Pathway Decision

Founder Alignment Conversation User Guide

Purpose

Translate insights from the conversation into a clear, intentional pathway decision. The goal is to determine whether entrepreneurship or other transition pathways align with the individual, their context, and the demands implied by the technology. These are working decisions, grounded in current alignment and constraints, not final commitments. This synthesis is designed to:

- Preserve the openness and trust of the conversation
- Reduce reliance on facilitator intuition alone
- Make pathway decisions explainable, repeatable, and revisitable

Facilitator Role

Facilitators act as decision architects, not judges or investors. Facilitators should avoid selling entrepreneurship, ranking pathways, diagnosing motivations, or resolving tensions through persuasion. Their role is to:

- Reflect patterns observed across the conversation arcs
- Frame realistic pathway options
- Guide structured reflection toward a decision
- Ensure the outcome is clearly named and understood

Process

Summary of Findings (Working Hypothesis)

Pathway decision begins with a lightweight, provisional summary of observed patterns that is shared with academics to get their agreement and see what they might adjust. This is not a comprehensive recap, nor a polished interpretation. It is a working hypothesis offered for alignment and correction. This ensures shared understanding before pathways are discussed. Facilitators are not expected to capture everything discussed or to offer polished interpretation. Facilitators should structure a summary using these anchors:

- **Identity & Career Orientation:** How the individual relates entrepreneurship to their academic identity and career goals.
- **Motivation & Durability:** What appears to sustain their interest, particularly under uncertainty or delayed payoff.
- **Capacity & Ownership Reality**: How time, risk tolerance, and responsibility are understood in practice.
- **Venture Demands in Context**: What the technology implies in terms of venture form, scale, and sustained involvement.

Pattern-Based Decision Guide

After completing the summary, this framework helps determine a reasonable Stage 1 outcome based on the conversations. Stage 1 answers a very specific question: Is there sufficient alignment to justify the structured exploration of venture planning in Stage 2? A ‘yes’ here does not commit to starting a company, as many questions about role, team structure, and capacity remain and will be the focus of the next stage. The framework helps turn previous red/yellow/green assessments into grounded decisions. While these signals are informative, they are **not additive** and should not be tallied. The goal is to determine which pathway makes sense not generate a score. The “Mixed Signals” section below provides some guidance in cases where a clear pattern does not emerge.

PATTERN 1: Licensing Pathway

There three potential indicators that licensing is the current pathway and each is presented below:

The academic wants impact, not operations: licensing provides them what they want (impact) without work they don't want (operations). Look for:

- Cares deeply about the technology being used (Arc 3 green on impact)
- Little to no interest in operational work (hiring, fundraising, customer development) of a new venture (Arc 3 red on building)

- Prefers advisory role over leadership role (Arc 4)
- Time-to-impact matters more than control or ownership (Arc 2)

Identity conflict with entrepreneurship: licensing preserves academic trajectory while enabling technology transition. Look for:

- Entrepreneurship feels threatening to academic career (Arc 1 red)
- Tenure is imminent and non-negotiable (Arc 1)
- Department is hostile to entrepreneurial activity (Arc 1)
- Frames entrepreneurship as "should do" not "want to explore" (Arc 1/Arc 3)

Technology doesn't need a startup: licensing offers the fastest path to impact given technology characteristics. Look for:

- Established players already exist who could deploy faster (Arc 5)
- Regulatory barriers favor incumbents (Arc 5)
- Technology is component/tool, not full solution (Arc 5)
- Speed to market is critical and startup would be slower (Arc 5)

PATTERN 2: Pause with Intent

There four potential indicators that pausing is the current pathway and each is presented below:

Timing is wrong, but alignment might exist later: pausing allows academic to revisit when circumstances change. To this end, it is critical define clear revisit conditions to maintain motivation and establish a working timeline. Look for:

- Interest in entrepreneurship but immovable current constraints (Arc 1/Arc 4)
- Tenure decision in next 12-18 months (Arc 1)
- Family situation temporary but consuming (Arc 4)
- Grant cycle/teaching load will ease in defined timeframe (Arc 4)

Technology not ready for commercialization: pausing allows time for additional research and development make other pathway makes sense. If possible, establish possible milestones to make technology more transitionable. Look for:

- Needs significant additional development (Arc 5)
- Market validation unclear (Arc 5)

- Key technical risks unresolved (Arc 5)

Team alignment needed: pausing opens the opportunity to conduct collaborator alignment conversations and work to revise current assessment. Look for:

- Essential co-inventors haven't been consulted (Arc 5)
- Co-inventors want different things (one spinout and the other licensing) (Arc 5)
- Role conflicts unresolved (who would lead? who gets equity?) (Arc 5)

External pressure, not opportunity: External pressure often will not sustain through startup challenges, so pausing provides time to develop genuine motivation or recognize that different path is better. Look for:

- Urgency driven by financial need (Arc 2)
- Motivated by proving critics wrong (Arc 3)
- Reputational desperation (Arc 2)
- Cannot identify intrinsic motivation for building (Arc 3)

PATTERN 3: Spinout Exploration (Proceed to Stage 2)

At this point, the conversation suggests that foundational alignment exists to justify structured exploration. While a range of structural details (IP, equity, funding, team, capacity, etc.) will evolve in Stage 2, these are things to look for:

- Entrepreneurship feels aligned or worth exploring (Arc 1 yellow/green)
- Motivated by building, impact, or learning (Arc 3 yellow/green)
- Has 10+ hours/week for Stage 2 venture planning (Arc 4)
- Technology plausibly benefits from startup structure (Arc 5)
- None of the clear pathway patterns above match

Mixed Signals: When Multiple Patterns Fit

Mixed signal pattern are common as some arcs will show strong alignment and others may lean towards misalignment or signals within an arc may even be contradictory. Regardless of how many green signals exist, certain red flags should prompt serious consideration of non-spinout pathways. While these were discussed above in the context of licensing and pausing, it bears repeating that any one of these may warrant a pause or conditional outcome regardless of other positive signals:

• Entrepreneurship threatens core academic identity

• Capacity assumptions are unrealistic and unacknowledged

• Financial or reputational desperation is driving urgency

• Founding collaborators have divergent, unresolved goals

Beyond these red flags, the following table presents a set of mixed signals and provides some potential pathways.

Observed Signals	Recommended Pathway
Strong motivation and identity fit, but very limited capacity	Proceed to Stage 2 to design advisory role
Person ready, but technology obviously better licensed	Licensing
Everything aligned except tenure pressure right now	Pause until after tenure decision
Everything aligned but co-inventor status unknown	Proceed to Stage 2 after co-inventor alignment session
Excited about impact, ambivalent about operations	Licensing (impact-focus is the real driver)

In addition to this guidance, continuing the conversation can always help provide additional clarity. These questions help address different aspects of misalignment:

- "If you had to choose between impact and control, which matters more?" (tests licensing vs spinout)
- "What would need to change for spinout to feel aligned?" (tests whether gap is addressable)
- "How would you feel if the technology succeeded but you weren't operationally involved?" (tests motivation)

Finally, if a facilitator is genuinely stuck, it is usually advantageous to default to the more conservative, reversible option. For example, if one is wavering between spinout and licensing, the latter allows the opportunity to revisit if licensee shows traction. Likewise, in a decision between spinout and pause, pausing allows the process to restart later when conditions improve.

Step 3: Closing and Documentation

Every conversation concludes with one of three pathways:

Pathway 1: Spinout Company (Proceed to Stage 2)

- This path typically involves forming and leading / co-leading a company for multiple years, raising external capital with dilution, building or managing a team beyond the lab, and sustained involvement from the founder, particularly in early stages.

Pathway 2: Licensing or Partnership

- This path typically involves identifying and negotiating with external partners, less day-to-day operational responsibility, impact through third-party execution, and an advisor or technical contributor role for the academic. Engage with university TTO to initiate local licensing practices.

Pathway 3: Pause with Intent

- This path involves intentionally delaying commercialization to de-risk key questions, reshape future research or grants toward transition readiness, and revisit the decision once defined conditions are met.

Facilitators should explicitly name the working pathway decision, normalize it as responsible, clarify what the decision does and does not trigger, and outline how the outcome will be documented. Documentation should reflect the conversation rather than justify the decision, and academics should be invited to review and edit the summary before it is finalized.

Documentation occurs after the conversation to preserve flow and trust.

Stage 1 Transition Pathway Summary Template (Optional)

Purpose
Capture the outcome of a Founder Alignment Conversation and summarize an intentional decision about next steps for transition, based on founder alignment, venture demands, and pathway fit.

Section 1: Pathway Considered and One-Sentence Rationale (Required)

Indicate suggested pathway and record one rationale sentence in plain language:

☐ Spinout Company

☐ Licensing / Partnership

☐ Pause with Intent

This pathway was selected because [primary alignment], **despite** [key tradeoff], **with** [primary risk] being monitored.

Example: “A licensing pathway was selected because the founder’s academic identity and limited capacity align with advisory engagement, despite interest in entrepreneurship, with market validation being monitored for future reconsideration.”

Key considerations that informed this decision: (2-3 most important signals from the conversation]

Conditions for revisiting (if pausing or conditional outcome)

Section 2: Acknowledgement

This summary reflects a working decision based on current information and alignment.

Academic Innovator: _____ Date: _____

Facilitator: _____ Date: _____