

Getting Started with CNCF Mentorship

A Guide for Future Mentees

Nate W.

Head of Mentorship & Documentation, CNCF

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Who I Am & Why This Talk

I run the **CNCF Mentorship program** and administer **LFX Mentorship** for the CNCF.

Every term I see the same thing:

- Hundreds of people who want to participate in cloud native
- All asking the same question: **where do I start?**

Mentorship is one of the most direct ways in. This talk is the map I wish everyone had.

"I Want to Contribute... Where Do I Even Start?"

Cloud native is **huge**: hundreds of projects across the [landscape](#). That's exciting, and it's intimidating.

"At first I didn't really know about CNCF. I read about it, and to be honest, I didn't understand any of the projects at first."

— Mariam Fahmy, who is now a **Kyverno maintainer**

If that's you, you're in exactly the right place. Mariam started where you are.

What Mentorship Actually Means at the CNCF

It's not a course. It's not an internship at a company. It's a **structured, paid, hands-on project** working on a real CNCF project with an experienced mentor.

It's a starting point, not a finish line:

- Many mentees grow from **mentee** → **contributor** → **mentor**, and sometimes even **maintainer**
- The real win isn't one merged feature, it's joining the community and staying

It Works at Scale

Metric	Figure
Successful mentorships in 2025	187
Mentees still contributing a year later	More than half (2025)
CNCF projects mentees have contributed to	Dozens, across the landscape
Mentees who became CNCF maintainers since 2020	25

The Programs CNCF Supports

	LFX Mentorship	Google Summer of Code	Outreachy
Run by	Linux Foundation	Google	Software Freedom Conservancy
Cadence	3 terms a year	Once a year (summer)	Twice a year
Who	Students and professionals	Open source beginners	Underrepresented groups in tech
Paid?	Yes	Yes	Yes

CNCF participates in all of these. Today, we'll focus on **LFX Mentorship**.

LFX Mentorship: What It Is

LFX Mentorship is the Linux Foundation's mentorship platform.

- The CNCF uses it to run paid mentorships **across its projects**
- Mentees pair with a mentor to do real, scoped work over a **~3-month term**
- Everything happens **remotely**, in the open, on the project's real repos

What LFX Mentorship Offers

- **A dedicated mentor.** An experienced maintainer whose job for the term is to help *you* succeed.
- **A community.** Work alongside the project's maintainers and contributors, not on the outside.
- **Structure.** A defined project, a timeline, and milestones, not "go figure it out."
- **Real, merged contributions.** Code, docs, and tests in projects people actually run, yours to point to.
- **A stipend.** It supports your time so you can focus on learning; it's not a salary.

Who It's For

- Students **and** working professionals (we don't limit it to students) ^{[1][3]}
- **No prior contribution required:** everyone starts somewhere
- All you need:
 - The time to commit: it's a **full-time** program (be honest, it's real work)
 - A genuine willingness to learn
 - The ability to engage **respectfully, collaboratively, and professionally** (we all follow the [CNCF Code of Conduct](#))

More experienced candidates may have an edge on complex projects, but there are projects at **every** level.

Timelines: Three Terms a Year

LFX Mentorship runs on a predictable cadence:

Term	Roughly
Term 1	March – May
Term 2	June – August
Term 3	September – November

Applications open **a few weeks before** each term starts.

Next mentee window (Term 3, 2026): applications **Aug 3 – Aug 18** · info sessions around **Jul 21**.

Confirm dates at github.com/cncf/mentoring.

A Quick Word on GSoC

Google Summer of Code is another great option. A couple of things to know:

- **Annual and summer-timed**, for those newer to open source
- It has its **own eligibility rules**

Plan your path. Some programs limit you if you've already done another. Check the rules *before* you apply so you don't lock yourself out.

From Curious to Contributor

Find a project → Participate → Apply → Grow

Step 1: Find the Right Project

Don't start with the biggest, most famous project. Start with the **right** one for you.

- Browse the [CNCF Landscape](#) to see the whole ecosystem
- Pick by **interest** and the **skills** you have or want to build
- **Approachable beats prestigious**: a smaller, well-documented project teaches you more, faster
- **Get to know it**: read the docs and try the project before you contribute [8]

Mariam chose Kyverno over Kubernetes because it felt more approachable, and *"the documentation was very, very good."*

Step 2: Get Involved

- **Pick one good starting point:** a `good first issue`, a docs fix, or a task from [CLOContributor](#)
- **Start small:** see one contribution all the way through review before taking on more
- **Be responsive:** address feedback, iterate, follow the project's CONTRIBUTING guide
- Contributing **isn't only code:** solid bug reports, reviewing others' work, and joining discussions all count

Mariam went **deep, not wide:** one project, explored thoroughly, led by curiosity.

Show Up: Engagement Is More Than PRs

The best way to stand out isn't code volume, it's being a real community member.

- **Join the meetings:** community calls, SIG meetings, office hours
- **Review others' work:** reading PRs is one of the fastest ways to learn
- **Help others & share:** team up, blog, or give a lightning talk
- **Go to events:** KCDs, meetups

Prometheus & Thanos tell mentees exactly this: take part in the project's life. [6][7]

Step 3: Prepare a Strong Application

When the window opens, you'll write a **Cover Letter** (statement of purpose).

Make it count:

- **Show you've engaged:** link the issues, PRs, or docs you've already touched
- **Be specific:** why *this* project, why *you*, what you want to learn
- **Be honest about your experience and your time:** overcommitting or underselling sets you (and your mentor) up for a rough term
- Apply to projects you can realistically grow into

Remember: mentors pick the **best fit**, weighing skills *and* the ability to collaborate.

Step 4: Apply on the LFX Platform

The mechanics are simple. Here's the flow: [2]

1. Create a mentee profile at mentorship.lfx.linuxfoundation.org
2. Open **Mentorships** → filter to "**Accepting Applications**"
3. Apply to the projects you've prepared for, **up to 3 per term**
4. Submit your Cover Letter, Resume, and any prerequisites
5. Your application stays **Pending** through the application phase

What Tips the Decision

Mentors read every completed application, shortlist a few, and interview only their **top** candidates. [6]

It comes down to fit, not PR count:

- **Genuine motivation:** *"why this project, not the other 100?"* is a real question
- **A specific, honest application:** show you understand what the project needs
- **Clear communication:** it matters as much as raw skill
- **Realistic commitment:** it's a **full-time** program, so be upfront about the time you can give

Mariam's Path: The Flywheel in One Story

When	What happened
2022	GSoC on PostgreSQL, first taste of open source
Then	Curiosity: Docker → Kubernetes → discovers Kyverno
Term 1, 2023	Accepted as LFX mentee on Kyverno; mentor Jim Bugwadia
During term	Ships major features; invited to co-mentor the next term
~10 months later	PR adding her as a Kyverno maintainer is merged
Today	Mentors LFX terms herself, bringing in the next generation

Mentee → contributor → mentor → maintainer. Now she brings in the next generation, that's the flywheel.

If You're Not Selected (Yet)

These programs are **competitive**: hundreds apply for a handful of spots. Not getting picked is **not** a verdict on your worth.

- **Keep contributing** anyway: it's the single best thing you can do
- **Apply again** next term
- **Don't expect individual feedback**: at this volume, mentors can't provide it. It's not personal.
- **Don't compare yourself** to who got selected; mentors weigh factors you may not be able to see

Those who keep showing up are the ones who eventually get in.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- **✗ Don't pester mentors about selection:** DMing, pinging, or emailing to ask if you've been picked won't help, in public or private. If you're shortlisted, they'll reach out.
- **✗ Don't disparage other applicants:** their wins aren't your loss, you're on the same side.
- **✗ Don't ghost:** if life happens, communicate; silence burns trust
- **✗ Don't wait for permission:** start (thoughtfully) contributing before any window opens
- **✗ Don't mass-produce AI PRs or applications:** reviewers can tell, and volume backfires [6]

Where to Get Help

You are not doing this alone. Use these channels:

- **CNCF Slack** → join at slack.cncf.io, then the **#cncf-mentoring** channel
- **GitHub Discussions** → github.com/cncf/mentoring/discussions
- **Email** → `mentoring@cncf.io` (for things that can't be asked publicly)

Ask in public when you can. Public answers help the next person too, and that's the whole spirit of open source.

Your Next Step (Start This Week)

You don't have to wait for an application window to begin.

1. **Pick one project.** Browse the [CNCF Landscape](#) or [CLOContributor](#) for something approachable.
2. **Make one contribution.** Find a `good first issue` or a docs fix. Open one PR. That's the whole job.
3. **Watch for the window.** Star github.com/cncf/mentoring and join **#cncf-mentoring** on Slack for the next term.
4. **Engage like a community member.** Thank people who help you, review others' work, own your mistakes. This is what mentors select for.

Questions?

"You're not supposed to know everything, just take the first step, and keep learning. It's okay to be lost in the beginning."

— [Mariam Fahmy](#), Kyverno maintainer

Resources

Start here

- **CNCF Mentoring** (hub for everything): github.com/cncf/mentoring
- **LFX Mentorship platform**: mentorship.lfx.linuxfoundation.org
- **Getting started guide**: contribute.cncf.io/contributors/getting-started

Find a project & read Mariam's story

- **CNCF Landscape**: landscape.cncf.io · **CLOContributor**: clotributor.dev
- **The Mentorship Flywheel** (CNCF blog): cncf.io/blog/2025/12/18

References

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- [2]** "How to Apply to the Mentorship Program." LFX Mentorship Documentation, The Linux Foundation.
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- [3]** "Become a Mentee." CNCF Mentoring.
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- [4]** "LFX Mentorship." CNCF Mentoring.
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- [5]** Waddington, N. "The Mentorship Flywheel: How CNCF Is Growing the Next Generation of Cloud Native Leaders." CNCF Blog, December 18, 2025.
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- [6]** Sens, A. & Płotka, B. "What We Learned After Mentoring 30+ Mentees." KubeCon EU 2026.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUvwnbhn2ZQ>
- [7]** "Thanos & Prometheus Mentorship." Thanos Documentation.
<https://thanos.io/tip/contributing/mentorship.md/>
- [8]** Kleinhans, R. "Start Contributing to Open Source." CNCF Contributor Site.
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Colophon

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