

Visuals That Bring Postsecondary Value to Life

How to turn your data into visuals that inform and stick

While the data behind postsecondary value is compelling, the challenge remains that most of the audiences we need to reach will never read a full report. In order to reach them with information that sticks, we have a very limited amount of time to capture their attention.

A well-designed visual does work that words cannot do alone, making complex data immediately legible. Whether building materials on your own or providing a marketing and communications team details on what is needed, this guidance will help us think about how to build visuals that work, and provides the language to ask for them effectively. Use this guide as a reference when developing a variety of materials, such as slides, one-pagers, and social media content — or as a briefing tool when partnering with designers in your organization. *Please note the data presented in these graphics is for demonstration purposes only.*

Core Principles for Visualizations and Graphics

Lead with the finding, not only numbers: Start designing your visual by asking yourself, “What do I need this person to walk away knowing?” That becomes your headline.



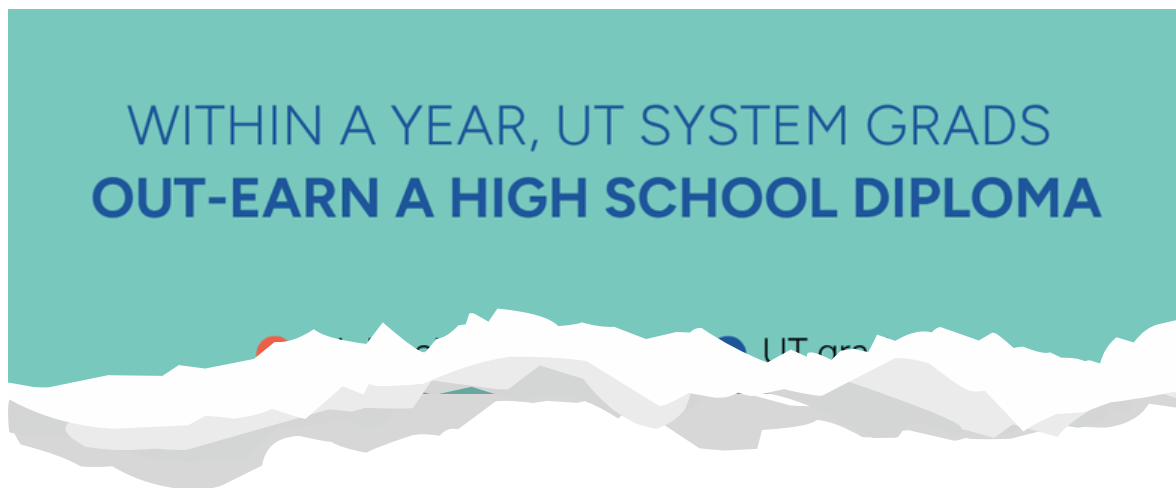
Convert metrics into relatable terms: Percentages and thresholds are meaningful to researchers, but for most of our audiences, dollars, years, and comparisons land better.

DON'T:



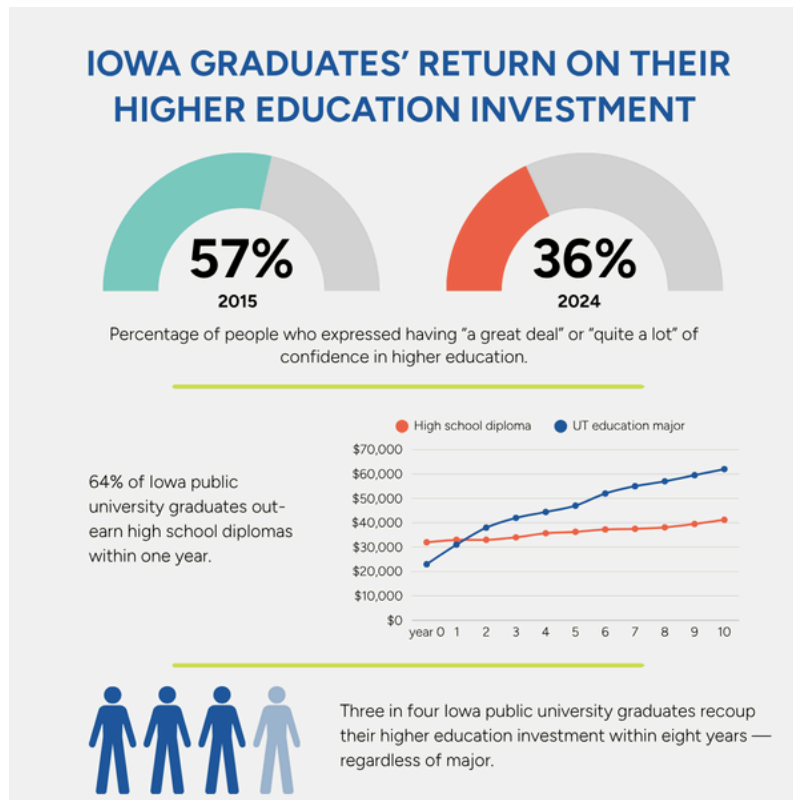
Give numbers a reference point: Anchor your data to something the audience understands, such as a comparison group, time horizon, cost figure or community touchstone.

DO:

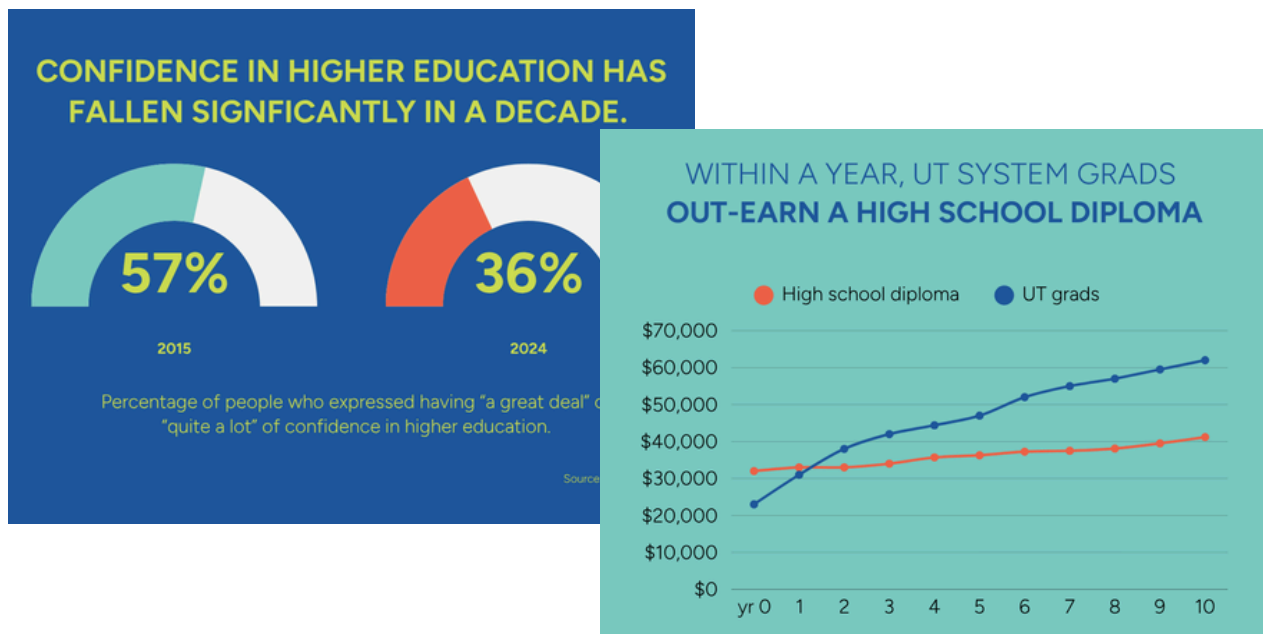


Less is more: Resist the urge to put everything into a single chart or image. Each visual should be clear about the finding in one glance.

DON'T:



See it in action: Let's put it all together with a couple of examples:



Visual Types and When to Use Them

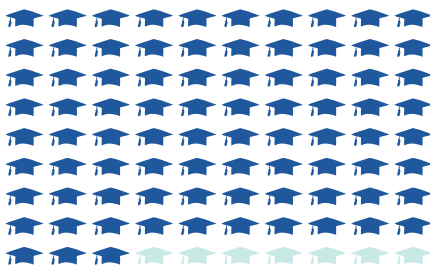
Data Visualizations

The workhorses of visuals, these are designed to inform decision-makers quickly and credibly.

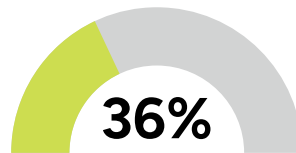
Best for:

- Showing earnings trajectories over time
- Comparing outcomes across programs, institutions, or groups
- Illustrating break-even timelines or ROI benchmarks
- Surfacing equity gaps for various disaggregated groups

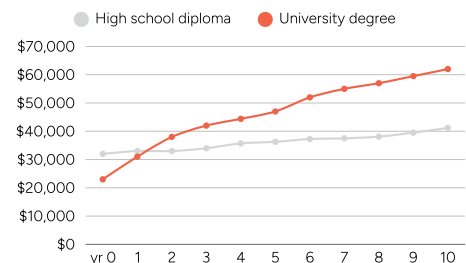
These images are most commonly used in board presentations, legislative or executive briefings, institutional reports, or one-pagers. They're meant for evaluation by the audience.



93% of graduates recoup their full higher education investment within just eight years.



Only 36% of Americans have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education.



University degrees out-earn high school diplomas within two years post-graduation, and earn a 50% premium after 10 years.

Design tips:

- Use a clear, declarative headline above the chart
- Limit color to two or three values; use contrast intentionally to draw the eye to what matters
- Remove gridlines, excess labels, and any elements that compete with the finding
- Always include a brief data source note at the bottom for credibility
- General rules of thumb for different charts:
 - If showing a change over time, use a line chart
 - If comparing categories, use a bar chart
 - Avoid pie charts if category distribution is not significantly different

Social Media Graphics

Grab the attention fast and communicate something meaningful in three seconds or less.

Best for:

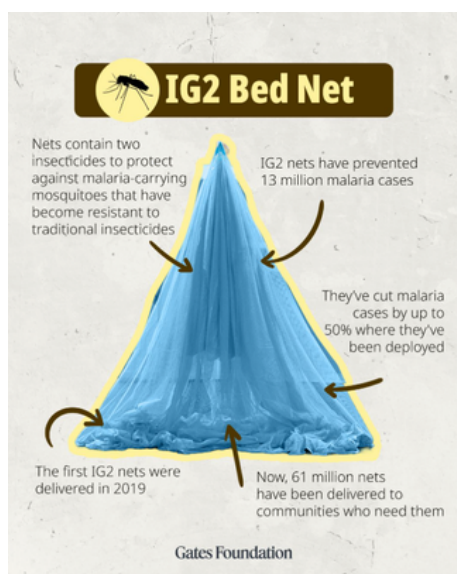
- Sharing a single striking statistic
- Reframing a common misconception
- Connecting outcomes to impact
- Turning a key finding from a report into accessible language

These visuals need to stand out in a feed, competing with everything else clamoring for your audience's attention.

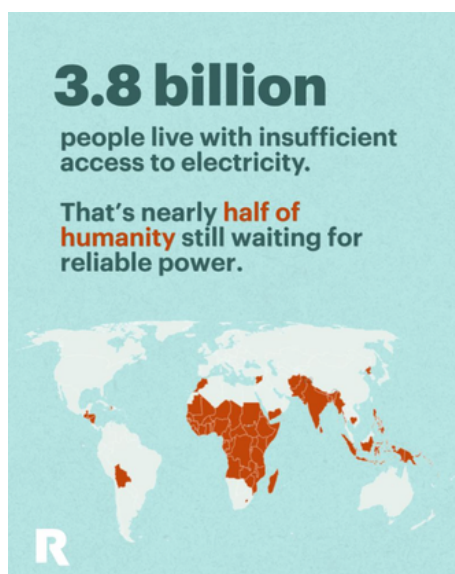
Design tips:

- One state, one visual, one message
- Anchor data to human scale (e.g., "that's 1 in 3 students")
- White space signals clarity and confidence
- Pair data with imagery or, sparingly, icons
- Simplicity is your friend – no charts that require legends

EXTERNAL EXAMPLES:



[Source](#)



[Source](#)



[Source](#)

Jargon-Free Visuals

Jargon alienates, plain language creates buy-in. While the Postsecondary Value Framework threshold structure is powerful, it's also abstract. Together, we will practice how to make each threshold tangible for non-technical audiences.

THRESHOLD	REFRAME EXAMPLE	MAKE IT YOUR OWN
Threshold 0: Minimum Economic Return	Was the investment worth it?	
Threshold 1: Earnings Premium	Do graduates earn at or above median wages for their field?	
Threshold 2: Earnings Parity	Are graduates experiencing pay inequities compared to peers?	
Threshold 3: Economic Mobility	Does a degree move people into upper-middle income?	
Threshold 4: Economic Security	Can graduates build financial security to withstand life's curveballs?	
Threshold 5: Wealth Parity	Do all students attain similar levels of wealth compared to more advantaged peers?	
Social or Community Value	How do these occupations impact our community?	