Conversation Arc 1: Identity and Career Alignment

Founder Alignment Conversation User Guide

Objective

Understand how central a role entrepreneurship plays into this person's professional identity. Arc 1 assesses whether entrepreneurship aligns with the individual's career trajectory and long-term goals as an academic.

Core prompts:

"How do you describe yourself first: as a researcher, a builder, or something else?"

"How important is tenure to you, personally and professionally?"

"Do you see yourself in academia in 5 years? 10 years?"

"How would a startup fit within your vision for your academic career?"

Deepening questions:

"What would you regret more in five years: trying and failing, or never trying?"

"How does your department (or advisor) view entrepreneurial activity?"

"What are the most challenging and rewarding parts of your job?"

What to look for:

Reminder: Red, yellow, green is not a grade (i.e., red does not mean failure) and the facilitator should focus on patterns and overall sentiment.

Green Signals (Entrepreneurship may be well-aligned with career identity)

- Uses builder/operator language alongside researcher identity

- Sees entrepreneurship as expanding rather than threatening academic identity
- Discusses tenure as one goal among several, not the sole definition of success
- References prior experiences where they stepped outside traditional academic roles
- Articulates curiosity about what entrepreneurship would teach them
- Identifies multiple versions of academic success, including hybrid paths

Yellow Signals (Suggests conditional alignment or need for boundary-setting)

- Strongly identifies as researcher but expresses genuine curiosity about building
- Tenure matters significantly but they can articulate what trade-offs they'd accept
- Sees entrepreneurship as time-limited experiment rather than identity shift
- Department culture is skeptical but not hostile
- Can name what they'd learn from trying, even if it didn't succeed
- Frames entrepreneurship as "worth exploring"

Red Signals (Suggests spinout may create identity conflict)

- Describes entrepreneurship in terms of external expectations ("should")
- Cannot articulate success without including traditional academic markers
- Tenure or promotion is described as non-negotiable and timeline is imminent
- Department views entrepreneurial activity as detrimental to academic career
- Discusses entrepreneurship in outcomes (money, recognition, exit) not process

Decision Aid Questions

After Arc 1, ask yourself:

1. Does this person see entrepreneurship as aligned with or divergent from their professional identity?

- If divergent: Licensing or pause may preserve academic trajectory
- If aligned: Spinout remains viable if other arcs support it

2. Is tenure pressure creating a forcing function?

- If yes and timeline is tight: Pause until after tenure decision
- If yes but timeline is flexible: Consider advisor/technical role in spinout

3. What is their relationship to uncertainty about career path?

- Comfortable with multiple possible futures: Can navigate early-stage pivots
- Needs certainty about outcome: May struggle with venture ambiguity