



**HERDWORK
HUMANITIES**

HERDWORK HUMANITIES MENTORSHIP WORKSHOP

September 2026 Mentorship Workshop

Summary of Findings and Program Implications

A synthesis of the September 1, 2026 workshop transcript, participant chat, workshop presentation, and attendance documentation.

Prepared September 2026

College of Liberal Arts, Marshall University

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Executive Summary

CENTRAL FINDING

Student agency does not develop simply because a mentor gives a student more freedom. It develops when expectations are visible, questions and mistakes can be discussed, support changes as the student grows, and the student receives meaningful but appropriately bounded responsibility.

The September 2026 workshop moved the HerdWork Humanities mentoring conversation from defining quality mentorship to applying mentoring judgment. Participants considered how mentors decide whether a student needs an explanation, demonstration, supported practice, coaching questions, or greater independence—and how to check whether that choice is working.

Across the panel, audience discussion, and Teams chat, participants consistently described quality mentorship as a balance among clarity and autonomy, support and accountability, direct feedback and respect, individualized guidance and consistent expectations, mentor coordination and student ownership, and organizational needs and student learning goals.

The session reinforced a practical cycle for mentors: observe, ask before assuming, choose a mentoring move, agree on a next step, and check back and adjust. The goal is not complete student independence. It is greater discernment: knowing what to own, what to ask, how to communicate, and when additional support is appropriate.

Workshop Purpose and Context

The September 1 session was the third HerdWork Humanities mentorship workshop. It intentionally built on the August 2025 workshop, which explored why mentorship matters, and the January 2026 workshop, which focused on strong mentoring practices. The September workshop centered on the question: “How do we know which mentoring move a student needs—and when?”

The hybrid panel brought together three complementary perspectives: a faculty mentor and faculty program leader, a community-partner site mentor with AmeriCorps mentoring experience, and a returning student intern completing a third HerdWork semester. In-person and Teams participants contributed examples, questions, and responses throughout the session.

WORKSHOP FRAMEWORK

Explain → Demonstrate → Practice → Coach → Step Back

Select the move by considering task familiarity, confidence, stakes, clarity, and progress.

Major Findings

1. Mentorship is the developmental layer beyond supervision

Supervision establishes what must be completed, by when, to what standard, and with what training or access. Mentorship adds context and development: why the work matters, what the student is learning, what should be modeled or practiced, how feedback can support improvement, and when the student is ready for greater ownership.

The workshop defined student agency as becoming more able to ask informed questions, communicate early, use feedback, make appropriate decisions, and recognize when support is needed. A student can complete assigned work without fully understanding the organization or becoming more prepared for the next professional situation. Mentorship makes that learning visible.

2. Clarity is a precondition for student agency

Clarity was the most consistent condition associated with ownership. Participants named communication, constructive feedback, clear assignments, visible stakes, defined expectations, values alignment, and appropriate creative freedom.

Initiative should not be treated as a personality trait that a student either possesses or lacks. Before expecting independent action, mentors should define what the student may decide, what requires approval, what should happen after a task is finished, how long the student should work through a blockage, and what progress or completion looks like.

3. The right level of support changes over time and by situation

The student panelist described needing substantial clarity and specific guidance early in her first experience, then needing less direct direction and becoming more comfortable asking small questions before they became larger problems. Her concise lesson—"asking is better than wondering"—captured the value of early communication.

The site-mentor perspective reinforced that students may need different approaches based on personality, age, academic experience, prior work experience, communication preferences, and the task itself. Mentors should not simply provide less support over time; they should become more deliberate about which form of support is needed now.

4. Feedback should preserve accountability and dignity

A major theme involved students' responses to mistakes, missed deadlines, and perceived failure. Participants described how shame can lead students to withdraw or become silent. Mentors can reduce that risk by creating explicit space for students to discuss what is not going well and by separating a correctable error from a judgment about the student as a person.

Effective feedback remains honest and standards-based. It should name observable work, clarify the purpose or standard, identify a manageable next step, invite questions, and allow the student to revise or try again.

5. Students may carry expectations from earlier workplaces

A returning mentor described an intern whose extreme anxiety about being even slightly late made sense only after the mentor learned about earlier negative supervisory experiences. Prior

employment may have taught a student that questions are unwelcome, mistakes are punished, schedules are inflexible, or feedback is personal rather than developmental.

Mentors should explain the norms of this organization rather than assuming that prior work experience prepared the student accurately for the current environment.

6. Small systems and communication problems should be investigated first

One faculty mentor described a situation in which a site could not see a student's work because the completed file had been saved in a different digital location. What initially looked like missing work was a file-management and communication problem.

This is especially important in remote and hybrid placements. Roles, responsibilities, file locations, naming conventions, communication channels, backup contacts, priorities, and progress-reporting methods should be documented rather than assumed.

7. Mentors should separate observations from interpretations

The workshop distinguished an observation—"the assignment was submitted after the deadline"—from an interpretation—"the student is not interested in the work." Interpretations may eventually identify a real growth area, but they should not be treated as facts before the mentor asks what happened and what the student understood.

The audience case on "quiet competence" showed how a careful student who waits for direction could be labeled passive, while the student may believe they are avoiding overstepping. A stronger first move is to name what was observed, ask what the student understood, and clarify where independent action is welcome.

8. Mentor coordination is essential, but the student must remain visible

Site mentors, faculty mentors, and HerdWork leadership may each see a different part of the experience. A student may be doing excellent site work while falling behind in academic reflection, or may share uncertainty with a faculty mentor that is not visible at the site.

The mid-semester mentor connection should compare useful observations about strengths, current work, communication, workload, hours, academic connections, final materials, and support needs. Participants emphasized transparency and appropriate boundaries: share only what is needed for support, tell the student why mentors are connecting, and involve the student directly when appropriate.

9. Ownership becomes concrete when it is tied to goals and evidence

Participants recommended giving each intern a bounded goal, project, product, or decision area that can grow with the student. This allows the student to practice agency without being asked to invent every next step from an undefined role.

Mentors can also help students identify the professional meaning of their work. A routine task, revision, unsuccessful outreach attempt, or incomplete project may still demonstrate judgment, persistence, communication, adaptability, or systems thinking. Students benefit when mentors name that evidence while the experience is happening.

Program and Practice Implications

Establish an early mentoring agreement

During the first two weeks, explicitly discuss schedule, communication, feedback, decision authority, confidentiality, file systems, backup contacts, and what the intern should do when a task is complete. Revisit the agreement as the work changes.

Use a written work plan

Define intended outcomes, priorities, areas of ownership, and check-back points. A written plan supports both autonomy and accountability and provides a neutral reference when expectations become unclear.

Create a predictable check-in rhythm

Use weekly or otherwise consistent site-mentor check-ins and weekly or biweekly faculty-mentor contact. Ask about wins, challenges, learning, next steps, and needed support—not only task completion.

Ask questions that make difficulty discussable

Replace “Is everything okay?” with questions such as “What is not going as expected?” “Where are you stuck?” or “What are you worried might happen if you move forward?”

Structure the mid-semester mentor connection

Use a consistent agenda, explain what information will be shared and why, determine when the student should participate, assign next steps, and establish a check-back point.

Share Humanities at Work information with site mentors

A site mentor requested the course outline so that site-based mentoring could reinforce the course and avoid unnecessary duplication. A concise topic schedule or syllabus should be included in mentor resources.

Add a remote-placement onboarding check

Confirm file systems, progress visibility, primary and backup contacts, response times, project priorities, meeting norms, and how feedback will be delivered.

Conclusion

The September workshop operationalized mentoring judgment. Its most actionable lesson was that mentors should not ask students to “take initiative” without making the purpose, boundaries, quality standard, and decision authority visible.

Quality mentorship begins with observation and curiosity rather than labels. It offers the support the student needs now, gives the student an appropriate next action to own, and returns later to determine whether the approach worked. The wraparound model is strongest when site mentors, faculty mentors, HerdWork leadership, and the intern share information early, respect appropriate boundaries, and keep the student actively involved in decisions about their own growth.

FINAL TEST

Is the student more able to act, reflect, communicate, and seek support than they were at the beginning?

Source Note

This publication was prepared from the following HerdWork Humanities materials:

- September 2026 Mentorship Workshop audio transcript
- September 2026 Teams chat responses
- September 2026 workshop presentation and facilitator notes
- September 2026 Teams attendance report

Quotations are lightly edited only to remove verbal fillers, repeated words, or obvious transcription artifacts. The meaning has been preserved.

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