September 13, 2012

Dear Matt Ericson,
I’m writing you this letter to present some of my opinions about the article in http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/05/13/business/student-debt-at-colleges-and-universities.html.

What impresses me most in the visualization is the play mode of the chart, which is actually quite straightforward and helps initial users a lot in trying to have a quick idea of the trend on how the graduate debt and tuitions change over the years without the users having to click on the years on the slide bar. I also like the fact that users can zoom in and out the chart to take a look at some colleges that have graduate debt or tuitions in a specific range. In addition, by not only providing the search function to search for the data of a certain school, the name of which, when typed, can be prompted in a dropdown list, but also the map in which the locations of schools are given, this visualization definitely achieves the goal of interacting friendly with the users as well as offering what the users need. The last but not the least, all the components fitting into a screen where users don’t have to scroll up and down makes it much more clear and easier for interaction.

Aside from those, I do think that there’re some improvements that can be made to approach a better visualization. First of all, for the play mode, it might be better if users can cancel it by clicking a button or typing a certain key like “esc” when they don’t want to see it at the beginning, and for the slide bar for the year that can be set, is it possible to be triggered even when users click somewhere around the bar without having to precisely clicking on the slide bar? Second of all, the widget chosen for the filter “schools to show” has a problem when combined conditions are selected. So in this case, checkboxes would be better, and it won’t have the problem of white large area between this widget and the widget below it when no filter condition is selected. And I also suggest to put college or universities as a filter condition. Apart from that, although different colors are used for private and public schools, there are still some outlier circles that can give useful information are hidden behind circles with a different color. Besides, when I click a circle in the chart for details, I have to click the close button in the upper right in order to click on another circle which is hidden by this popup window. Maybe it would be better if this window can disappear when the mouse moves over it. And one last thing, if any warning message can be provided when there’s no result for what the users want to search, it would be very helpful. For instance, once I selected the private schools and after which went to the search box to type University of Maryland College Park which is apparently in the database and chose the map, there’s nothing related showed because University of Maryland College Park is a public school.
To sum up, this interactive visualization, including its animation, the choice of color and design really attracts me and thus interacts well with users in a large extend except for some improvements you might think that would be useful. It would be great if you could kindly think about my opinions and we can discuss this further later if you’d like to. Thanks again for your time.

Sincerely yours,
Yulu