

Market Alignment Checklist

Section 1: Credential

Description: This checklist helps academic program planners align program design with market demand data. The questions have no right or wrong answers. Instead, the checklist is intended to proactively raise important decisions and spur thinking on program design decisions that may impact enrollment or student outcomes.

Academic and business leaders should use the completed form to evaluate program design decisions and guide further conversations about the optimal program for the target student market.

Section 1: Credential

The following questions relate to the proposed program's type (e.g., B.S., M.A., certificate), name, and accreditation potential.

Valuable questions to ask about credential decisions include the following:

Question	Guidance	Answer
<i>I. Program Development</i>		
Were internal experts consulted when determining what type of credential to offer and what to name the program?	Enrollment management and marketing leaders can provide valuable feedback on market needs. Consulting them early in new program development process helps ensure program design reflects target market's preferences.	
<i>II. Credential</i>		
Does the target student market seek the proposed credential over other potential credentials?	Different student markets seek different types of credentials (e.g., certificate, bachelor's degree, master's degree) to meet their career goals and financial needs. Consult student surveys, frontline enrollment management staff, and competitor program data to understand what type(s) of credential the target market seeks.	
Do employers prefer employees with the proposed credential over other available credentials?	Professional programs should meet workforce needs for candidates with different levels of educational attainment. Consult employer representatives (e.g., alumni advisory board) and labor market demand data to determine what type(s) of credential (e.g., certificate, master's degree) is in-demand in target market.	

Market Alignment Checklist (cont.)

Question	Guidance	Answer
<p><i>(If proposing non-terminal credential)</i> Is the proposed credential stackable?</p>	<p>Some prospective students look for the option to “stack” credentials when evaluating programs. Stackable credentials can be combined with other credentials to form a full degree. Where applicable, consider allowing students to stack program with related existing program to increase its market potential.</p>	
<p>III. Name</p>		
<p>Do prospective students recognize the proposed program name?</p>	<p>Even if the proposed program provides desired learning outcomes, students will not find or enroll in program if they do not recognize its name. Google Trends/AdWords, student surveys, and frontline enrollment management staff can share insights into program naming preferences.</p>	
<p>IV. Accreditation</p>		
<p>Will the proposed program pursue accreditation or certifications?</p>	<p>Some fields (e.g., health informatics) increasingly require employees to possess subject-specific certifications. Consult employer representatives (e.g., alumni advisory boards) and labor market demand data to determine what type(s) of certification is required to obtain jobs in target industry.</p>	

Market Alignment Checklist (cont.)

Section 2: Delivery

The following questions relate to the proposed program's modality, length, and schedule.

Valuable questions to ask about delivery decisions include the following:

Question	Guidance	Answer
<i>I. Program Development</i>		
Were internal experts consulted when setting program modality, length, and schedule?	Enrollment management and marketing leaders can provide valuable feedback on market needs. Consulting them early in new program development process helps ensure program design reflects the target market's preferences.	
<i>II. Modality</i>		
Do prospective students prefer proposed modality over other potential modalities?	Some prospective students search exclusively for programs in a particular modality (e.g., fully online, face-to-face). Frontline enrollment staff and student surveys can reveal whether target audience is interested in one program modality more than others.	
<i>III. Length and Schedule</i>		
Is the program longer than competitor programs? If yes, please justify length.	Adult and working professional students typically prefer shorter programs to minimize cost of attendance and time away from the workforce. Programs requiring longer time-to-complete or more student credit hours than competitors should have unique value propositions (e.g., internship, experiential learning requirement) that justify the added length.	
Are proposed class times convenient to prospective students in target market?	Professional programs should accommodate typical working students' schedules where possible. Consider evening, weekend, or asynchronous online courses to expand program access to working adults. This is particularly important when competitor programs offer convenient scheduling options.	

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Market Alignment Checklist (cont.)

Question	Guidance	Answer
How many start dates does the proposed program offer?	Some adult students prefer to start professional programs as soon as possible, rather than waiting for the traditional start of the academic calendar. Others seek cohort experiences with traditional start dates. Frontline enrollment staff and student surveys can reveal student preferences for traditional versus “on-demand” start dates.	

Market Alignment Checklist (cont.)

Section 3: Admissions

The following questions relate to the proposed program's price and application requirements.

Valuable questions to ask about admissions decisions include the following:

Question	Guidance	Answer
<i>I. Program Development</i>		
Were internal experts consulted when setting program pricing and application requirements?	Enrollment management and marketing leaders can provide valuable feedback on market needs. Consulting them early in the new program development process helps ensure program design reflects target market's preferences.	
<i>II. Pricing and Aid</i>		
How does proposed list tuition rate compare to competitors' list prices? If applicable, please justify higher list price.	Prospective adult and working professional students often weigh price over reputation when choosing a program. Review competitor program prices on IPEDS ¹ or competitor program websites to assess how proposed list price compares. Generally, for every 5% by which list price exceeds a competitor's, assume a 0.5% decrease in applicants.	
How do proposed merit and need-based aid opportunities compare to competitors' options?	Even small merit awards of \$500-\$1,000 can attract admitted students to one program over a competitor. Review merit and need-based aid availability on competitor program websites to assess competitiveness of proposed net pricing strategy.	
Will the program charge application fees?	Application fees can ensure that only serious prospective students apply. However, fees may also dissuade students from applying, particularly if competitor programs require lower or no fees. Consider competitor programs' application fee requirements when setting fees.	
<i>III. Application Requirements</i>		
How many faculty letters of recommendation are required for admission? Are these necessary to gain a sufficient understanding of student quality?	Academic letters of recommendation are valuable indicators of applicants' potential to succeed in program. However, prospective adult and working professional students may lack robust academic networks. Some may opt not to apply to programs requiring multiple academic letters of recommendation. Consider competitor programs' application requirements when setting admissions criteria.	

1) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Market Alignment Checklist (cont.)

Question	Guidance	Answer
<p>What prerequisite courses are required for admission? Are these necessary to gain a sufficient understanding of student readiness?</p>	<p>Prerequisite courses ensure that admitted students are prepared to succeed in program. However, stringent undergraduate course requirements penalize prospective adult students whose future career goals deviate from their undergraduate majors. Where appropriate, consider offering bridge programs to allow students to complete required foundational coursework before starting the formal program.</p>	
<p>What standardized tests and scores are required for admission? Are these necessary to gain a sufficient understanding of student readiness?</p>	<p>Prospective students have conflicting preferences for standardized tests. Some prospective students seek the prestige signaled by admissions tests and scores, while others are deterred by the time and money required to prepare for standardized exams. Consider competitor program application requirements and consult frontline admissions staff or student surveys when setting standardized test and score requirements.</p>	

Market Alignment Checklist (cont.)

Section 4: Experience

The following questions relate to the proposed program’s curriculum, experiential learning components, and other attributes that shape the day-to-day student experience.

Valuable questions to ask about experience design decisions include the following:

Question	Guidance	Answer
I. Program Development		
Were internal experts consulted when designing the student experience?	Enrollment management and marketing leaders can provide valuable feedback on market needs. Consulting them early in the new program development process helps ensure program design reflects target market’s preferences.	
II. Student Experience		
What aspects of this program are distinctive compared to competitor programs? Why would prospective students enroll in this program over competitors?	Particularly in saturated markets, distinctive features help attract prospective students away from competitors. This is especially important for programs that cannot compete on price.	
Does the proposed program have an experiential learning component? Do competitor programs?	Prospective students in career-focused programs increasingly seek opportunities to apply new skills while enrolled. Consider relevance of experiential learning when designing programs. Where applicable, work with alumni advisory boards and other employers to develop high-value experiential learning curricula.	
Does the proposed program allow students to customize their academic experience through electives or tracks?	Increasingly, many students seek to personalize curricula. While some programs require set curricula to achieve learning outcomes, consider allowing students to choose tracks or electives where appropriate.	
<i>(If program targets adult and working professionals)</i> Are course assignments due at times that are convenient to working adults?	Professional programs should accommodate working students’ schedules where possible. Adult and working professional students may choose not to apply to programs with assignments due during standard working hours.	

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.