

Graduate Applications Assumptions and Expectations

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Executive Summary

The goal of this research study is to understand the assumptions and expectations a potential student of a graduate program has in regards to its application process.

The research team explored the expectations potential applicants have when interacting with content provided by a graduate program, regardless of whether their expectations match the reality of the application process. The mismatches between their assumptions and reality could highlight a potential avenue that allows Bentley to stand out among graduate programs.

To find these expectations, the research team had 4 overarching questions to answer during the study.

- What analogous experiences do people rely on that informs their expectations of interactions with Bentley?
- Once Bentley is approached for information pertaining to a program, how do people expect the experience to develop?
- What do people expect from a college representative when discussing their future education?
- What do potential students know or think they know about the process of applying to a graduate degree program?

All the questions that are presented here are questions pertaining to how potential applicants perceive interactions with the university they are thinking about applying to for an extended education. Due to the questions addressing people rather than product and the focus of these questions, all questions within this study scope were placed in the upper-left quadrant on the nCredible framework, which would make this study scope part of the Exploratory Research quadrant.

For the study, the research team conducted 90-minute interviews with 5 participants in locations that were considered out of context for the participants in regards to applying to a university.

From the research, potential applicants are looking for a more personalized experience through the program. An admissions official would need to ask questions about the participant and needs to listen for the applicant's desires.

The research team created 2 personas that represented potential applicants. One type, the Guide Seeker, is looking to further his education and needs help determining how to fit graduate school into his daily life. This persona is actively looking to build a relationship with the admissions official, with the official asking questions about the persona's background and needs, personalizing messages sent to the persona, and providing a road map for completing the program.

Schedule

Description	Start Date	End Date	Hours
KICKOFF AND ALIGN			
Prepare for kickoff meeting	6-Sep	6-Sep	1
Conduct kickoff meeting	6-Sep	6-Sep	1.5
Create 2x2	26-Sep	27-Sep	4
Select a study scope and expand on study scope details	12-Oct	13-Oct	3
Update 2x2 based on stakeholder feedback	14-Oct	14-Oct	0.5
Update study scope details based on stakeholder feedback	1-Nov	1-Nov	1
Create full schedule	30-Oct	31-Oct	4
RECRUITING			
Find Participants through family and Friends	5-Nov	16-Nov	8
Coordinate session time & location w/ participants	16-Nov	16-Nov	1
CLIENT PROTOCOL CREATION			
Create engagement arch and activities/questions	6-Nov	8-Nov	12
Hand in engagement arch and activities/questions to stakeholders	9-Nov	9-Nov	0
Recreate engagement arch and activities/questions	16-Nov	17-Nov	12
Edit and Finalize engagement arch and activities/questions based on stakeholder feedback	18-Nov	18-Nov	1
Assemble Note-taking Framework	18-Nov	18-Nov	1
CONDUCT THE STUDY			
Conduct the study with P1 + Debrief	19-Nov	19-Nov	2
Replay Recording of P1 for Note Taking	21-Nov	21-Nov	2
Conduct the study with P2 + Debrief	23-Nov	23-Nov	2
Replay Recording of P2 for Note Taking	26-Nov	26-Nov	2
Conduct the study with P3 + Debrief	24-Nov	24-Nov	2
Replay Recording of P3 for Note Taking	27-Nov	27-Nov	2
Conduct the study with P4 + Debrief	25-Nov	25-Nov	2
Replay Recording of P4 for Note Taking	28-Nov	28-Nov	2
Conduct the study with P5 + Debrief	30-Nov	30-Nov	2
Replay Recording of P5 for Note Taking	31-Nov	31-Nov	2
ANALYSIS			
Organize data	2-Dec	2-Dec	8
Deconstruct Data, share stories, and document thematic findings	4-Dec	9-Dec	30
Discuss form factor	9-Dec	9-Dec	3
Create Final Deliverable Content	9-Dec	12-Dec	16

Review Final Deliverable content	13-Dec	13-Dec	2
Edit Final Deliverable	14-Dec	14-Dec	4
FINAL READOUT			
Submit the final deliverable	15-Dec	15-Dec	0
			134

Budget Mathematics

Hourly Rate: \$55/hour x 134 hours = \$7,236

The average annual salary for a User Experience Researcher in the state of Massachusetts with less than a year of experience is approximately \$72,000 a year. If we convert that to an hourly rate, which would require 40 hours a week for 50 weeks, that becomes \$36.00 an hour. However, because the consultant also needs to pay for items such as health insurance for themselves and self-employment taxes, an additional 50% should be provided to the contractor, bringing the rate to \$54/hour.

Recruitment Incentive: \$150/person x 5 participants = \$750

For a user research session that lasts for an hour and a half, \$150 would usually be enough to entice qualified people to be participants in a research study.

Outside Recruitment Costs: \$0

Because this was a friends and family recruit, there was no need to utilize a recruiter.

Facility Costs: \$0

Research was conducted in locations that were freely accessible to both the researcher and the participants, so space did not need to be rented.

Travel Costs: \$40

All locations visited for this project were within a 25-mile radius of the researcher's base of operations.

Cost of Materials: \$50

Papers, pens, ink, bottled water, and snacks for all participants.

Total Costs: \$8,056

Demographics

Behavior

Looking for people thinking about enrolling into a Masters' Degree program

Looking for people discontent with their current career path

Criteria

Employed people who have remained in the same occupation for over a year.

People who have not begun an application process to a graduate program

Abilities

Can potentially contact a university representative.

Criteria

Ability to use a phone or email account

Demographics

Bachelor's Degree Obtained

Criteria

Completed or in process of completing an undergraduate degree.

Psychographics

People who believe that gaining knowledge is vital when looking to improve their own lives.

They have an innate desire to learn

Criteria

Evidence of learning during their free time.

Context

For this study, the researcher took their participants out of context, removing them from their natural environment to answer these questions. At the time the study was conducted, it was unclear what constituted as in-context regarding how people made assumptions about the application process. If the researcher assumed a given context was correct but the realities of said context did not match that of a given participant, there would be no additional data from the meeting that informs the research goals. To minimize this risk, it was decided to take the participants out of context.

Prior to the engagement, the researcher will reach out to recruited participants to find a convenient time and location for the two of them to meet for a single 90-minute meeting. All recruited participants lived close to the researcher, so the researcher found locations that were private enough to allow the participant to speak freely about his or her own thoughts and feelings while keeping his or her anonymity. The researcher met participants at the following locations:

- The researcher's home (3 participants)
- A private room in the local library (1 participant)
- The participant's home (1 participant)

Dynamics

The researcher planned to conduct a single 90-minute one-on-one interview with each participant. By utilizing a one-on-one engagement, the researcher can directly address the participant's assumptions regarding the process of applying to a graduate program.

The researcher decided not to utilize a multiple person engagement because the amount of effort required to coordinate a group effort would have been difficult given the size of the team and the pace of the research. This is especially true considering that the multi-person engagement would have taken place around Thanksgiving, when participants are more likely to be unavailable because many would be traveling outside of the state.

During the 90-minute engagement the researcher:

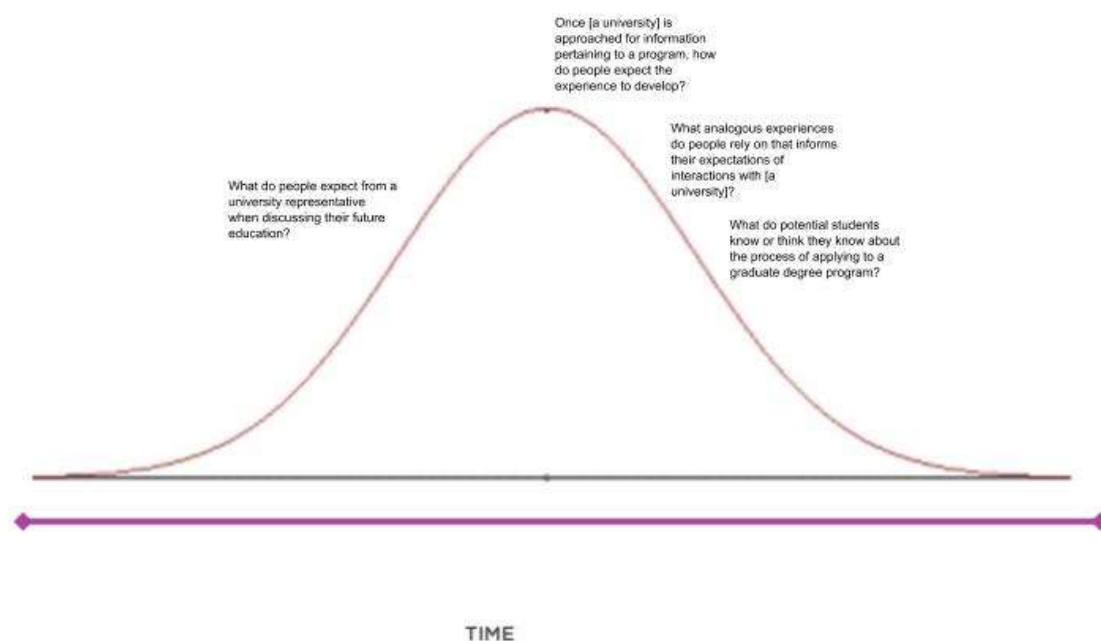
- Set up the recording device to record the audio of the engagement
- Provided the participant with snacks and water
- Asked the participants questions (details in the protocol)
- Presented activities for the participant to complete (details in the protocol)
- Took simple notes regarding the participant's answers

The researcher also replayed the audio of the engagements to make more detailed notes of the encounter at a later date.

The Procedure

I will be utilizing a conversation-based method to discuss the participant's thoughts and assumptions regarding the subject matter. To do this, I will begin by asking the participant about his impressions of education and educational institutions. Then I will transition into asking about how he searches for information. After that, I will ask him to describe the concept of applying for something. Based on the responses from the previous section, I will ask him specifically about his impressions of applying to graduate school and finding information about a graduate program.

Engagement Arc



Before Engagement Day

After scheduling a time and place to meet, I need to send the participant an email thanking him for his participation and attach a recording consent form. I will instruct the participant to review and sign the consent form and give it to me on the day we meet.

Engagement Day

When I receive a phone call from the participant regarding his arrival, I should go out and meet him.

When I meet him, I should welcome him and thank him for participating and take him inside.

When I reach the testing area, I will show the participant to his seat. I should offer him water and snacks.

I should ask the participant for the printed signed consent form. If he does not have it, I should give him another copy to review and sign. I should wait patiently while he is reading the form.

When I'm ready, I should sit now next to the participant with my phone, my pen, and my notepad.

I should then say:

Hello there [insert name here], I'm Michael Andryauskas, and for the next hour and a half, I would like go through some exercises and discussions relating to graduate school. During the activities, there are no right or wrong answers as long as they are truthful. As for the discussions, I would like to hear as many details as possible as long as they are your true thoughts and feelings. You are free to ask me questions, but I will not answer your question if I believe it would bias your answer.

I will be using this notepad to take notes during our session, but I will always be listening to what you have to say. With your signed consent, I am going to record the audio for this session on my phone for my personal notes. When I start recording, I will ask for verbal consent before going into the main material. I will also be periodically checking the time on my phone to ensure that we get out within the agreed upon time. Do you have any questions about the process before we begin?

After answering the questions about the process of the session, I should start the recording and say:

Do you agree to be recorded for this research study?

After gaining consent, I can officially begin asking questions.

Protocol – Questions & Activities

Start of Arc

What does it mean to get an education?

Why would someone want to get an education?

How would someone gain an education?

Tell me about the last time you visited an educational institution.

- Why were you going there?
- How would you describe the location?
- Who did you meet there?
- What types of people did you see there?
- What moments of your time stood out to you?
- What were some of the things that you discovered while you were there?

Halfway up Arc

Tell me more about the people that you met at this educational institution.

- What were they like?

What do you imagine when you think of an educational institution representative?

What would you share with or ask from an educational institution representative?

How would that compare with someone representing a graduate school?

How would you talk to a graduate school representative compared to talking to another person?

ACTIVITY: I will give the participant a pen and a slip of paper with the phrase “Finding Information” written at the top. Then I will give the following instructions:

I would like you to spend the next minute writing down as many words that come to mind that relate to the phrase above.

After one minute, spend a few minutes reviewing the results of the activity with the participant.

ACTIVITY: I will give the participant a pen and the following piece of paper:

ONLINE

OFFLINE

IN PERSON

Then give the following instructions: *I would like you to spend the next five minutes filling out what information you believe you can find online, offline, and in person.*

I will stop the participant after 5 minutes. Then, I will spend the next 10 minutes reviewing the results of the activity with the participant.

Tell me about the last time you had to find information offline.

- What were you looking for?
- How did you begin searching?
- Why couldn't you find the information online?
- Where did you go to find the information?
- Who did you talk to while searching for this information?

I should move the sheet of paper that says, “Finding Information” to the side in preparation for the next activity

ACTIVITY: I will give the participant a pen and a slip of paper with the word “Apply” written at the top. I should then say:

Once again, for the next minute or so please write down all the words that come to mind relating to the word on the slip of paper.

After one minute, I should spend a few minutes reviewing the results of the activity with the participant.

TOP OF ARC

When you apply for something, what does that mean?

Tell me about the most memorable time you attempted to apply for something.

- What were you applying for?
- Why were you completing the application?
- How long did the application process take?
- Where did you go during the application process?
- What made you believe it would be better to apply there when compared to other places with similar offerings?
- Who else was involved during the application process?
- How many times did you have to return to the location during the application process? What did you need to return for?
 - How was the first visit unique from subsequent visits?
- What were the results of the application process? How do you feel about what you applied for now?

How would you expect the application process for graduate school to proceed?

- What about this process is like [application story]? What is different?
- How long would the process take?

Tell me about how you will decide which graduate program or programs would be best for you.

- How would you decide whether a certain graduate program would be the right one for you?
- What schools (if any) have you looked at during your search for the graduate program for you?
- How did you learn about these graduate programs?
- How would you find information about a graduate program?

*I should move the application activity pages aside and show the word association slip with the “Finding information” phrase from the first activity

How should finding information for a graduate program compare to [the finding information scenario the participant told me about]?

- How is it similar? How is it different?
- What would you expect the people involved to provide?
- What information would you try to find out?

Halfway down arc

What could a graduate program provide that would be helpful to you before you submit an application?

What do you believe gaining a graduate degree would provide you?

Why are you interested in getting a graduate degree?

Post-Engagement

After the engagement is complete or the previously agreed upon time has passed, I will tell the participant “The session has ended,” and I will stop the recording. I should take photographs of the results of the activities that the participant has completed during the session. As compensation for his time, I might have follow up conversations with a participant regarding my current graduate program experience and/or offer to buy them lunch.

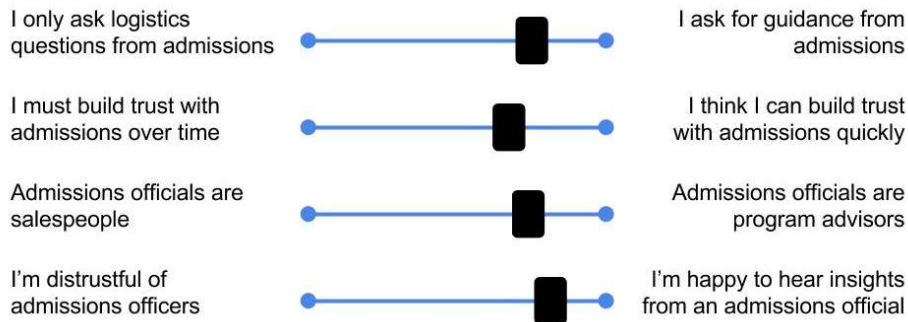
If the participant is to leave the facility where we met, I should escort the participant out of the building. After the participant has left, I should spend a half an hour reviewing the information gathered from the session.

Once the study has been completed on December 15th, 2017, I will delete any recordings related to the research study.

The Personas

The Guide Seeker (3 Participants)

“Admission officials are here to help me get the most out of my graduate education. I want to work with them to figure out if it’s best for me to get my graduate degree here and how we can make that happen.”



Tensions

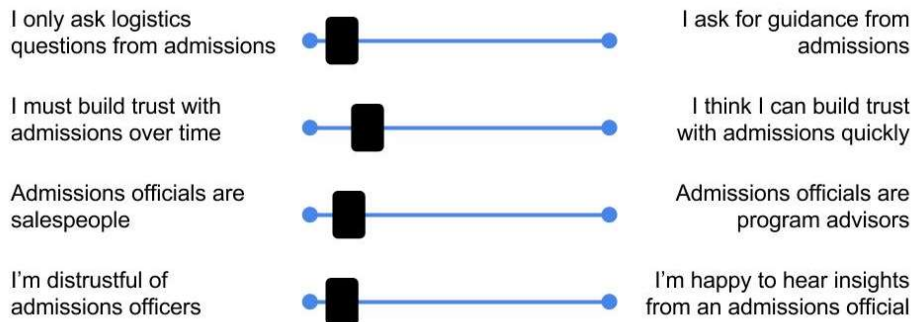
- Unsure how to proceed through the program when enrolled
- Needs help figuring out life responsibilities on top of graduate school
- Someone who helps me apply really needs to know me

More Thoughts

- Primarily wants an education to learn the material

The Skeptic (2 Participants)

“An admissions official tries to sell me on their school, but they don’t really know or care about the people they’re selling. I need to know what they’re trying to hide about the program.”



Tensions

- Needs to know the caveats of the program
- Wary to trust faculty members (especially admissions officials) the first time
- Wants to know if the program is worth going into for their career goals

More Thoughts

- Primarily wants an education for reasons outside of learning (gaining a network, filling a job prerequisite)

Themes

From the research gathered in this study, it can be suggested that potential students need the application process to be more about them rather than about the school. Personalizing the application experience would require the official to understand the applicants needs and wants to gain their trust and perhaps serve as an advisor during the application process.

Average Student Outreach

- *Potential applicants wish to find other non-biased opinions from current and former students of the program to discuss what to expect during and after the tenure in the program.*
- Both Guide Seekers and Skeptics believe speaking with the average student is important.
- Skeptics would be less likely to talk with a former student who has an affiliation with a school because the student may have been vetted to only say good things.
- Guide Seekers are more open to speaking to a faculty member who has completed his targeted graduate program in previous years.

Information from Admissions

- *While all potential applicants are expecting admissions to present logistic information about the school, some of them are also expecting guidance on how to make attending the program work.*
- Guide seekers are more likely to ask an admissions official how to coordinate their school schedule with other life responsibilities such as their jobs.
- Skeptics would be more likely to ignore advice about the program that an admissions official would provide, relying more on the advice of an average student from the program. Their perception of admission officials as salesmen makes them believe they have no “skin in the game” in regards to their success in the program.

Trust Building

- *If an admissions official wishes to be seen as a trustworthy ally, it would require the official addressing the potential applicant's needs in person.*
- Both Guide Seekers and Skeptics agree that it's easy to lie online and present only good and general information, and they would rather get to know a representative in person.
- Guide seekers are more likely to develop personal ties with a representative, looking for advice on how to shape their path in a graduate program.
- Skeptics may be more capable of trusting a representative when a relationship can be built between the applicant and the representative.

Asking good questions

- *An admissions official who asks questions about a potential student's situation provides the official with an understanding of the person, and the person gains more trust in the admissions official.*
- A Guide Seeker appreciates being asked questions because this allows the official to understand if the potential applicant would be a good fit for the graduate program.
- A Skeptic can gradually trust an admissions official's judgement about his program experience if the official learns about his needs and desires.

Being a Good Fit

- *Even if a potential applicant is qualified for the program, he wants to know if he can get along with the professors and peers in the program.*

- Both Guide Seekers and Skeptics need to know if they are a good fit for the program before applying.
- Guide Seekers are more likely to consult with an admissions official to see if they would be qualified, and may bring their resume with them when meeting them on campus.
- Skeptics are more likely to ask a student to determine if they are a good fit, asking more questions about the professor and the student body.

Understanding Caveats

- *A potential student wants to minimize his risk of getting a poor experience from his time in the graduate program.*
- Both Skeptics and Guide Seekers cite this as an important factor, but for different reasons.
- Skeptics are more likely to believe that the downsides of the graduate program may not appear until they're already committed to the program.
- Guide Seekers are more likely to want to know how the program schedule can coordinate with the other factors in their lives.

Return on Investment

- *Some potential applicants want to know what they're getting from completing the graduate program. This is directly contrasted with their view of applying for a job, which is more about what they can bring to the company.*
- This factor is generally more important to Skeptics than to Guide Seekers.
- Skeptics are more likely to reach out to former students of a program to ask how the education helped their career, and are looking to fulfill a dream job prerequisite or gain a larger network of professionals in their selected fields.
- Guide seekers generally don't believe that this is as important as the content they would be learning, and they're more likely to believe an education is never wasted.

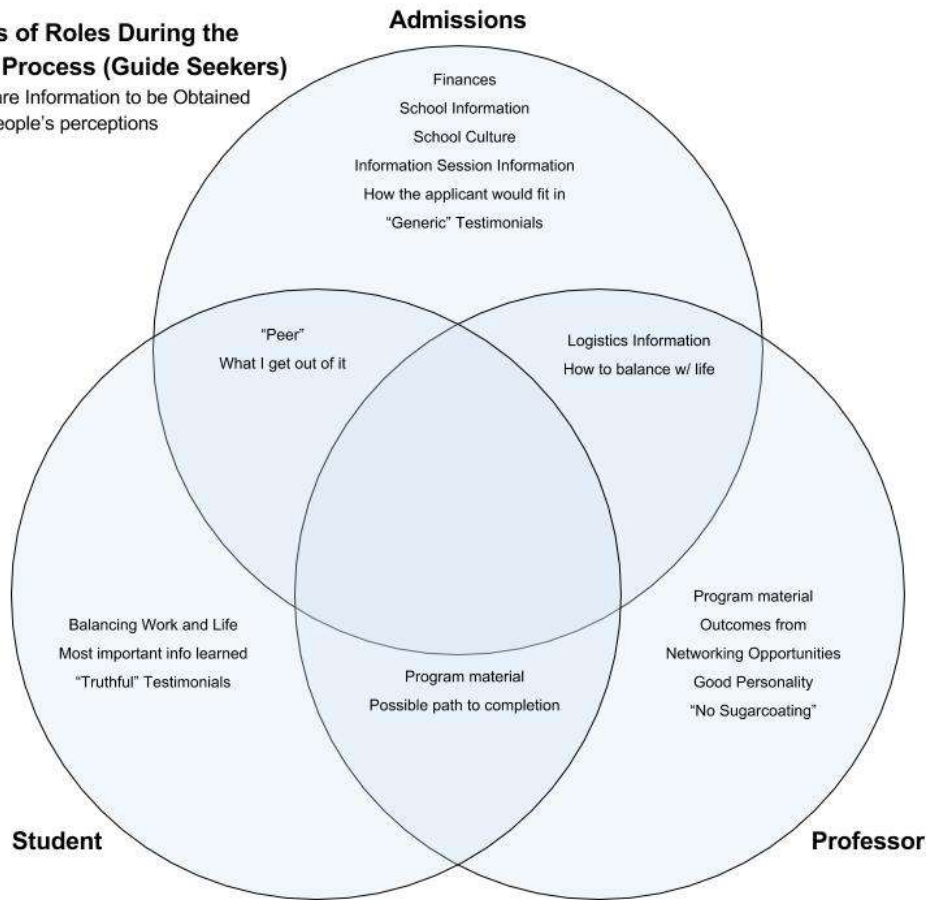
Relatability

- *Admissions officials should make sure they can connect with a potential student on a personal level, which may include having an in-depth understanding of the typical day in the life of a student in the desired program.*
- Guide seekers are more likely to view relatability as an important characteristic, and they may view an admissions official as a guide if they both come from similar backgrounds.
- While relatability is not the primary trait Skeptics look for when discussing admissions, they believe it's a nice complement to the type of person they imagine an admissions official would be.

Guide Seekers Expectations

Expectations of Roles During the Admissions Process (Guide Seekers)

All Non-Quotes are Information to be Obtained
All Quotes are people's perceptions



What makes a good application ally?

- Listens more than he talks
- Personalizes messages
- Been through the process themselves
- Can be seen as a peer
- Relatable
- Puts applicant at ease
- Asks questions about their interests
- Able to work with 3rd party members (i.e. company employing applicant)
- Provides a roadmap for the best path forward
- Responds to messages within 24 hours
- Tells the applicant what he/she needs to know
- Keeps information up to date

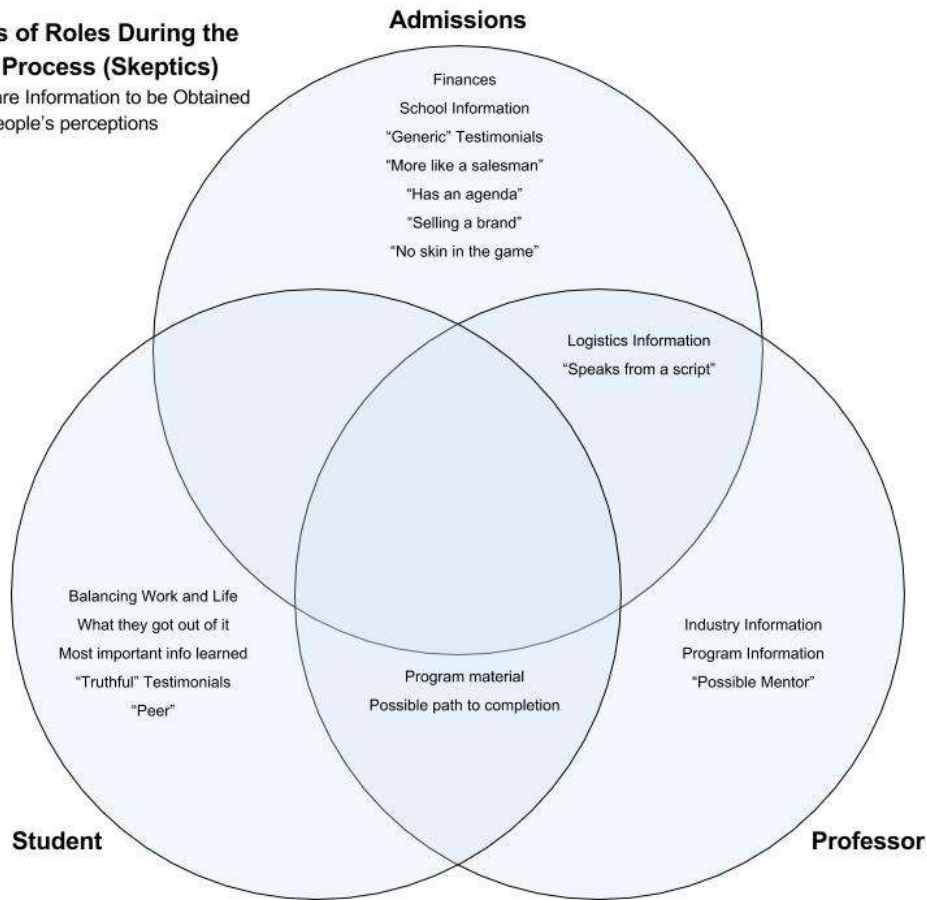
What makes a bad application ally?

- Treating you like a number
- Not being transparent with information
- Being Marketed Towards
- Not meeting one-on-one
- Providing automated responses

Skeptics Expectations

Expectations of Roles During the Admissions Process (Skeptics)

All Non-Quotes are Information to be Obtained
All Quotes are people's perceptions



What makes a good application ally?

- Expertise in the application process
- Relatable
- Listens more than he talks
- Remembers you
- Asks questions that reveals the applicant's needs
- Gaining a sense of what they like
- Accessible by phone or email
- Making suggestions based on what they want
- Keeps personal information safe and secure

What makes a bad application ally?

- Giving a sales pitch
- Speaking from a script
- Hiding information
- Pressuring applicant to apply

Analogous Experiences

Experience	How it's similar	How it's different
Applying to a job (Guide Seekers and Skeptics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to know if they're the right fit • Need to present your best work • Nerve-racking if you don't know if you got it • Decision makers should get a feel for who you are • Want to know first-hand accounts • Need to know the benefits • Can I learn what I need here? • Must read a description about the job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job about what I can do for them, Graduate School about what they can do for me • School should be less daunting • Work can help with the transition into new job vs. school should provide no transition help into class • Coworkers would need to make sure you are prepared; school applicants don't • Fewer applicants for a job
Getting Lost without a Phone (Guide Seekers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to rely on past experiences • Want a list of directions • Need to ask for help • Need to reach a destination 	
Applying for a house (Skeptics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to present your best work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School application should be less daunting
Applying for a mortgage (Skeptics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to present your best work • Need to keep personal information safe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School application should be less daunting
Speaking to a client (Guide Seekers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to know the right questions to ask • Should understand all the details 	
Networking Events (Skeptics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to stand out from others • Need to make connections • Learn about different perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More laid back for networking

Next Steps

If Bentley University wishes to refine the findings of this study with the researcher, Bentley should look to recruit participants representing different demographics than the sample recruited for the study. The participants gathered for this study were primarily potential applicants who have been out of school for at least a few years and are from the northeastern United States. There are two potentially important demographics that have not been addressed in this study.

- Potential applicants from other nations may have processes from their country of origin that may affect their perception of the application process at Bentley University.
- Potential applicants who are considered new undergraduates may have their perceptions altered by the processes from their undergraduate program.

There are also several assumptions that should be resolved to make the provided personas of potential applicants more accurate. Conducting more research on more participants may help clarify some of the assumptions that might be inferred from the data presented.

The following is a list of some of the potential assumptions

- It is unclear if there are any processes a potential applicant may want to go through prior to reaching out to a graduate program.
- While skeptics are capable of building relationships with someone they meet when they apply for a job, they may not wish to build a relationship with a graduate program admissions official in the first place.
- While Guide Seekers can tell when they're being reeled in by someone they trust, how much leeway do they give before breaking ties with the institution associated with the other party?

If the client is content with the information provided, Bentley should look at the perceptions presented in the research and, with the assistance of a UX design team, compare this to the realities of the application process. With these comparisons, speak to the design team about what could and should be done about these perceptions. In some cases, Bentley may want to alter the application process to match the perceptions. In other cases, Bentley may wish to find ways to eradicate the perception, especially if the perception has a negative connotation associated with it.