Play 0.4: THE INTAKE CRITICAL PATH - Two Journeys, One Timeline

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Before You Begin

This Play assumes familiarity with a few foundational concepts from earlier in the Graduate Program Intake Playbook. If you have not yet worked through the following, a brief review will make this Play more useful.

The Five Playbook Systems

These systems organize every Play in the series and form the backbone of the critical path you will map here: Part 0 (Program Strategy & Foundation), System I (Lead Collection), System II (Learner Conversion), System III (Fan Creation), and Cycle Review & Reset.

The Program Purpose Statement (Play 0.1)

"We believe every person who enters a graduate program arrives with something valuable — experience, perspective, and potential that is uniquely their own..." This statement is the foundation everything in this Play is built on. If your program does not yet have its own purpose statement, Play 0.1 will help you write one — and this Play will be more meaningful once you have.

Roles in a Learner-Centered Graduate Program (Play A.9)

This Play identifies six roles — Program Director, Faculty, Staff, Students, Alumni, and Employers — and how each one changes in a learner-centered program. The Intake Critical Path assigns responsibilities using this role language throughout.

You do not need to have mastered these — this Play will make sense even with a partial understanding. But if a reference to "Play 0.1" or "the Fan Creation system" feels unfamiliar as you read, those are the places to look.

> *What this Play produces: By the end of Play 0.4, you will have an Alignment Map — a tool that shows where your program's critical path and your learners' critical path must be synchronized, and a set of checkpoints for confirming that synchronization at every stage. Play 0.5 — The Intake Timeline Builder — takes the Alignment Map and turns it into a working calendar for your specific program.*

Key Terms

Term	Definition
Critical Path	The sequence of decisions, milestones, and dependencies that must occur, in order, for an outcome to be achieved. Unlike a timeline, a critical path distinguishes between what is essential and what is merely scheduled.
Milestone	A specific, identifiable point of progress — a decision made, a document completed, a conversation held, a transition reached.
Dependency	A relationship between two milestones in which one cannot begin, or cannot be meaningful, until the other is complete.
Alignment Checkpoint	A specific question used to confirm that the program's critical path and the learner's critical path are synchronized at a given stage.
Backward Design	The practice of defining a desired outcome first, then working backward to identify what must happen, in what order, to produce it.

Section 1: The Logic of Backward Design

The Timeline Does Not Start Where You Think It Does

Most graduate program intake timelines start at the beginning.

They begin with the date the application portal opens, or the first recruiting event of the season, or the moment someone on the admissions team sends the first prospecting email. They move forward from there — adding milestones as they go, filling in deadlines as they become relevant, and adjusting the sequence as each intake cycle collides with the realities the team did not expect.

The result is a timeline that reflects how the intake process feels — reactive, sequential, and perpetually behind — rather than how it should work.

There is a better starting point. And it is not at the beginning.

Start at the End

The Graduate Program Intake Playbook is built on one core idea: each choice made during the intake must directly lead to the program's defined outcome. That principle begins here — with the Intake Critical Path.

The Intake Critical Path does not start with the application portal. It starts with graduation.

Specifically, it starts with a date — the date on which the cohort you are currently recruiting will complete the program and enter the world as graduates and alumni. That date is your anchor point. Everything else in the intake process — every milestone, every deadline, every decision gate — is calculated backward from it.

Designers call this backward design. It is the practice of defining the desired outcome first and then working backward to identify the sequence of steps, decisions, and dependencies required to produce it. It is the same logic that drives curriculum design at its best — you begin with what you want learners to learn and then design the learning experiences that produce the desired outcome.

Applied to the intake process, backward design produces something that forward planning almost never does: a critical path in which every milestone has a purpose, every deadline has a rationale, every dependency is visible, and every step connects to the outcome the program exists to achieve.

Why Critical Path — Not Just Timeline

A timeline is a schedule. It tells you when things happen.

A critical path is something more important. It tells you which things must happen — in what order, for what reason, and with what dependencies — for the outcome to be achievable. It distinguishes between milestones that are critical and milestones that are supportive. Miss a critical milestone and everything downstream is at risk. Miss a supportive milestone and quality suffers, but the outcome remains achievable.

In graduate program management, this distinction matters enormously because intake teams perpetually lack resources and constantly decide where to focus attention, often under pressure. A program that manages using a critical path knows which delays are serious and which are recoverable. A program that manages only from a timeline treats every missed deadline as equally urgent — which means nothing is truly prioritized.

But there is a deeper reason why critical path thinking is the right frame for Play 0.4. The intake process does not involve one critical path. It involves two.

Two Critical Paths. One Intake.

The first is the Program Critical Path — the sequence of decisions and actions the program must complete, in the right order, for an intake to succeed. It runs backward from graduation through five milestone categories: Graduation and Program Completion, Fan Creation, Learner Conversion, Lead Collection, and Foundation and Strategy. Each category has dependencies. Each depends on decisions made in the category before it. And all of it flows from the graduation anchor.

The second is the Learner Critical Path — the sequence of experiences, decisions, and transitions the learner must move through to arrive at enrollment and ultimately graduation. It runs through six stages: Problem, Awareness, Consideration, Decision, Retention, and Loyalty and Advocacy. Each stage has its own logic, its own questions, and its own requirements from the program. And there's no way to speed it up, skip any steps, or force it into existence.

These two paths are not the same journey. But alignment is necessary. When the program synchronizes its critical path with the learner's critical path — when what the program is doing at each milestone matches what the learner needs at each stage — the intake works. Enrollment is not just filled. It is well-matched. Learners do not just start. They succeed.

When the two paths are out of alignment — when the program is executing a milestone the learner is not yet ready for, or when the learner has reached a decision point the program has not yet prepared for — intake breaks down in predictable ways. Applications arrive from poorly matched candidates. Enrolled learners disengage early. Graduates do not become advocates. The cycle repeats without improving.

Play 0.4 gives you both paths — mapped, aligned, and translated into a working timeline your program can manage from cycle after cycle.

The Learner Is Wayfinding

Before diving into the two critical paths, it is worth naming something that shapes everything about how the learner critical path works.

Most prospective graduate learners do not arrive at your program with a clear, fully formed plan. They arrive with a problem — a professional trigger, a feeling of being stuck, a sense that their current capabilities are no longer sufficient for where they want to go. They know something needs to change. They do not yet know exactly what.

Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, founders of Stanford University's Life Design Lab and authors of Designing Your Life, call this wayfinding — the practice of moving forward not by mapping the entire journey in advance, but by finding the next right step from where you currently stand. Most people, they argue, cannot see the whole path from the beginning. They find it by moving, reflecting, and moving again.

This insight has direct implications for how the program shows up in the early stages of the learner's critical path. A prospective learner in the Problem or Awareness stage is not executing a career plan. They are wayfinding. They are searching, comparing, reconsidering, and searching again. The program that understands this does not respond by intensifying its recruitment pitch. It responds by becoming the most useful guide available for the next step of the learner's journey — whatever that step turns out to be.

That posture — guide rather than recruiter, partner rather than vendor — is what the learner-centered program is designed to embody from first contact. It is also what makes the Intake Critical Path a fundamentally different planning tool than a conventional intake timeline. The program is not just scheduling its own activities. It is designing its presence along a path that the learner is actively navigating.

Why Graduation Is the Right Anchor

Graduation may seem like an odd place to anchor an intake process. By definition, graduation is months or years away from the learner's first contact with the program. The people you are currently recruiting have not yet enrolled, let alone completed the program.

But that distance is precisely the point.

When graduation is the anchor, the intake process becomes an act of commitment rather than administration. The program is not simply filling seats for the coming semester. It is making a promise — to a specific group of people, with specific professional goals, in a specific workforce context — that the program will equip them with the knowledge, skills, capabilities, and confidence to lead with purpose.

This reorientation has practical consequences that run through both critical paths. On the program side, it changes what gets measured at every milestone — from enrollment counts to learner readiness, from application volume to candidate-program fit. On the learner side, it changes the questions the program asks at every stage — not "are you qualified to enter?" but "are we the right program for where you are trying to go, and are you ready to do what this program will ask of you?"

And it changes the ultimate measure of intake success. A forward-designed intake process measures success at enrollment — how many seats were filled. A backward-designed intake process measures success at graduation and beyond — how many learners were well-matched, well-supported, and well-prepared for the professional lives they came to build.

That is what the two critical paths, working in alignment, produce.

One Intake. Every Cycle.

The Intake Critical Path is not a one-time planning exercise. It is a living framework — rebuilt before every intake cycle, updated in real time as the cycle unfolds, and reviewed at the close of each cycle as part of the Cycle Review and Reset process.

This is the perpetual draft principle in action. The critical path you build today is not the one you will use next cycle. It will be smarter, more calibrated, and more useful — because it will be informed by what you learned this time. That is not a weakness of the framework. It is its design intent. Like Burnett and Evans' well-designed life, a well-designed intake process is never finished. It is always in progress.

The sections that follow develop both critical paths in full. Section 2 maps the Program Critical Path — five milestone categories, their dependencies, and the decisions that define them. Section 3 maps the Learner Critical Path — six stages, their primary questions, and what the program must be doing at each one. Section 4 brings the two paths together in the Alignment Map — the most important tool in this Play.

By the time you complete this Play, you will have something no generic intake template can produce: an Alignment Map built for your program, your learners, and the professional outcomes you have committed to delivering. Play 0.5, The Intake Timeline Builder, takes that map and turns it into a working calendar.

Section 2: The Program Critical Path

What the Program Must Do — In the Right Order

The Program Critical Path is the sequence of decisions, milestones, and actions the program must complete for an intake to succeed. It is organized into five milestone categories, presented here in backward order from the graduation anchor. Dependencies exist within each category, meaning that specific conditions, decisions, or tasks need to be fulfilled before the next category's milestones can be effectively pursued.

Read Section 2 as a decision guide. Work through each category in order. Answer the decision prompts for your specific program context. The answers you generate here become the inputs for the Intake Timeline Builder in Play 0.5.

Category 1: Graduation and Program Completion Milestones

Closest to the anchor point — define these first

These milestones mark the final stages of the learner's journey through the program. They are the fixed endpoints from which everything else is calculated — the capstone completion date, the final assessment window, the credentialing and conferral process, and the formal transition from enrolled learner to program alumnus.

They are also the milestones most programs never think of as intake milestones. That is a mistake. The graduation experience — its design, what it communicates, and how the program uses it to activate the alumni relationship — is the first milestone of the next intake cycle. A graduation ceremony that ignores the Fan Creation system is a missed opportunity. A graduation experience that formally welcomes graduates into the alumni community, activates their advocacy role, and sets expectations for the relationship going forward is a critical intake milestone for the cohort you will recruit next cycle.

Decision Prompts:

- What is the graduation date for the cohort you are currently recruiting?
- What does your current graduation experience communicate to graduates about their role as alumni?
- What specific milestone marks the transition from enrolled learner to active alumnus in your program?
- Who is responsible for activating the alumni relationship at graduation — and what does that activation look like in practice?
- What is the last program-managed touchpoint before graduation, and what does it accomplish?

Category 2: Fan Creation Milestones (System III)

Mid-program through post-graduation

These milestones cover the period from enrollment through graduation and into alumni engagement. They include curriculum-workforce alignment checkpoints, career milestone tracking touchpoints, alumni advocacy activation, and the annual program iteration process. They begin — critically — on the first day of enrollment, not at graduation.

The Fan Creation system is not a post-program activity. It's an integral part of the learning journey, woven into the student's experience from the instant the enrollment agreements are final. Every course that explicitly connects content to the learner's career milestone map is a Fan Creation milestone. Every check-in that tracks a learner's progress toward their professional goals is a Fan Creation milestone. Every interaction that reminds the learner that the program's success is measured by what they do after graduation — not what they know before it — is a Fan Creation milestone.

Decision Prompts:

- At what point in the program do you conduct a formal curriculum-workforce alignment review (Play 3.1)?
- How frequently do you track learner progress against their career milestone maps (Play 3.2) during the program?
- What is the first alumni advocacy touchpoint after graduation — and when does it occur?
- How do you collect alumni feedback (Play 3.3) and at what intervals?
- When and how do you conduct your annual program iteration (Play 3.4), and whose responsibility is it?

Category 3: Learner Conversion Milestones (System II)

Admission through enrollment

These milestones cover the transition from prospective learner to enrolled partner. They include the admissions consultation, the career milestone mapping session, the enrollment process audit, and the enrollment agreement. They are the milestones most often described as the admissions process — but in a learner-centered program, they are something more than that.

The Learner Conversion system is where the program's partnership orientation becomes concrete and personal. The admissions consultation (Play 2.1) is not a sales pitch. It is the first genuine planning conversation between the program and the learner — the moment at which the program begins to understand this specific person's professional trigger, career goals, and readiness for the program's demands. The enrollment agreement (Play 2.4) is not a formality. It is the formalization of a mutual commitment — what the program promises to the learner, and what the learner commits to bringing to the program.

The dependencies here are significant. An effective admissions consultation depends on a well-developed ideal candidate profile (Play 1.2) and a workforce skills analysis (Play 1.3) — both of which live in the Lead Collection system. The career milestone map cannot be built without first understanding the learner's entry point (Play 1.1). The enrollment agreement cannot be meaningful without the clarity that the consultation and milestone mapping have produced.

Decision Prompts:

- At what point in the process does your admissions consultation currently occur — and is it positioned as a planning session or a sales conversation?
- How are career milestone maps currently developed, and who leads that process?
- When was your enrollment process last audited for friction points (Play 2.3)?

- What does your current enrollment agreement communicate about mutual expectations — and does it reflect the partnership model?
- What is the last milestone before enrollment is confirmed, and what does it require of the learner?

Category 4: Lead Collection Milestones (System I)

Research, sourcing, and qualification

These milestones cover the program's active presence in the markets and communities where prospective learners are making decisions about their professional futures. They include entry-point identification, ideal candidate profile development, workforce skills mapping, and lead qualification. They are the milestones that determine the quality — not just the quantity — of the learner pool that the Conversion system will engage and work with.

This category has the longest lead time of any in the program critical path. The workforce skills analysis that informs your ideal candidate profile for a fall intake should be completed in the cycle prior — meaning it is never truly finished, only updated. The entry point identification that shapes your sourcing strategy requires sustained attention to the professional communities and contexts where your prospective learners are active.

Dependencies here run in both directions. Lead Collection depends on the Foundation and Strategy milestones in Category 5 for clarity about the program's mission, market position, and target learner profile. And it feeds directly into the Learner Conversion milestones in Category 3 — the quality of the admissions consultation is only as good as the quality of the learner profile that precedes it.

Decision Prompts:

- How do you currently identify and document the entry points that trigger a graduate education search for your target learners (Play 1.1)?
- When was your ideal candidate profile last updated — and does it reflect the current workforce landscape (Play 1.2)?
- How frequently do you conduct a workforce skills analysis, and who contributes to it (Play 1.3)?
- What are your current lead qualification criteria — and do they filter for program fit or just academic eligibility (Play 1.4)?
- What is your program's sourcing strategy, and is it aligned with the entry points and ideal candidate profile you have defined?

Category 5: Foundation and Strategy Milestones (Part 0)

The starting point — furthest from graduation, first to complete

These are the milestones furthest from graduation on the timeline — and the first ones the program must complete before any intake activity can begin. They include the program purpose statement review, partnership model confirmation, stakeholder analysis, intake critical path construction, and the documentation of the assumptions, goals, and constraints that will govern the coming cycle.

Foundation and Strategy milestones are the ones most often skipped in favor of getting to the visible work of recruiting. That is a critical error. A program that begins lead collection without a current purpose statement review is recruiting for a program it may have already outgrown. A program that begins learner conversion without a current stakeholder analysis is making commitments on behalf of partners whose expectations it does not fully understand.

The Foundation and Strategy milestones are not bureaucratic prerequisites. They are the decisions that make every other milestone meaningful. They answer the questions that the entire critical path depends on: Who are we recruiting? Why? For what outcome? With what partners? Under what constraints?

Decision Prompts:

- When in the cycle do you review and confirm the program's purpose statement and value proposition (Play 0.1)?
- How do you document and communicate the partnership model to all stakeholders at the start of each cycle (Play 0.2)?
- Who conducts the stakeholder analysis — and when does it occur relative to the start of lead collection activities (Play 0.3)?
- What are the assumptions, goals, and constraints governing the coming intake cycle — and are they written down (Play 0.6)?
- Who is responsible for confirming that all Foundation and Strategy milestones are complete before lead collection begins?

Section 3: The Learner Critical Path

What the Learner Must Experience — In the Right Order

The Learner Critical Path is the sequence of experiences, questions, and transitions the prospective learner moves through from the moment a professional trigger creates a learning need to the moment they become an active alumni advocate for the program. It runs through six stages, each with its own logic, its own primary question, and its own requirements from the program.

Read Section 3 as a design guide. At each stage, the question is not what the program needs to accomplish. It is what the learner needs to experience — and what the program must be doing to make that experience possible. The program's job is not to manage the learner through these stages. It is to design the conditions in which the learner can move through them well.

Stage 1: Problem

The learner experiences a professional trigger

A prospective graduate learner rarely begins their journey with a clear picture of the solution. They begin with a problem — a professional trigger that creates a gap between where they are and where they need or want to be. It may be a career transition they sense is coming. A promotion they were passed over for. An employer expectation they cannot yet meet. A field moving in a direction they are not prepared for. A life event that resets their sense of what is possible.

In Burnett and Evans' language, the learner is wayfinding at this stage. They are not executing a plan. They are recognizing a design challenge — and beginning, tentatively, to look for the next step. They may not yet know graduate education is the answer. They may not yet know your program exists.

The program's job at Stage 1 is presence and relevance. Not recruitment. The program that shows up in the professional communities, conversations, and search contexts where these triggers occur — with content, perspective, and intelligence that is genuinely useful to someone experiencing this kind of challenge — is the program that earns the right to be considered. The Entry Point Worksheet (Play 1.1) is the tool for mapping where these triggers occur and how the program can be present when they do.

What the learner needs at this stage:

Recognition that their problem is real, nameable, and addressable — and that someone understands it from the inside.

What the program must be doing:

Building and maintaining a presence in the professional contexts where its target learners experience their triggers. This milestone, crucial for Foundation and Strategy, needs to be in place before the Lead Collection system can become operational for any intake.

Stage 2: Awareness

The learner discovers the program as a potential solution

Awareness is the moment the program transitions from being invisible to being a possibility. The learner searches — online, through their network, through professional associations — and the program appears on their radar. This may happen through a search result, a colleague's recommendation, a social media post, or a LinkedIn article. However it happens, the program now has the learner's attention — briefly, tentatively, and in competition with every other option they are evaluating simultaneously.

The program's job at Stage 2 is to make a clear, honest, and compelling case for why this program is worth a second look — without overselling, without obscuring the program's real demands, and without pretending to be something it is not. The ideal candidate profile (Play 1.2) is the guide here. The clearer the program is about who it is designed to serve, the more naturally it will resonate with the right prospective learners and self-select the wrong ones out before the conversion process begins.

What the learner needs at this stage:

A clear enough picture of the program to decide whether it is worth further investigation — and enough honesty to make that decision well.

What the program must be doing:

Executing its Lead Collection sourcing strategy with messaging aligned to the ideal candidate profile and the entry points identified in Play 1.1. The tagging system (Play A.8) begins here — every first contact is a data point.

Stage 3: Consideration

The learner evaluates whether this program is the right fit

Consideration is the stage most programs mistake for a sales opportunity. It is not. It is a research and evaluation process — and the learner is running it, not the program.

At this stage, the prospective learner is comparing the program against alternatives, weighing costs and benefits, assessing the fit between their professional goals and the program's outcomes, and beginning to form a judgment about whether this program is worth a serious commitment. They are asking questions — some of which they will voice directly to the program, many of which they will answer on their own through observation, research, and conversation with people they trust.

The program's job at Stage 3 is not to close the sale. It is to be genuinely useful to a learner who is making one of the most significant professional investments of their life. That means providing honest, specific, and accessible information. It means making it easy to ask hard questions. It means not managing the learner's perception of the program but trusting that a well-matched candidate who fully understands the program's demands will choose it for the right reasons.

The lead qualification criteria (Play 1.4) do their most important work here — not to screen candidates out harshly, but to help the program invest its attention in the learners most likely to thrive. A learner in the Consideration stage who's poorly matched with the program is best served by learning that now, not after enrollment.

What the learner needs at this stage:

Enough honest, specific information to make a well-informed decision — and a program that respects their ability to make it.

What the program must be doing:

Providing genuinely useful information, facilitating meaningful conversations, and applying lead qualification thoughtfully. The admissions consultation (Play 2.1) may be introduced here as an invitation — not a pitch, but an offer to have a real planning conversation.

Stage 4: Decision

The learner commits to pursuing enrollment

The Decision stage is the critical transition point between the Learner Critical Path's first movement — searching, evaluating, comparing — and its second movement — committing, planning, and preparing. It is the moment the learner says, in effect: this is my program.

But in a learner-centered program, the decision is not simply "do I want to enroll?" It is a more considered question: "Is this program the right partner for where I am trying to go — and am I ready to do what this program will ask of me?" That question deserves a real answer, arrived at through a real conversation. That conversation is the admissions consultation (Play 2.1).

The admissions consultation is the most critical single milestone in the Learner Conversion system — and one of the most critical in the entire Intake Critical Path. It is the moment at which the program and the prospective learner sit down together, examine the learner's professional goals honestly, and determine whether this program is genuinely the right fit. When it works, it produces not just an enrollment but a well-grounded commitment. When skipped or treated as a formality, the enrollment that follows is built on assumptions that frequently prove wrong.

Completion of the career milestone map (Play 2.2) is at or immediately following the admissions consultation. It translates the learner's professional goals into a specific, measurable set of milestones that the program commits to supporting. It is the foundation of the enrollment agreement (Play 2.4) — and ultimately of the retention and advocacy that follow.

What the learner needs at this stage:

A genuine planning conversation that helps them make a well-grounded commitment — not a sales pitch that obscures the program's real demands.

What the program must be doing:

Executing the admissions consultation framework with honesty, depth, and genuine attention to fit. Completing the career milestone map. Preparing the enrollment agreement as a real mutual commitment.

Stage 5: Retention

The enrolled learner moves through the program toward graduation

Retention begins the moment the enrollment agreement is signed — not when the learner struggles, not when grades slip, not when a crisis arises. A program that defines retention as the prevention of dropout is operating reactively. A program that defines retention as the active, ongoing fulfillment of the enrollment agreement is operating from its critical path.

This stage spans the full length of the program and is where the Fan Creation system begins its work. Curriculum-workforce alignment (Play 3.1) ensures that what the learner is learning connects with where they are going. Career milestone tracking (Play 3.2) provides the regular check-ins that surface misalignment early — before it becomes crisis. Faculty operating as relationship anchors, staff operating as relationship connectors, and the program director maintaining whole-program visibility ensure that no learner is ever seen only through a single lens.

This is also the stage at which Burnett and Evans' design thinking methodology has its deepest application. A learner in the Retention stage is not simply completing requirements. They are designing a professional identity — iterating, prototyping, sometimes reframing their goals entirely as the program opens new possibilities they did not anticipate at enrollment. The program that understands this does not hold learners rigidly to the career milestone map they created at the admissions consultation. It treats that map as a living document — a prototype, in Burnett and Evans' language — that evolves as the learner does.

What the learner needs at this stage:

Active, sustained support for their professional formation — not just academic support, but career intelligence, community connection, and honest feedback on their progress toward their goals.

What the program must be doing:

Executing the Fan Creation system from day one of enrollment. Tracking career milestones. Maintaining the enrolled learner's sense of connection to the program's community and to the professional world they are preparing to enter.

Stage 6: Loyalty and Advocacy

The graduate becomes an active member of the alumni community

Loyalty and Advocacy is not the end of the learner's journey. It is the beginning of a new chapter in the program's community. The graduate carries the program's reputation into their industry, their organization, and their professional network. They are, from this moment forward, the program's most credible voice — more credible than any marketing campaign, more persuasive than any ranking, more trusted than any testimonial the program could produce on its own.

But loyalty is not automatic. It is the earned outcome of a program that honored its commitments at every stage of the critical path — from the honesty of the admissions consultation to the quality of the curriculum to the care taken in the graduation experience. A graduate who feels the program kept its promises becomes an advocate. A graduate who feels the program over-promised and under-delivered becomes, at best, silent — and at worst, a warning to the next generation of prospective learners.

The program's job at this stage is to remain genuinely present in the graduate's professional life — not intrusively, not transactionally, but as a community that continues to add value long after the credential is conferred. Alumni advocacy (Play 3.3) and the annual program iteration process (Play 3.4) are the primary vehicles for this continued relationship. They make sure the program stays relevant by using what graduates are doing to improve what the program teaches and promises to future students.

In this way, Stage 6 feeds directly back into Stage 1 of the next cohort's learner critical path. The alumni community is the program's most powerful presence in the professional contexts where the next generation of prospective learners is experiencing their triggers. The cycle is not linear. It is a loop — and loyalty and advocacy keep it turning.

What the learner needs at this stage:

A program that remains genuinely present and valuable in their professional life — not as a credential they completed but as a community they belong to.

What the program must be doing:

Executing the Fan Creation system beyond graduation. Maintaining alumni relationships through structured touchpoints, mentoring opportunities, and genuine reciprocity. Using alumni intelligence to improve every subsequent intake cycle.

Section 4: The Alignment Map

Where the Two Journeys Meet

Sections 2 and 3 developed the two critical paths separately — first the program's, then the learner's. That separation was deliberate. Each path has its own logic, its own dependencies, and its own requirements. They needed to be understood individually before they could be understood together.

Section 4 brings them together.

The Alignment Map is the most important tool in this Play. It is where the program leader stops planning in a single dimension — what do we need to do next? — and starts planning in two dimensions simultaneously: what do we need to do next, and where is the learner in their journey right now? Those two questions, answered together at every milestone, are what transform a competent intake process into a genuinely learner-centered one.

How to Read the Alignment Map

The map is organized around the six stages of the Learner Critical Path. For each stage, it shows four things.

The learner's primary question — the central question the learner is trying to answer at this stage. This is the lens through which the learner is evaluating everything the program does. If the program's activities at a given milestone are not helping the learner answer their primary question, those activities are misaligned — regardless of how well they serve the program's internal purposes.

The program milestone category — the category of program critical path milestones that must be active and functioning when the learner is at this stage. Not every milestone in the category will be relevant to every learner at every moment. But the category as a whole must be operational.

The Playbook system — the system that governs the program's activities at this stage.

The alignment checkpoint — the specific question the program leader can ask to confirm that the two paths are synchronized at this intersection. If the answer to the alignment checkpoint is no, the program has an alignment problem to resolve before moving forward.

The Alignment Map

Learner Stage	Primary Question	Program Milestone Category	Playbook System	Alignment Checkpoint
Stage 1: Problem	What is holding me back professionally?	Foundation & Strategy	Part 0	Is the program's purpose statement, value proposition, and presence established in the professional contexts where our target learners experience their triggers — before the intake cycle begins?
Stage 2: Awareness	Who can help me close this gap?	Lead Collection	System I	Does the program's sourcing strategy reach the professional communities and contexts where our target learners are searching — and does our messaging speak directly to their trigger?
Stage 3: Consideration	Is this the right program for me?	Lead Collection	System I	Does the program provide honest, specific, and accessible information that helps a well-matched candidate self-select in — and a poorly matched candidate self-select out — before the conversion process begins?
Stage 4: Decision	Am I ready to commit to this program?	Learner Conversion	System II	Does the admissions consultation give the prospective learner a genuine planning conversation — not a sales pitch — that produces a

				well-grounded commitment built on honest mutual understanding?
Stage 5: Retention	Am I becoming the professional I came here to be?	Fan Creation	System III	Does the program actively track each learner's progress toward their career milestone map — and respond to early signals of misalignment before they become crises?
Stage 6: Loyalty & Advocacy	How do I give back to the community that formed me?	Fan Creation	System III	Does the program maintain a genuinely reciprocal relationship with alumni — contributing as much value as it asks for — and use alumni intelligence to improve every subsequent intake cycle?

Reading the Map: What Alignment Looks Like

When the two critical paths are aligned, the program's activities at each milestone match what the learner needs at each stage. The alignment is not always obvious. It does not mean the program is doing the same thing the learner is doing. It means the program is doing the right thing in response to where the learner is.

At Stage 1, alignment means the program has done the foundational work — purpose statement clarity, stakeholder analysis, entry point identification — before the intake cycle begins. The learner does not know this work exists. They simply experience its result: a program that seems to understand their professional context, speaks their language, and appears when and where they are looking.

At Stage 2, alignment means the program's sourcing strategy is active and well-targeted. The learner is searching. The program is findable — in the right places, with the right message, at the right moment. The first contact is captured in the tagging system. The learner's entry point is identified and recorded.

At Stage 3, alignment means the program resists the temptation to sell and instead helps the learner research. The program's communications at this stage are informative, honest, and specific. They make it easy to ask hard questions. They do not manage the learner's perception — they respect the learner's judgment. The lead qualification process runs quietly in the background, ensuring the program's attention is directed toward the learners most likely to thrive.

At Stage 4, alignment means the admissions consultation happens — and happens well. It is a real conversation, not a formality. It produces a career milestone map that reflects this specific learner's goals, not a generic template. It results in an enrollment agreement that both parties have genuinely considered. The learner who completes this stage in a well-aligned program does not feel processed. They feel known.

At Stage 5, alignment means the Fan Creation system is active from the first day of enrollment. The learner's career milestone map is a living document — reviewed regularly, updated as the learner grows, and used as the reference point for every advising conversation and curriculum decision. The program does not wait for a learner to struggle before intervening. It tracks progress continuously and responds to early signals with the same intentionality it brought to the admissions consultation.

At Stage 6, alignment means the graduation experience is designed as an intake milestone, not a closing ceremony. The alumni relationship is activated — not promised and then forgotten. The program stays present in the graduate's professional life in ways that add genuine value. And the intelligence the alumni community generates — about careers, about workforce needs, about the gap between what the program taught and what the work actually demanded — flows back into the next cycle's Foundation and Strategy milestones.

When all six intersections are aligned, the intake cycle is not a sequence of disconnected administrative events. It is a coherent, learner-centered experience from first contact to lifelong advocacy. And each cycle produces a smarter, better-calibrated version of itself — because the Alignment Map is reviewed at the close of every cycle as part of the Cycle Review and Reset process.

Reading the Map: What Misalignment Looks Like

Misalignment is not always dramatic. It rarely announces itself as a crisis. It accumulates quietly — in recruiting metrics that look acceptable but mask poor candidate-program fit, in early-term attrition that gets attributed to individual learner failure rather than systemic misalignment, in alumni relationships that never develop because no one invested in activating them at graduation.

The most common misalignments in graduate program intake follow six predictable patterns.

Foundation-to-Awareness Misalignment

This occurs when the program begins lead collection activities before its Foundation and Strategy milestones are complete. The sourcing strategy is active, but it is not anchored to a current purpose statement review or a current stakeholder analysis. The result: the program recruits for a version of itself that may no longer be accurate — and attracts learners who would not have chosen it if they had known what it had become.

Awareness-to-Consideration Misalignment

This occurs when the program's messaging at Stage 2 overpromises or obscures the program's real demands. Learners arrive at Stage 3 with an inaccurate picture of the program and begin to self-select in for the wrong reasons. The admissions consultation that follows is trying to correct a misimpression rather than build a genuine plan. The enrollment that results is built on a shaky foundation.

Consideration-to-Decision Misalignment

This occurs when the admissions consultation is treated as a sales conversation rather than a planning session. The learner reaches the Decision stage without a career milestone map, without a genuine mutual assessment of fit, and without the honest conversation that would have revealed whether this program is actually right for them. The enrollment agreement that follows is a formality, not a commitment.

Decision-to-Retention Misalignment

This occurs when the Fan Creation system does not activate at enrollment. The learner completes the admissions process, signs the agreement, and then — nothing. No early check-in. No career milestone review. No connection to the program community before the first class session. The learner arrives on day one feeling like a number rather than a partner. Early disengagement is the predictable result.

Retention-to-Loyalty Misalignment

This occurs when the graduation experience does not activate the alumni relationship. The learner completes the program, participates in the ceremony, and waits to hear from the program. If the first contact they receive is a donation solicitation, the relationship is already damaged. If the program never contacts them at all, the opportunity is lost entirely.

Post-Graduation Abandonment

This occurs when the program treats graduation as the finish line rather than a transition point. The learner completes the program, participates in the ceremony — and the program's contact ends. No structured alumni touchpoint. No career milestone check-in. No invitation into the advocacy role. No mechanism for the graduate's professional intelligence to flow back into the program.

This pattern is different from Retention-to-Loyalty misalignment, which occurs when the graduation experience fails to activate the alumni relationship. Post-Graduation Abandonment occurs when the relationship was never designed to continue at all — when the Fan Creation system ends at conferral rather than extending across the full arc of the graduate's professional life.

The cost is compounding, and the timeline is longer than most programs recognize. A graduate not contacted within the first ninety days is significantly harder to re-engage at six months. A graduate not re-engaged at six months is functionally lost to the program by year two. But the relationship does not have a natural expiration after year two — it simply requires a different kind of attention. A graduate at year ten has accumulated a decade of career trajectory intelligence, mentoring capacity, and professional network value that a graduate at year one does not yet have. A program that loses touch after the early check-ins is not just failing at onboarding alumni — it is forfeiting an asset that becomes more valuable, not less, with time.

> *A note on time horizon: Post-graduation intelligence gathering does not have an end date. It continues for as long as the graduate remains a viable intelligence resource — which, for most alumni, means for the remainder of their professional life. This Play introduces post-graduation milestones for the first two years, because that period establishes the relationship. A forthcoming Play — Play A.10, The Post-Graduation Intelligence System — will address how that relationship is sustained, deepened, and made useful across the full decades-long arc of an alumnus's career.*

The Alignment Checkpoint for Post-Graduation Abandonment: Does the program have a structured post-graduation contact sequence — with specific touchpoints, responsible roles, and defined purposes — that begins within ninety days of graduation, continues through at least the first two years of alumni status, and connects to an ongoing alumni community the program intends to sustain indefinitely?

If the honest answer is no, graduation is not done. It has simply been left unfinished.

Each of these misalignments is preventable. The Alignment Map is the tool for preventing them — not by guaranteeing perfect execution, but by making the dependencies visible before they become problems.

Using the Alignment Map in Practice

The Alignment Map is designed for three uses.

Before the intake cycle begins

Use it as a readiness assessment. Work through each alignment checkpoint in sequence. For any checkpoint where the honest answer is no, identify the specific action required to bring the two paths into alignment before the cycle begins. Those actions become milestones in your Intake Timeline Builder (Play 0.5).

During the intake cycle

Use it as a monitoring tool. At each milestone review, return to the relevant alignment checkpoint and ask: is the program still doing what this stage of the learner's journey requires? When cycles get busy and attention gets stretched, the Alignment Map is the quickest way to identify where the program's critical path has drifted out of sync with the learner's.

At the close of the intake cycle

Use it as a debrief framework. For each stage, ask: where were we aligned? Where were we misaligned? What did the misalignment cost — in candidate quality, in early attrition, in alumni engagement, in program intelligence? The answers become the inputs for the Playbook revision process (Play R.3) and the Foundation and Strategy milestones for the next cycle.

Used consistently across cycles, the Alignment Map does something no single-cycle planning tool can do: it builds institutional memory. The program that works through this map before, during, and after every intake cycle gradually develops a precise, evidence-based understanding of where its critical path and its learners' critical path are naturally synchronized — and where they consistently diverge. That understanding is one of the most valuable assets a graduate program can have.

Bridge to Play 0.5: The Alignment Map you have built in this Play — the six learner stages, the five program milestone categories, and the alignment checkpoints that connect them — is the foundation for everything that follows. Play 0.5, The Intake Timeline Builder, takes this Alignment Map and turns it into a working calendar specific to your program. It includes the Backward Design Worksheet, which calculates your program's key milestone windows from your graduation anchor, and the Milestone Registry, which gives you a complete, trackable record of every milestone in both critical paths for a single intake cycle. If you have completed Play 0.4, you are ready for Play 0.5.

References

Internal Playbook References

Play 0.1 — Program Purpose Statement
Play 0.2 — The Partnership Model
Play 0.3 — Stakeholder Analysis
Play 0.5 — The Intake Timeline Builder
Play 0.6 — Assumptions, Goals & Constraints
Play 1.1 — Student Entry Points
Play 1.2 — Target Student Learner Profiles
Play 1.3 — Workforce Skills Analysis
Play 1.4 — Lead Qualification Criteria
Play 2.1 — The Admissions Consultation
Play 2.2 — Career Milestone Mapping
Play 2.3 — Enrollment Process Audit
Play 2.4 — Enrollment Agreements
Play 3.1 — Curriculum Alignment
Play 3.2 — Career Milestone Tracking
Play 3.3 — Alumni Advocacy & Feedback
Play 3.4 — Program Iteration
Play A.8 — The LMS Tagging System
Play A.9 — Roles in a Learner-Centered Graduate Program
Play A.10 — The Post-Graduation Intelligence System (forthcoming)

External Sources

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