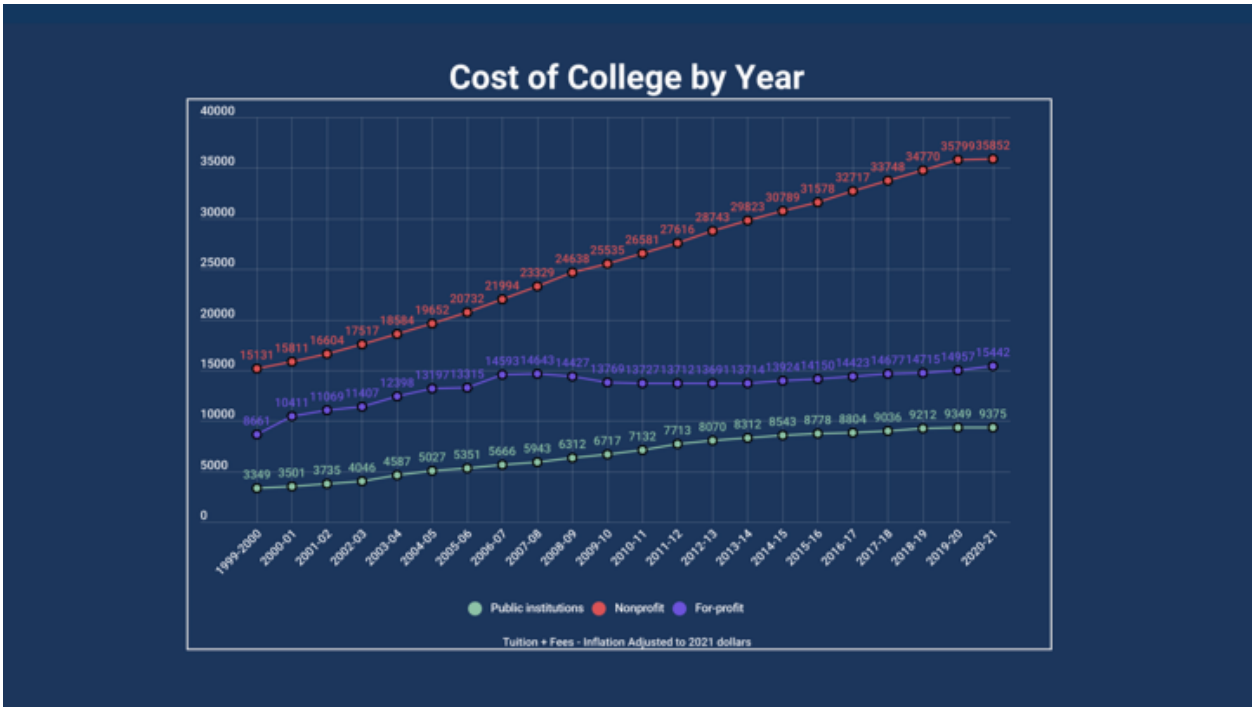
Winning Edge #7 – Persuade with a Visual

This is Trevor Bragdon with Commonwealth Partners' *The Winning Edge*: Tips to help conservatives persuade and win.

Today, we're looking at how to create a persuasive visual or persuasive graph. This episode's a little different. Normally, we do these as audio, but since we're doing a visual, we have to show you something. Rather than talking about a graph, we will show you one.

Take a look at a graph we have right here. This is a graph that shows the cost of college by year, and we look at it on the public colleges, the nonprofit colleges, and then the for-profit colleges.



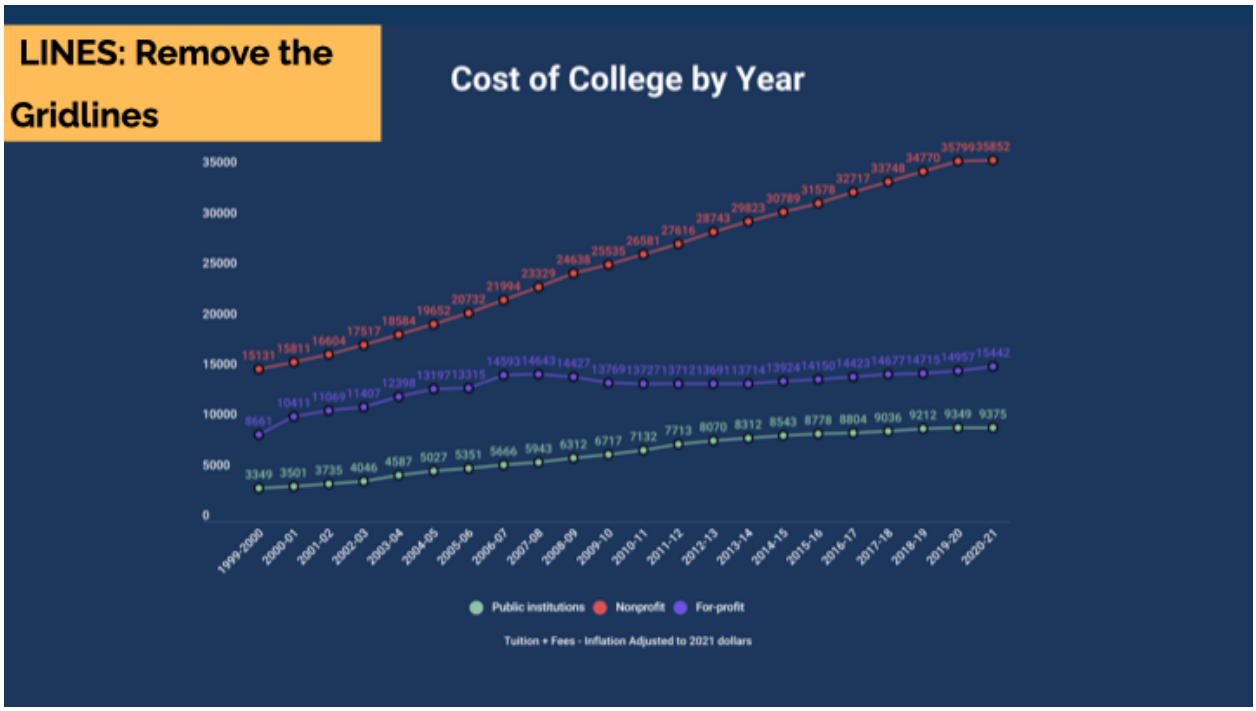
The first thing you want to do when you have a graph like this is to really ask yourself the question, "Is this the best type of graph?" We've chosen a line graph, but should you be using a bar graph, a stacked bar graph, or something else?

Next you should ask, "What's the emotion that I'm going for with this graph?" Think about your target audience. Who are those people you are trying to influence? Who's the main decision-maker you want this graph to persuade? And really think about what emotion you want them to feel. Maybe it's surprise, maybe it's outrage, maybe it's anger, curiosity, or excitement. For this example, we're going for a graph that shows curiosity. We want the decision-maker looking at this graph to start asking some additional questions.

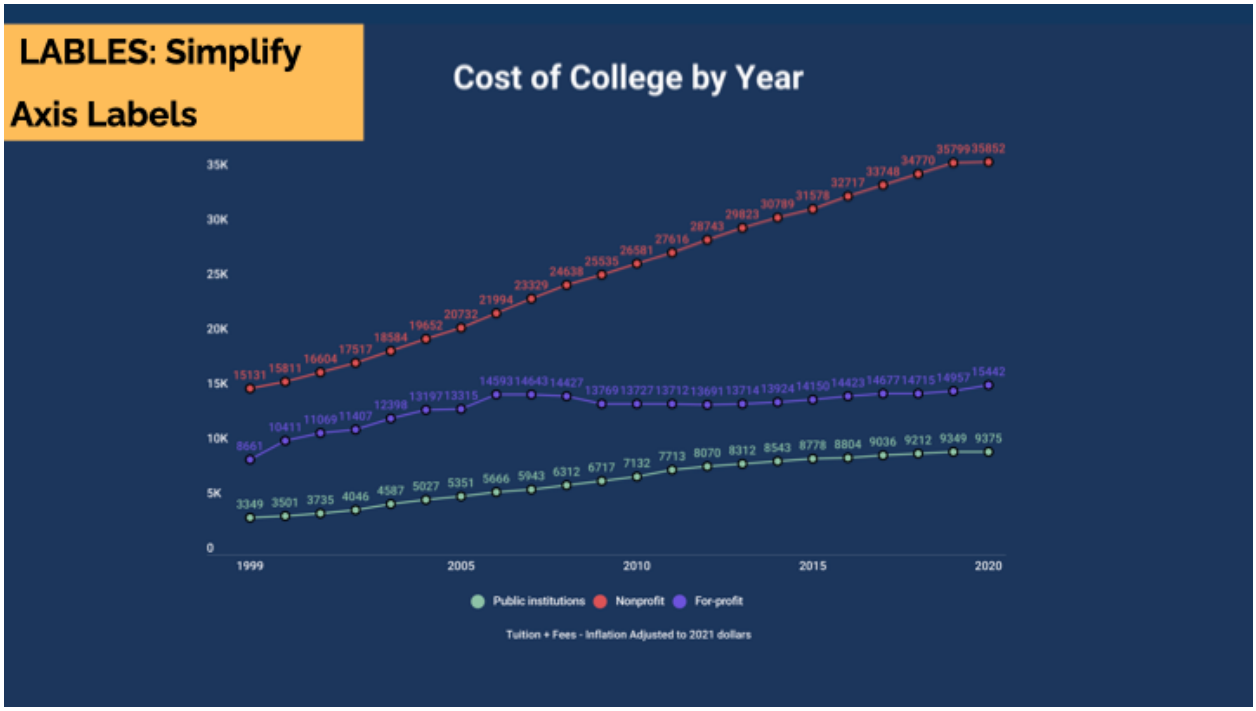
Now that we've decided on the type of graph and the emotion we want to have, let's clean up this graph to make it more persuasive. If you're an economist, you might love this graph with all the points and everything about it all in one place. But for the other 99% of the world, this graph is a little overwhelming and hard to quickly figure out what's going on. Remember, your decision-maker is very busy. You want them to understand the point of a graph in under five seconds so that they might dig in and learn more.

This graph looks like a lot of work, so to simplify a graph, all you need to remember is three letters: LLC. And that stands for Lines, Labels, and Colors.

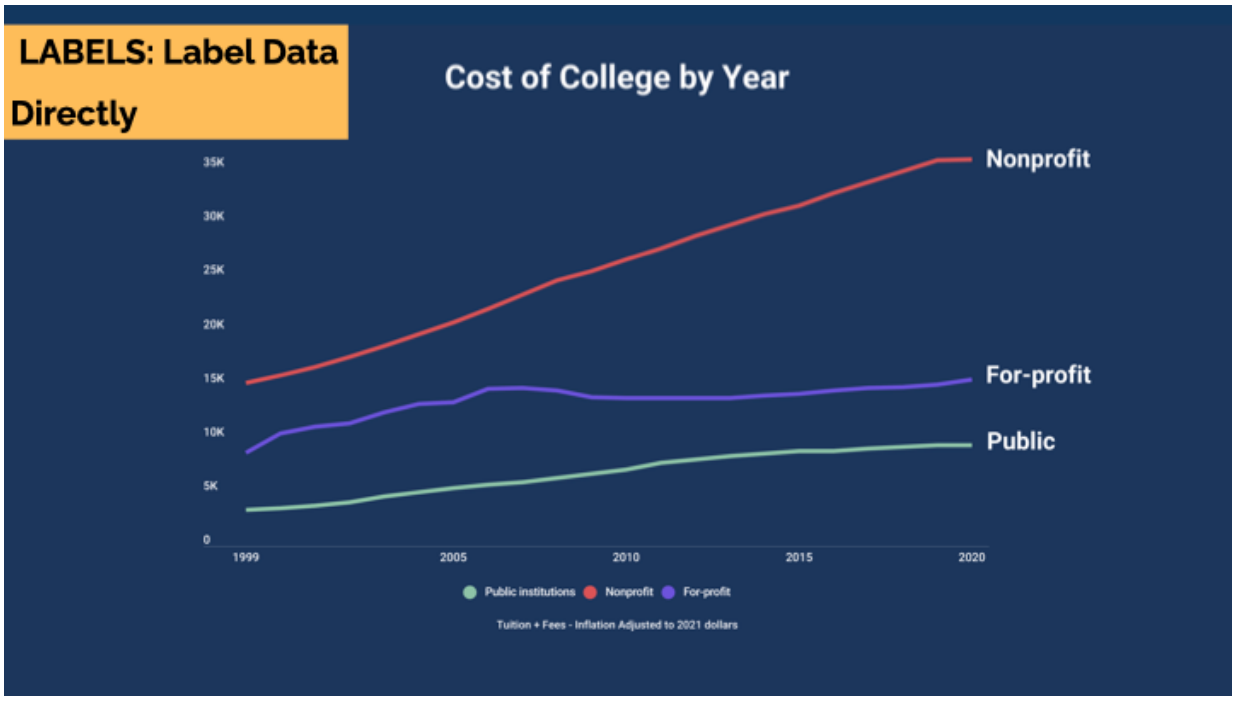
Lines - The first thing you want to do is focus on lines. Are there lines that we could simplify here? The next thing you want to do is remove the grid lines. Grid lines themselves aren't bad, but they create visual clutter, which makes it difficult for the person looking at the graph to tell what's going on. Use only a few strategic lines on your graph to make it make sense.



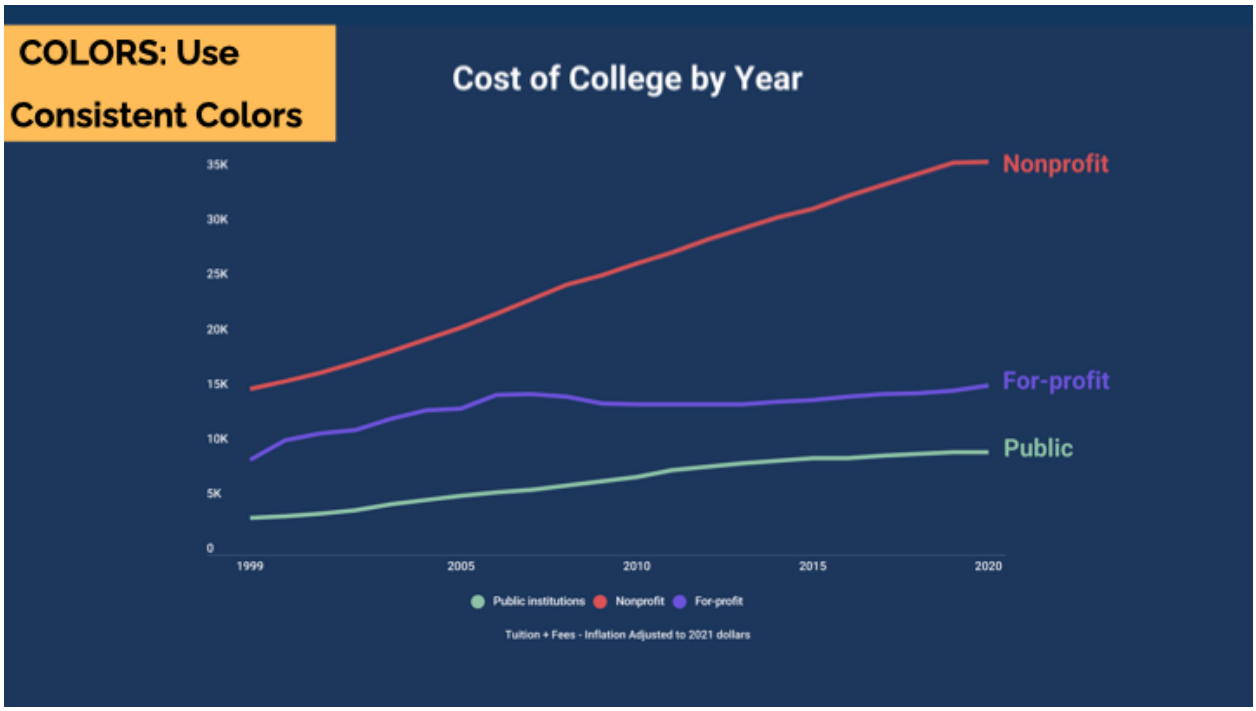
Labels - The second thing you want do is you want to adjust the X and Y axis by simplifying the labels on those axes. On the lefthand side, you can see what we did here is made it say 30k instead of 30,000. Also, instead of showing every single year on the bottom, we broke it into five-year chunks. Again, this is just making it easier for your reader and decision-maker to quickly tell what's going on.



- The next thing you can do is remove your data labels. You don't necessarily need to have every point along this graph. Now, if you want precision in a graph, you may leave on those data labels. But if you're going for directional accuracy and you want to just create an impression of the direction, you want to remove those labels to make it clearer for the audience and that decision-maker to see the trends in front of them.
- After you remove those data labels, then you want to label the data directly when possible. The top line is now clearly nonprofit colleges. The second line is for-profit colleges, and the third line is public colleges. This is much easier to read quickly.



- **Color -** Here you want to use consistent coloring on your graph and labels. Now the decision-maker can look quickly, know what's going on in this graph, and see what each line represents.



To make a visual more persuasive and improve a graph:

1. First ask, “Is this the right type of graph?”
2. Then decide on the emotion you want to create.

3. Clean up the graph by remembering **LLC** - **L**ines, **L**abels, and **C**olors.
    a. Remove unnecessary **Lines** both on borders and on grid lines.
    b. Then **Label** the data directly, simplify the labels on your X and Y axis.
    c. Try to use **Colors** consistently when you label that data to make it easy to look at the graph and understand what's going on.

Do this, and you'll give yourself the winning edge.