Transition Pathway Conversation Guide

Founder Alignment Conversation User Guide

Introduction

This meeting in intended to facilitate an informed, intentional decision about whether and how an academic innovation should transition beyond the university. Founder first in design, the Transition Pathway Conversation ideally occurrs before significant commitments of time and resources are made and seeks alignment between individual goals, technology, and the practical realities of startup formation.

Prior to this conversation, there is no need for a business plan, pitch deck, or investor materials, only an expectation that the academic innovator come prepared to discuss the following topics at a high level:

- **Vision:** what success would look like to you
- **Motivations:** why you're considering commercialization now
- **Technology:** what it is, what problem it may address, and its current maturity
- **Constraints:** time availability, desired role, and risk tolerance
- **Experience:** any prior involvement in startups, licensing, or industry partnerships

Overview

This conversation is designed to assess founder alignment, not technology quality, and determine whether entrepreneurship is currently aligned with their career goals, risk tolerance, and capacity to engage. This conversation should support decision-making about *whether* and *how* one's academic research might transition. All outcomes ranging from spin-off, licensing, waiting, or not pursuing commercialization are valid and productive outcomes.

The conversation is structured around five conversational arcs, that move from the individual to the opportunity, to provide a comprehensive view of founder alignment.

- **Identity and Career Alignment** - how entrepreneurship fits into the individual's academic and professional trajectory.

- **Risk, Control, and Sacrifice** - comfort with uncertainty, loss of control, collaboration, and long-term commitment.
- **Motivation for Entrepreneurship** - whether the desire is to build a company or achieve impact through other means.
- **Capacity and Commitment** - realistic assessment of time, attention, and desire for operational leadership.
- **Technology in Context** - given this person's alignment, what might this technology transition require and does that fit in with the above.

These arcs are intended to be explored in sequence so early insights can help shape how later topics may be approached. With that said, this is not a script to be followed verbatim, and facilitators should use the arcs as a framework and allow the conversation to flow naturally while ensuring that each arc is addressed with sufficient depth.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed for use by commercialization counselors, technology transfer professionals, and entrepreneurship leaders. It is not a formal survey, checklist, or scorecard. Facilitators should not attempt to ask every question or capture verbatim responses. Instead, the goal is to surface enough information and considerations so the academics can make better decisions for themselves. In addition to conversation prompts, there is "What to Look For" guidance for each conversation arc that provides a red-yellow-green framework to assess signals and some summative questions that can help shape facilitator interpretations. These decision aids help facilitators interpret signals from each conversation arc and identify patterns that inform which pathway is most sustainable for this person at this time.

A typical conversation lasts about an hour and may occur over one or two meetings. Facilitators should:

- prioritize listening over instruction,
- encourage honest reflection rather than definitive answers,
- normalize uncertainty and non-startup outcomes,
- and avoid generating premature momentum or commitments.

The interview should conclude with a clear, shared understanding of:

- whether entrepreneurship is an appropriate path,
- which commercialization pathway best fits the individual and the technology,
- and what the most responsible next step should be.

A successful conversation should help provide clarity, alignment, and intentionality, not a business plan or a promise of support.

Field Screening Tool

This document is intentionally detailed and provides a comprehensive description of five conversation arcs and the signals to be looking out for during the conversation. While intended to define a process this document may be too detailed in practice after one becomes familiar with the content and methods. As such Appendix A: Facilitator Field Screening Tool is provided to provide a lightweight mechanism to support the conversations over time.

About the Stage Process

This Transition Pathway Conversation serves as Stage 1 in a multi-stage technology transition process. Stage 1 determines whether entrepreneurship is worth exploring further and identifies the most aligned pathway.

Academics who proceed to Stage 2 (Spinout Exploration) will engage in structured venture planning to resolve role design, team composition, and operational details. Stage 2 typically involves additional collaborative work to determine whether company formation is viable and aligned. Additional details about Stage 2 will be provided to academics who select that pathway.