

## Providing Feedback to Externs – A Recommended Approach

In order for students to progress in their placements, meet their educational goals, and develop as attorneys, it is essential that they receive detailed and constructive feedback on their work—both written and oral. With Mentor Attorney guidance, students should be able to reflect on their performance, get a sense of what they did well and why, and develop strategies for improvement. Providing feedback is a skill that requires patience and practice. You may find it gratifying or uncomfortable. Some students will be receptive, others defensive. One supervision model suggests that feedback be **FAST**:

**Frequent**—weekly meetings work well to assure the frequency of feedback.

**Accurate**—address actions or behaviors that need correction, not the person.

**Specific**—give specific examples of things a student should replicate or improve upon.

**Timely**—if too much time passes, externs are likely to repeat their mistakes.

Using this model, we recommend a two-step approach to providing feedback to students.

### 1. Student Self-Evaluation:

- Ask students first to evaluate their own performance on a lawyering task. You might ask if there were aspects of the assignment that they struggled with or were unsure about. Students often realize when their work product misses the mark, or their performance is less than effective. Before you offer critique to students, allow them the opportunity to first give their assessment; otherwise, students may modify their impressions in response to yours.
- Ideally, while a student is offering self-critique, you would simply listen, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Then ask what changes the student would make the next time.
- Ask about the *process* the student used to approach the assignment, not just the final work product. Issues with the final product may stem from a lack of understanding about what steps to follow in carrying out a particular lawyering task.
- This type of exchange encourages a student to move through the learning process from doing a task through analyzing it and developing a plan for improved performance.

**2. Attorney Evaluation of Student Performance:** Deliver honest and constructive feedback that is detailed in terms of both substance and process by following these guidelines:

- *Plan your critique* in terms of content and format; don't wing it.
- *Lead with the positive.* Highlight something done well so the student knows to replicate it, and is motivated to improve in other areas.
- *Be selective.* Select one or two points on which to offer correction and fully develop those points, without rambling on.
- *Check for understanding* by posing a question or comment that allows the student to show s/he can incorporate your suggestions going forward. For example: "What alternative approaches might you try next time?"
- *Remain open* to the possibility of improvement. If an extern's work does not measure up, you may be inclined to assign less demanding work. Instead, aid the educational mission by giving the extern a chance to learn and improve.