



PLAY 0.1

THE PROGRAM PURPOSE STATEMENT

Discovering What Your Program Stands For — and Building It to Last

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Part of the Graduate Program Intake Playbook — Part 0: Program Strategy & Foundation

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Before You Begin

Play 0.1 is the first Play in the Graduate Program Intake Playbook — and in some ways the most important. Everything that follows depends on what you build here. The critical path in Play 0.4 starts with purpose statement clarity. Play A.9 bases its architectural role on it. And the enrollment agreement in Play 2.4 cannot be meaningful without it.

You do not need to have read any other Play before this one. Play 0.1 stands alone. But if you have already worked through other Plays and are coming back to this one, you find that much of what those Plays assumed is exactly what this Play helps you build.

What this Play produces: A program-specific purpose statement — written in your program's voice, grounded in your program's specific value, and designed to function as the operational foundation for every system in the Intake Playbook. The guided worksheet in Section 3 takes 60 to 90 minutes to complete and can be done individually or with your program team.

A Note on This Play's Evolution

Play 0.1 was first published as a guided worksheet — a set of structured prompts designed to help program leaders discover and write their own purpose statement. That worksheet worked. It gave programs a practical starting point and a structured drafting process, and several programs used it to write purpose statements that are now doing real work inside their Playbooks.

But as I designed subsequent Plays, particularly Play A.9, Roles in a Learner-Centered Graduate Program, and Play 0.4, The Intake Critical Path, something became clear. The purpose statement kept appearing as the foundational assumption of everything that followed. The role architecture assumed it, and the critical path started from it, and the alignment map depended on it. And each time a program's purpose statement was weak, vague, or borrowed from the institution's broader mission, it showed up as a root cause of something breaking down downstream.

A worksheet alone was not sufficient. I thought program leaders needed to understand not just how to write a purpose statement, but why it differs from a mission statement, what a strong one actually does, and how to test whether what they wrote is good enough to carry the weight the rest of the Playbook places on it.

This revised Play builds that context around the original worksheet. The worksheet itself — now integrated as the Purpose Statement Builder in Section 3 — is unchanged in its essential structure. What is new is everything around it: the argument for why this work matters, the criteria for what makes a purpose statement strong, and the testing process for knowing when it is ready to work.

This is the perpetual draft principle in action. The first version was a good start. This version is what the Playbook taught me and other Playbook users it needed to become.

Key Terms

Term	Definition
Purpose Statement	A declaration of what a program believes about the people it serves, the standards it holds itself to, and the measure by which it chooses to be judged. It is specific, directional, and impossible to copy-paste from another institution without it ringing hollow.
Mission Statement	A broad, institutional declaration of what an organization does. Most university mission statements describe the institution's general educational purpose and apply equally to dozens of programs within the same university. A purpose statement and a mission statement are not the same thing — and confusing them is the most common error programs make when attempting this work.
Value Proposition	The specific, distinctive benefit a program delivers to the specific learners it serves, in the specific professional context it operates in. A purpose statement without a clear value proposition is aspiration without direction.

Section 1: Why This Play Exists

The Problem With Mission Statements

If you ask most graduate program leaders to describe their program's mission, one of two things happens. Either they recite the university's institutional mission statement with minor modifications — replacing “university” with “program” and adding a discipline-specific phrase or two. Or they produce something so broadly worded that it could apply to any graduate program anywhere.

Neither of these is useful.

A mission statement that could belong to any program belongs to no program. It doesn't explain to a prospective learner why your program is the ideal match for their unique goals. It does not tell your faculty what they are being asked to build. It does not tell your staff what success looks like. And it does not tell you — the program leader — what decisions are consistent with your program's commitments and which ones are not.

The Graduate Program Intake Playbook uses the term purpose statement deliberately, and for a specific reason: to prevent the copy-paste reflex that mission statement language almost always triggers.

A purpose statement is different in kind from a mission statement. It does not describe what the program does. It declares what the program believes — about the people it serves, about the standards it holds itself to, and about the measure by which it is judged. It is personal where a mission statement is institutional. It is specific where a mission statement is general. And it is

directional — it points everyone in the program toward the same outcome with enough precision that they can use it to make real decisions.

Why the Purpose Statement Is the Foundation

The Graduate Program Intake Playbook is built around one operating principle: every decision in the intake process should be traceable back to a clear picture of the outcome the program is trying to produce. This principle only works when there's a clear definition of outcomes.

When a program has no true purpose statement, it is driven by habit and assumption, not commitment. It recruits the learners it has always recruited, using the messages it has always used, because no one has ever been precise enough about who the program serves and why. It evaluates admissions decisions without a clear picture of what a well-matched candidate looks like. It designs curriculum without a grounded answer to the question: prepared for what, exactly?

Every misalignment in the Intake Critical Path (Play 0.4) traces back, eventually, to a program that was not clear enough about its purpose. The Foundation-to-Awareness misalignment — recruiting for a version of the program that no longer exists — is a purpose statement problem. The Consideration-to-Decision misalignment — an admissions consultation that becomes a sales pitch rather than a planning session — is a purpose statement problem. A program that cannot articulate specifically what it is for cannot have a genuine planning conversation with a prospective learner about whether this program is the right fit for them.

The purpose statement is not a formality to complete before the real work begins. It is the real work — because without it, nothing else in the Playbook is fully operational.

Why This Worksheet Works

The Purpose Statement Builder in Section 3 is effective for six reasons, each of which shapes how it is designed.

- It starts with reflection rather than writing, so leaders arrive at the drafting stage with something real to say.
- The learner, rather than the institution, is the starting point that alters the fundamental basis for all subsequent development.
- It surfaces what program leaders already understand internally but have never had to voice publicly.
- It builds shared ownership by inviting every voice in the program into the process.
- By connecting the program's purpose to real-world decisions from the start, it is built for practical application, not just as a source of inspiration.
- It is honest by design — keeping the program's purpose grounded in what the program actually does and what it is committed to becoming.

The Purpose Statement as a Living Document

One more thing before we begin building: the purpose statement is not a permanent inscription. It is the first entry in a perpetual draft.

Your program's purpose will evolve. The workforce your graduates enter will change. The learners you serve will shift. The professional contexts that define relevance in your field will move. A purpose statement written today may need meaningful revision two or three cycles from now.

This is not a weakness. It is the design. The Cycle Review and Reset process includes a purpose statement review at the start of every intake cycle — not because the statement changes constantly, but because every cycle is an opportunity to ask: Is this still true? Is this still specific enough? Is this still honest?

What you write today is the best current version of your program's purpose. It will be better next year because your program will have learned something in the cycle between now and then. The existence of this revised Play is itself the proof of that principle.

Section 2: What a Strong Purpose Statement Does

Before you write anything, it helps to understand what you are trying to produce. A strong program purpose statement does five things.

1. It honors what learners bring.

The prospective learners your program serves are not blank slates. They are professionals — with careers already in progress, experience already accumulated, and perspectives already formed by years of work in the world. A purpose statement that positions them as passive recipients of knowledge contradicts the learner-centered model from the very beginning. A strong purpose statement begins from a position of respect. It acknowledges that the learner arrives with something valuable — and that the program's job is to build on that foundation, not replace it.

2. It identifies the growth that the program commits to producing.

Honoring what learners bring does not mean accepting them where they are. A learner-centered program holds high standards — for the learner and for itself. A strong purpose statement is honest about the challenge. It names, with some specificity, the growth the program commits to producing. Not “we develop leaders” — but what kind of leadership, in what context, measured by what outcomes.

3. It makes equity a design principle, not a disclaimer.

Many program mission statements include a sentence about diversity, equity, and inclusion. These sentences largely function as afterthoughts, considered by the program as enhancements to its educational purpose rather than components of its learning environment design. A strong purpose statement treats equity as structural. It is not a value that the program holds. It is a fundamental principle that forms the foundation of the program's design. That distinction has real operational consequences. It influences the recruitment process, the conduct of admissions consultations, the curriculum's goals, and the methods for measuring program effectiveness.

4. It holds the program to the same standard as the learner.

This is perhaps the most distinctive feature of a well-designed purpose statement — and the one most programs leave out. The standard of excellence does not apply only to learners. It applies to the program itself. To the faculty. To the staff. To the director. A purpose statement declaring “excellence is expected of ourselves as much as our learners” commits the entire team to shared accountability.

5. It measures success beyond graduation.

The most common mistake in graduate program mission statements is measuring success at the moment of program completion. A purpose statement that ends at graduation is measuring the wrong thing. The people your program serves become leaders of organizations, shape industries, build communities, and influence the next generation of professionals in their fields. A purpose statement that measures success by what graduates do, who they become, and how they strengthen the communities they serve is not being aspirational. It is about being precise regarding the program’s real impact, which lasts well beyond the last day of class.

Section 3: The Purpose Statement Builder

You can complete this worksheet on your own or collaborate with your program team. Set aside 60 to 90 minutes. There are no right answers — only honest ones.

Part 1: Your Program’s Learners

Start with the people the program exists to serve.

- Who are the people who come to your program? What do they bring with them — professionally, personally, and experientially?
- What do most of them not yet see or know about themselves when they arrive?
- What do you want to be true about them when they leave — not just what they know, but who they are?
- What do you want to be true about them one, five, or ten years after they leave?

Part 2: Your Program’s Values

Name what your program actually stands for.

- If your program had to choose three values to guide every decision it makes — about recruiting, teaching, operations, and alumni engagement — what would they be?
- Where in your current program are those values most visible? Where are they hardest to see?

- What is the specific meaning of equity as it pertains to your program's purpose? How is it built in — not bolted on?

Part 3: Your Program's Commitments

Specify the obligations of your program along with the individuals or groups entitled to them.

- What does your program owe its learners? What is the promise you are making when someone enrolls?
- What does your program owe the communities and fields your graduates will serve?
- How do you hold yourself — as a program — to the same standard of excellence you expect from your learners?

Part 4: Your Measure of Success

Decide how you will know if the purpose is working.

- How will you know if a learner has truly grown during the program — beyond grades and credentials?
- How will you stay connected to graduates long enough to know whether the purpose is being lived out in the world?
- What would it look like if your program fully succeeded — not just for one learner, but for all of them?

Part 5: Your Draft

Use your reflections above to complete the following prompts. Do not worry about making it perfect — just make it honest.

We believe every person who enters our program arrives with _____.

Our purpose is to _____, so that learners can _____.

Our program commits to _____, _____, and _____.

We measure our success not just by _____, but by _____.

Part 6: The Compass Test

Before you finalize your statement, ask these four questions.

- Would this statement help an admissions team decide who is a fit for this program?
- Would this statement help a faculty member design a learning experience?
- Would this statement help a staff member decide how to support a struggling student?
- Would this statement give an alumni coordinator a reason to continue in a relationship with graduates?

If the answer to all four is yes — your purpose statement is ready to work.

Section 4: Testing Your Draft

The Compass Test in Part 6 tests your statement against real program functions. The following four additional tests examine the quality of the statement itself. Run both sets before finalizing.

The Specificity Test

Read the statement and ask: could this have been written by any graduate program at any university? If the answer is yes, it is not specific enough. Remove any sentence that could belong to someone else without adjustment.

The Honesty Test

Read the statement and ask: is this true right now — or is this aspirational? A purpose statement should be honest about what the program actually is, not only what it intends to become. If there is a significant gap between the statement and current reality, note it — that gap is a program improvement priority, not a reason to write a less honest statement.

The Accountability Test

Read the statement and ask: could someone use this to hold the program accountable? A purpose statement that is specific enough to be tested is specific enough to be useful. If every sentence is too vague to be evaluated, it is not doing its job.

The Read-Aloud Test

Read the statement out loud. Does it sound like something a person with real convictions would say — or does it sound like a committee wrote it? Purpose statements that fail the read-aloud test seldom withstand the examination of the prospective learners they aim to address.

Section 5: Putting the Purpose Statement to Work

The purpose statement is not a document that gets written once and filed. It is a working tool — used actively across all five Playbook systems.

In recruiting and lead collection (System I)

The purpose statement is the foundation of the program's value proposition. When the program is present in the professional communities where prospective learners are experiencing their triggers, the purpose statement is the authentic voice of that presence. It will resonate most powerfully with the learners who are most closely aligned with it — and it will help the wrong candidates self-select out before the admissions consultation.

In the admissions consultation (System II)

The purpose statement is the opening frame of every admissions consultation (Play 2.1). It is what the program director or faculty member points to when a prospective learner asks: what is this program actually about? It is also the reference point for the career milestone mapping conversation — because the learner's goals and the program's commitments need to be in genuine alignment before an enrollment agreement means anything.

In the enrolled learner experience (System III)

The purpose statement is the measure every faculty member, staff member, and advisor can point to when a learner asks: why does this matter? It keeps the program's community oriented toward the same outcome — what graduates do, who they become, how they serve — rather than the proximate measures of grades and credits.

In cycle planning (Part 0)

At the start of every intake cycle, the purpose statement review is a Foundation and Strategy milestone (Play 0.4). The question is not “should we change our purpose?” but “is this statement still accurate — and is the program still living up to it?” That question, asked honestly at the start of every cycle, is one of the most powerful drivers of program improvement available.

In measuring success (Cycle Review & Reset)

When the annual program iteration workplan (Play 3.4) is built, the purpose statement is the document it is built from. When alumni are asked how the program served them, the purpose statement is the reference point. It is the measure the program chooses to be held to.

A Final Word

Writing a genuine purpose statement is harder than it looks — and more important than most programs realize until they try to build something on top of it.

If you worked through this Play honestly, you may have found yourself confronted by questions your program has never had to answer with precision. Who exactly are you recruiting — and why? What are you actually committing to produce? What does equity look like in your specific program, not in the abstract? What would it mean to hold your institution to the same standard you hold your learners?

Those are not comfortable questions. But they are the right ones. And the fact that you are asking them — or that your team is asking them together — is itself a sign that your program is moving in the right direction.

Your statement is a draft, not a destination.

The purpose statement you write today is Version 1.0. It will be revised. It will be tested against the decisions your program makes in the coming intake cycle, and some of those decisions will reveal language that needs sharpening, commitments that need clarifying, or measures that need grounding. That is not failure. That is the Playbook working exactly as it is designed to.

What comes next?

With your purpose statement in hand, you are ready for Play 0.2 — The Partnership Model. The partnership model is where your program's purpose begins to take on operational form: who are the stakeholders your purpose commits you to, what do you owe each of them, and how does that shape the way your program shows up in every system from Lead Collection through Fan Creation? The purpose statement answers the question: what do we stand for? The partnership model begins to answer: with whom, and how?

Share what you built.

If this Play helped you write a purpose statement — or helped you realize your existing one needed work — I would genuinely like to hear about it. What surprised you in the process? What was harder than you expected? What did your team disagree about — and what did you learn from that disagreement? Leave a comment, reply to the newsletter, or reach out directly. The Playbook gets smarter every time a program shares what they discovered working through it.

Need support? Three Ways to Engage – All Free

I built the Playbook to be useful, not to be sold. That means no paywalls, no retainers, and nothing to register for just to read the work.

Read the Plays. Every Play is free at <https://rgalsup.com/grad-program-intake-playbook/>. Start wherever your program needs the most help — each one stands on its own.

Join a free webinar. I host free monthly webinars on specific Playbook topics, built around real conversations with people working on the same problems you are. Registration is required. Watch <https://rgalsup.com> and my newsletter for dates.

Talk to me directly. If something here is hitting close to home for your program — faculty enablement, hidden data in your platforms, evidence that nobody is using — I would genuinely like to hear about it. Free one-on-one conversations are available via Calendly at <https://rgalsup.com>. Availability is limited on my end, so if you see a slot that works, grab it.

The offer is open. Let's make a difference one play at a time.

Subscribe to the Grad Program Intake Playbook newsletter so you do not miss a Play. View all published Plays at: <https://rgalsup.com/grad-program-intake-playbook/>.

References

Play 0.2 — The Partnership Model
Play 0.3 — Stakeholder Analysis
Play 0.4 — The Intake Critical Path
Play 0.6 — Assumptions, Goals & Constraints
Play 2.1 — The Admissions Consultation
Play 2.2 — Career Milestone Mapping
Play 2.4 — Enrollment Agreements
Play 3.4 — Program Iteration
Play A.9 — Roles in a Learner-Centered Graduate Program
Play A.10 — The Post-Graduation Intelligence System (forthcoming)

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