form of feedback will be most useful. A mentor can identify what is working, explain what needs attention, and then frame the conversation around the next step rather than simply telling the intern to fix a problem.

Productive feedback is timely, respectful, concrete, and connected to action.

5. Mentorship should build persistence without normalizing harmful conditions

Interns may encounter criticism, unfamiliar expectations, tedious work, or tasks that feel difficult. Mentors can help them distinguish ordinary professional discomfort from harassment, abuse, discrimination, or unsafe treatment.

Faculty mentors can support this development by helping interns define the problem, communicate honestly about deadlines, consider possible solutions, and return to the site mentor with a constructive approach rather than avoiding the issue.

Mentorship should develop resilience, responsibility, and problem-solving while preserving clear boundaries around safety, dignity, and appropriate workplace treatment.

6. The learning process matters as much as the final product - and both should be visible

Participants valued tangible work products because interns need evidence of accomplishment for the Experience Portfolio, Showcase, resumes, interviews, and future opportunities. They also cautioned against focusing so heavily on the final product that the intern overlooks the process used to create it.

An intern who produces a successful design, report, event, or outreach effort has also practiced research, decision-making, revision, communication, persistence, and judgment. Even a lead that does not develop or an outreach attempt that receives no response can teach a repeatable professional process.

Strong documentation should show both what the intern produced and how the intern learned.

7. Mentors play a critical role in translating humanities learning into workplace language

Students often possess relevant abilities before they know how to name them. Faculty mentors described connecting workplace tasks to previous experiences with research, close reading, writing, peer editing, language study, interpretation, data collection, creative work, and group projects.

Mentors can help interns move from broad claims such as “I used communication” to evidence-based explanations of what they actually did, how they adapted, whose perspectives they considered, and what result followed.



Reflection should not assume that interns can identify transferable skills on their own. Mentors should regularly help interns name the skills they are using and explain those skills in language future employers will understand.

8. Workplace culture and unwritten rules must be taught explicitly

Professional expectations that seem obvious to experienced staff may be unfamiliar to an intern. Participants recommended explicitly discussing schedules, attendance, dress, titles, meeting behavior, communication channels, asking questions, personal devices, remote-work norms, confidentiality, and social media.

A memorable workshop comparison described the work world as a foreign country whose customs must be learned. Interns cannot reliably follow customs they have never been taught.

Orientation should explain not only what the intern will do, but also how people in the organization work together.

9. Site mentors and faculty mentors need early, intentional coordination

Site and faculty mentors see different parts of the internship. Participants recommended establishing the relationship early, sharing contact information and course expectations, and holding a substantive conversation once the intern has had enough time to understand the placement.

Meetings that include the intern can clarify whether everyone has the same understanding of progress, responsibilities, and concerns. A brief mentor-to-mentor conversation may also be useful when handled transparently and appropriately.

A coordinated mentoring team is better positioned to reinforce expectations, connect site work to academic learning, and identify concerns before they become larger problems.

10. Matching should consider supervision preferences as well as subject interests

A successful match depends on more than major, mission, or topic. Some students thrive with detailed instructions and predictable tasks; others prefer broader goals and more autonomy. Participants suggested making the level of structure at each site clearer and discussing the intern's supervision preferences during matching and onboarding.

Even organizations with highly specific needs can create room for interns to personalize an approach, audience, format, or project component. Participants also encouraged sites to remain open to humanities majors whose backgrounds may not be the organization's traditional choice.

Matching should consider organizational need, intern interest, desired level of structure, and the developmental value of a new perspective.

11. Internship mentorship can reshape identity and career direction

Participants described outcomes that extended beyond technical skills. Internship experiences can change how students understand themselves, their communities, and their future possibilities.



The intern panelist explained that direct service, coworker support, and exposure to community systems broadened his thinking about law, civil rights, and public administration. Another mentor described an intern whose work with West Virginia writers affected how the student understood her identity and potential as a writer.

Mentorship can influence not only what interns can do, but also who they believe they can become and how they understand their responsibility to a community.

12. Mentorship is reciprocal and can benefit the organization

Interns are not only recipients of professional knowledge. They can offer new questions, perspectives, energy, and insight into how an organization's mission and public identity appear to someone encountering the work with fresh eyes.

Participants encouraged mentors to invite interns into appropriate meetings, allow them to shadow complex work, and ask for their observations about messaging, audiences, and organizational practices.

Strong mentorship is reciprocal: interns gain access to professional knowledge and networks, while organizations gain reflection, creativity, and a wider range of perspectives.

Summary of Mentorship Opportunities

- Provide a consistent beginning-of-placement orientation covering the organization's mission, structure, workplace customs, communication practices, confidentiality expectations, and available projects.
- Ask interns about supervision and feedback preferences rather than assuming all students need the same degree of structure.
- Establish at least one meaningful work product, with milestones and opportunities to reflect on the process used to create it.
- Schedule an early conversation among the faculty mentor, site mentor, and intern, ideally within the first month, and provide site mentors with an overview of relevant courses and program expectations.
- Build explicit humanities-skill translation into check-ins by asking what the intern did, which skills were used, what evidence demonstrates those skills, and how the experience could be explained to an employer.
- Normalize revision, practice, and unsuccessful attempts as part of learning while maintaining clear standards for communication, deadlines, and accountability.
- Include shadowing and observation, particularly when important organizational work is too complex or sensitive for the intern to lead independently.
- Consider supervisory fit during placement, including whether the site offers highly structured work, broad exploration, or a combination of the two.
- Maintain clear and consistent expectations for recording internship hours and reviewing progress toward the agreed commitment.



Conclusion

The January 2026 workshop presented mentorship as more than supervision or task assignment. Effective mentors help interns understand an unfamiliar professional environment, contribute meaningful work, develop confidence through practice, respond constructively to difficulty, and recognize the value of their humanities education.

The strongest mentoring relationships described in the workshop combined clear expectations without excessive control; meaningful organizational work with individual exploration; tangible products with attention to process; accountability with kindness and appropriate boundaries; professional feedback with trust and encouragement; and site-based experience with deliberate reflection and skill translation.

Because the workshop was a panel discussion, these findings reflect the experiences and perspectives of participating interns and mentors rather than formal program-evaluation data. The consistency of the discussion nevertheless provides a strong practical foundation for mentor training, intern preparation, placement procedures, and continued improvement of the HerdWork Humanities mentorship model.

Source and use notes. This document synthesizes the January 13, 2026, HerdWork Humanities Mentorship Workshop transcript. It is not a verbatim record. Examples have been condensed and organized by themes for external and educational use.