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## **Rethinking University Selection for Students through Real Life Testimonials**

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**Rethinking University Selection for Students through  
Real Life Testimonials**

By Pranav Shinde

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Communication Design

School of Design  
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY  
14623

## **Thesis Committee Approval**

**Thesis Title:** Rethinking University Selection for Students through Real Life Testimonials

**Thesis Author:** Pooja Shinde

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Communication Design**

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Date

## **Abstract**

The university selection process for students is a complicated process owing to the amount of investment and dedication it takes to take such a big step. The average cost and the time spent is a big factors and it is important to make a choice that students will cherish and make sure to see out through the entire course. However, in the course of making this decision, students have to rely on internet-based material such as university websites, comparison websites, and data-backed-of to entice students which always necessarily isn't right. What if students had an easier way to communicate with alumni and current students directly instead of scouring the internet to look for them to connect with? Having the ability to interact with alumni and current students directly would reduce the hassle of relying on old information and gaining real-life testimonials which would help them carve such an important path in their careers ahead. This project will explore user research to identify various touch points of interaction that students have while exploring their university options and where the intervention can likely happen. The thesis will allow main points of interaction to be evolved and adapted to students who are looking for their next level of study to be more personalized given through real-life testimonials, acknowledging multiple factors through real time communication. This helps them have a clearer look through someone else's eyes of what the experience would be like and help them choose a path of their liking.

The University Selection Process for students encompasses massive efforts of looking for the right university; finding the right program, and the faculty that you want to be studying under. For students, the process begins right from going through multiple requirements, deciding on universities to apply and then making one choice out of the many. This project is aimed at trying to help the students make better-informed decisions through real-time testimonials which are currently too far to reach and involve a very cumbersome workflow. The aspect of establishing real-time communications with either the program advisor, current students, or alumni involves utilizing multiple channels to get through and is a complicated workflow in the current scenario. A quote by Rick Clark considerably came under my eye when he mentioned, "Consulting alumni is a great way to learn about how their majors – or even specific courses or instructors – influenced their ultimate career trajectory, whether or not they ended up pursuing that field." This went on to highlight the fact that alumni connect does play a major role in terms of helping you choose the right career path and is not only limited to choosing a certain program or a certain university. The workflow considerably isn't in the favor of students with multiple tasks being juggled by them at the time ends in a rush scenario which may or may not help them in making the best possible decision. The solution I intend to work on would try to ascertain the factors which are most relevant to students while looking for certain universities. The research I look forward to undertaking would focus on questions about what important factors students take into account while making the final decision when selecting a particular university. After the interviews are completed my outlook would be focused on outlining what are the major interaction points that users tend to approach and tweaking them to help them establish real-time communications to obtain knowledge which is about their decision-making process. Having a real individual contribute their experiences with the product - in this scenario is a very important decision such as university selection helps. As stated in a pew research document, "By and large, Americans have confidence that reviews and ratings can be beneficial: Majorities say reviews have at least a somewhat positive effect on consumer confidence (88% think they help a lot or some), product safety (80%) and company accountability (78%)." Keeping in mind testimonials play such a big part, I explored through user interviews what would be the most relevant way for students to get in touch with alumni and current students. Many of the interviewees suggested that it is a stressful decision and confiding with someone who has been through a similar experience they might be having provides a sense of security and dependency which they can rely upon. The interviews also highlighted a high amount of confidence in students to rely on real-life testimonials even though a hard resource to look for is the most trusted way. The internet is filled with things that are looking to sell in one way or the other and misinformation is a very big part of luring potential customers (students in this case). The framework I identified after conducting focuses on developing real-life communications through university websites. University websites offer a deep-dive into the structure and culture, however, it lacks a personal approach to it. Having the ability to connect with someone with the same experience offers reliance. Universities can utilize this tool to market for their relevance and reliance on their offerings. It also serves as a huge marketing strategy that has possibly not been

explored earlier. My iteration of the framework building relies on helping potential students connect with alumni directly from the university website. The ease of access which was identified through user interviews cemented the assumption of helping students reach out directly. Many of the interviewees agreed it would be absolutely helpful to connect seamlessly. The other factor I took into account was the availability and feasibility of recruiting alumni, if not available for live sessions, alumni can chat, schedule later times and allow for flexibility in their calendars. The UI is designed intuitively keeping in mind, clear labeling of who the alumni are, their designations, and previous work they have accomplished. My current iteration only focuses on design students but it is a framework that can be adapted for multiple programs and aligned accordingly.

One of the big aspects I also intended to touch upon was the cumbersome application process. Having the ability to learn more about the university, and its culture also plays a major role, instead of having to research on the internet, the user can engage in a conversational AI which can help them guide them through the application process but also highlight multiple factors like student groups, different facilities which make it more enticing for the user to learn about and make a decision.

In conclusion, the current university selection process could be more meaningful for potential students. Visually appealing and ease of access by the usage of the right icons, colors, and labeling helps in establishing real-time communication. Adding multiple features such as scheduling calls, the ability to view their university work, and the chat option would give the users an effective experience. The framework would allow potential students to make better-informed decisions through real-life testimonials. The additional experience of completing a step-by-step application when replaced by a conversational AI allows for the potential student to learn more effectively about the university through prompts initiated through their responses and also be able to complete their application but with an engaging experience.

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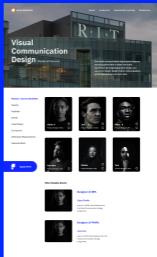
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# Rethinking University Selection for Studnets through Real Life Testimonials

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## Expanded Thesis Defence Presentation

*Pranav Shinde*





Prompt -

It is difficult for prospective students to choose a university that matches their liking in terms of prospects and something they have an interest in. Multiple factors like cost, living preferences, food, and place play a big part in making a very important decision.

### Solution -

Identify various touchpoints of interactions that incoming students go through and add personalized interactions which help them in making better-informed decisions through real-life conversations and testimonials.

## Primary Research

My primary research was focused on understanding where in the entire process of determining the appropriate school from a bunch of options the students felt most uncomfortable. There are numerous factors that international students have to take into account when making such a big decision that shapes their career. I wanted to understand where and how could those gaps be filled in for students to make a better-informed decisions.

I conducted a survey and interviews that consisted of **87 participants** across the spectrum of being involved in the admission process at some point in their careers.

**75% of the prospective students** rely on connecting with the alumni to make an informed decision during their university selection process.

**65% of the students** said it would be better if they could seamlessly connect with current students to determine how it aligns with their personal and professional goals.

Almost all the users highlighted it would have been easier to determine their university choices if they had multiple chances to interact with someone from the university other than their advisors. Reviews don't exactly help identify the current scenario of the particular program they are looking to enroll in.

## Key Takeaways

**Alumni Connect** - Most of the survey results indicated incoming students rely on the aspect of having personal communication, having real-life testimonials really helps them make better decisions.

The ground reality while being enrolled in a university is completely different than expected. Being aware of these circumstances definitely would help in making decisions as well. (Transport, Groceries, etc.)

## **Secondary Research**

Geared toward understanding what are the existing paths in potential students use to narrow down their final choices for college admissions, it was important for me to understand where in the existing workflow can the solutions be explored and how practical would they be in terms of benefitting the students in reducing their load and yet yield substantial results in making better informed decisions.

## Existing College Research for New Students



Google Search

Ranked Listings

Reviews

Acceptance Rate



LinkedIn

University Comparison

Alumni Search

University Socials

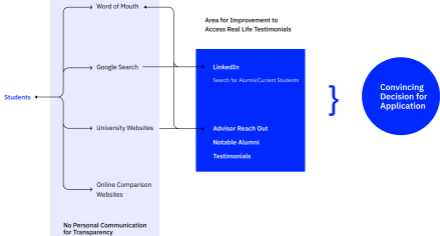


University Websites

Course Offerings

Course Structure

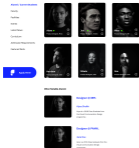
Advisor Reach Out





How might we establish transparency for potential students through real-time testimonials that help in making the right and well-informed decision from other than the available resources which are available at ease?

Rather than focusing on one solution to the university selection process, my solution focused on identifying different touch points for students where personalization could be provided. The solution is a framework to potentially build upon into university websites/social media marketing and also the application process.



## Live Chat with Alumni.

Have a conversation with program alumni of your concerned program either through chat or video calls.

- Real-Time Connections
- Testimonials
- Accurate Information



#### Key Takeaways



**Douglas B. BSN**

**BSN**

BSN



**Douglas B. BSN**

**BSN**

BSN

**Schedule Call.**

**Have a conversation with program alumni of your concerned program at a later time depending on the availability.**

- **Flexibility**
- **Trust**
- **Accessibility to resources.**



Call Functionality.

Have a conversation with program alumni or a current student of your concerned program through an intuitive UI to help connect in a seamless way.

- Easy to Share
- Live Communication

## Components



Name Cards



Icon Styles



### **Pranav Shinde - Product Designer**

Pranav is a 2nd Year MFA student in the Visual Communication Design Department. Pranav has taken courses like Interaction Design, Information Design, Branding and UX Design Strategies.

## Video Call Screen

## User Testing

### Questions -

Do you think connecting with alumni directly would help you in making university selection decisions more appropriate?

**14/15 interviewed users** agreed it would be better if they could directly talk to alumni.

Do you think a personalized approach from the university to provide real testimonials helps?

**12/15 interviewed users** said testimonials highly affect how they perceive a decision.

How difficult do you think it is to make a decision without consulting someone directly associated with the university?

Most of the users determine they struggle getting in touch with someone from the university other than through email communications.



Going above & beyond.

The experience of university selection also encompasses the application process. Reimagining the application experience to translate the form-based approach into a conversational application would help the students remain engaged in the process and also the intuitive approach that the university is undertaking.

\*Conversational AI for the application process would only be utilized if the advisors are unavailable for one on one interactions. The users can still connect with other students if they wish to connect as per availability.

How does a conversational application process make a difference in the experience that the students undertake?

**Voice provides a realistic feel in interactions -**

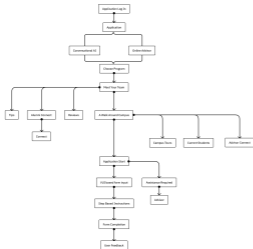
Interactive voice systems are a more natural means of interaction than visual interfaces for the majority of users and by removing a visible interface and exchanging it with voice, users are placed in a far more acquainted context.

**Offering a tailor-made personalized experience -**

A conversational interface or a device utilizing conversational AI can produce a deeper personal connection between a user and a system. This way, it is not just a device for the user, but more of a friend.

**Anticipatory Design -**

With your objective to reduce your end user's efforts in order to communicate with the WUI, it is imperative to understand the initial intent and anticipate needs at various "checkpoints" within the conversation in order to dish out relevant response(s).



This diagram represents the user flow for the application process through conversational AI. The entire process will be functioning on the basis of user inputs and specific commands. The user can also ask for the intervention of an advisor if available which provides a fallback for any system faults that are unseen.



### Panda

Your application assistant.

My name is Panda. I'm a conversational AI chat designed to guide you with your application for Acme.

Thank you for your interest in Acme. We're excited to potentially have you as a student.

Please select your field of interest at Acme.

Select Here →

Or:

Get More Assistance

Acme University

Your Communication Design Assistant



Here are some tips to help you with -

- Application Process Requirements
- General & Current Student Concerns
- Portfolio Review Request
- General Admissions Program Inquiries

Type your question below.

Send



## Meet your potential team!

Contact

Portfolio

Academic Records



**John Doe**  
Visual Communication  
Design Program Director



**Jane Doe**  
Instructional Designer  
Design Program Co-Director



Thomas Smith



Felicia Singh



Will Thomas



Sarah Miller

 **Frank**  
Your application advisor

**Tim**

- Application Process Requirements
- Manual & Current Student Contact
- Portfolio Review Process
- Connect with Program Advisor

### Acme HPA Visual Communication Design Application



 Let's start with your Full Name.

 `0000-0000-000000000000000000000000` 

 Will Praxus Steaks, did I get that right?

## Developing human-like conversations instead of forcing students down a rigid path.

For example -

Where are you coming from? What is your nationality?

**"India"**

I have heard great things about India, we have OSCIS, a student body for international students from India, let me know if you need some more information about the same.

.....

Developing narratives based on the individual helps the student engage more freely to have a conversation and also helps the university learn in more depth regarding a potential candidate and their eligibility for a particular program.

This is a framework that can be multiplied across various products to reshape the future of sales. It is a system that can be replicated by replacing certain terminologies and players in the area of concern.

How Might We?

Help real-time prospective clients connect with real-time product beneficiaries to establish a transparent client experience.



## Prospective Clients



Social Media Marketing

Flyers

Advertisements

Product

Real Life  
Testimonials  
through product  
beneficiaries.