Introduction

Founder Alignment Conversation User Guide

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The Spark Scaffolding program is funded by Launch Tennessee's TTAC Partnership Program and seeks to develop and deploy flexible tools to support the transition of academic research to commercial applications within the Tennessee Technology Advancement Consortium (TTAC). The Founder Alignment Conversation Guide serves as the foundational entry for engaging with academics. The Founder Alignment Conversation provides a structured, founder-first framework for engaging academic researchers in early conversations about whether and how their work should transition beyond the university. Conversations center on alignment between the individual, their career context, available capacity, collaborators, and the demands implied by different commercialization pathways. This approach enables TTAC partners to identify responsible next steps early, differentiate between spinout, licensing, and pause decisions, and avoid premature or misaligned startup formation. By creating a shared, repeatable method for these conversations across TTAC institutions, the guide helps build consistency in how opportunities are assessed while preserving institutional flexibility and academic autonomy.

This user guide supports facilitators with these conversations to help academics make informed, intentional decisions about technology transition pathways. It provides conversation structure, signal recognition patterns, and decision frameworks to facilitate honest reflection and clear decision-making. A Field Screening Tool (Appendix A) is included as a practical reference tool as facilitators become more comfortable with the content of the Founder Alignment Conversations and the signals to look for.

A successful conversation produces clarity about which pathway is most aligned with the academic's goals, constraints, and the technology's requirements. Successful conversations result in honest, well-reasoned decisions to guide the academic's next steps. Licensing and pausing, in place of a spin-off, are treated as equally valid outcomes given current alignment. Of note, this conversation serves as the first step of the Spark Scaffolding program and there is room at Stage 2, focused on the process of launching a spin-off, to address potential structural, hence correctable, challenges. The goal in Stage 1 is to make sure there is alignment between the academic and the actual demands of a start-up.

The Facilitators' Role

Facilitators are decision architects, not judges, investors, or therapists. They are expected to:

- Create space for honest reflection without pressure to perform or impress
- Surface considerations the academic may not have previously confronted
- Present realistic pathway options without ranking them as better or worse
- Help the academic arrive at a decision they can explain and defend

They are not responsible for:

- Convincing anyone that entrepreneurship is or isn't right for them
- Ensuring a certain percentage of conversations result in spinouts
- Protecting the academic from choosing a path that feels risky
- Guaranteeing that the pathway chosen will succeed

Using the Conversation Guide

The facilitators are not expected to:

- Ask every question listed in the conversation arcs
- Surface every signal mentioned in the "What to Look For" sections
- Achieve profound insights about the academic's psychology
- Fill out a scorecard or tally red/yellow/green signals
- Follow the framework in strict sequence if the conversation flows in a different direction

The facilitators are expected to:

- Cover each of the five arcs with sufficient depth to understand the academic's perspective
- Listen for patterns that indicate alignment or misalignment with different pathways
- Use the decision guide to translate what you heard into a clear pathway recommendation
- Reflect back what you observed so the academic can confirm, correct, or refine your understanding

The Conversation Guide is designed to:

- Give facilitators language and questions when you need them
- Help facilitators recognize patterns you might otherwise miss
- Provide structure when conversations feel stuck or circular
- Reduce reliance on gut feel alone by offering structured comparison
- Offer a framework for facilitators to build their own approach

Common Facilitator Concerns

"What if I'm not sure which pathway fits?"

Use the test questions in the Mixed Signals section. If you're genuinely stuck, it's okay to say: "I'm seeing elements of both spinout and licensing in our conversation. Let me share what I'm noticing and get your reaction." When in doubt, default to the more conservative, reversible pathway (licensing over spinout, pause over spinout).

"What if the academic disagrees with my assessment?"

Disagreement is valuable information and consider your read of the conversation a hypothesis, not a verdict. If there's disagreement, explore it: "Help me understand what I'm missing" or "What would you say is the strongest case for [the pathway they prefer]?" The pathway decision should be shared, not imposed.

"What if some arcs are green and others are red?"

Most conversations are not uniform across all arcs so this is normal and expected. The decision framework helps you determine which signals are foundational (identity, motivation) versus structural (capacity, role). Foundational misalignment usually points to a different pathway; structural gaps can often be resolved in Stage 2.

Key Principles for Founder Alignment Conversations

All pathways are valid. Licensing is not a consolation prize. Pause is not rejection. Spinout is not the only form of success.

Signals are informative, not deterministic. A "red" signal means "pay attention to this" not "disqualify this person." Context matters.

The academic is the decision-maker. You facilitate; they decide. If they choose a path you wouldn't recommend, your job is to ensure they understand the implications, not to veto their choice.

Working decisions can change. Stage 1 outcomes are not permanent. Licensing can be revisited if circumstances change. Pause can lead to spinout when timing improves. Spinout exploration can redirect to licensing during Stage 2.

Trust the process, adapt the details. Use the framework as structure, not a script. If a conversation needs to linger in one arc or skip ahead, follow the conversation. The framework is there when you need it, not to constrain you.

Before the First Conversation

- Read through all five conversation arcs to understand the progression
- Skim the "What to Look For" sections to understand the signal categories
- Review pattern-based decision guide to recognize patterns in responses
- Remember: the goal is clarity and alignment, not advocacy for any particular outcome

After Each Conversation

- Take 10 minutes to jot down the strongest signals observed in each arc
- Check whether any of the clear pathway patterns matched what you heard
- If mixed signals, use the decision guide table and test questions
- Draft the one-sentence rationale before writing the full summary

The facilitator’s judgment matters.

This framework exists to support it, not replace it.