

“We need more free food!”: Free Food and Excellent Performance of Academic Institutes

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Abstract

Many technology companies provide free food to their employees as part of employee welfare programs. Previous research reveals that free food at companies contributes building bonds between employees and increasing productivity. However, not much research on free food has been done in an academic environment. Through three weeks of field experimentation, we present an in depth examination of how experiment participants find and ingest free food. We report how the participants with different personalities managed to survive with free food. We also observe behavior change in participants by conducting post-interviews. We foresee our work will aid Ph.D. students who are generally broke by motivating university administration to provide more free food for the success of their students.

1. Introduction

Free food and technology companies have become an inseparable notion. Technology companies are expected to offer free food and employees enjoy complimentary diet.

Prior research[1, 2] suggests the positive impact of free food on enterprises. Without question, employees can have a healthy and nutritious diet for free. Furthermore, employees have more opportunities to meet and interact with their colleagues.

Given the flexible schedule of graduate students and the differences between product development and research, this implication cannot be taken as applicable for academic institutes for granted. There are also differences in characteristics of free food between the two communities. Free food in a business environment is usually served in cafeterias to save time and effort for employees. However, in institutes, it is served to advertise events such as seminars and events.

To investigate the impact of free food on academic institutes, we conduct a 3-week long field experiment on two Ph.D. students at a private school in the United States. We observe different behaviors

in searching for free food and attempting to feed themselves when there is no free food, dependent on the personalities of the participants. The following section demonstrates a previous strategy used for searching for free food.

2. Previous Work

The most common method is subscribing to a free food mailing list. There is a variety of free food mailing lists such as those which are department-wide and institute-wide. The institute also has numerous recurring social events (e.g. muffin Monday, “Taste of” series).

3. Experiment Setup

In order to test the impact of free food on the life style of the Ph.D. student, We restricted participants to consuming only free food during the experiment period. We recruited participants in the institute (age $M=23$, $SD=1.14$, 1 male and 1 female). Participant #1 does not have a dietary restriction and has a flexible office schedule. Participant #2 is gluten-free and actively participating various events at the institute. She comes to the office between 6am-7am and leaves office late at night.

We set the rules for the experiment as follows.

- Participants cannot spend a penny on food during any weekday between 9:00am and 6:30pm.
- Participants may do grocery shopping outside of this time window and may consume this food at any time as long as the total quantity of food is less than a full meal.

Should a participant violate any of the rules, they will forfeit \$10 to the other participant and the experiment will conclude.

4. Results

Participant #1 showed great dependence on free food mailing lists. He monitored emails vigilantly and upon receiving emails he ran to the source of food on campus. However, when there were no free food emails, he skipped his meals and ate outside the window of restriction.

Participant #2 took entirely different strategy. She had not attended seminars before the experiment, but during the experiment she went to several talks, conferences, and even other institutes to find free food. She also collaborated with other colleagues to notify her when said colleagues found free food. When she met difficulty finding food, she also asked friends to buy her food.

Interestingly, participant #2 accumulated more sources of free food as the experiment continued. Participants #2 said “I literally

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got more than three different messages from my friends about free food everyday”

5. Conclusion and Future Work

In general, participants expressed positive feedback about free food. Participant #2 mentioned *“I was able to save lots of money.”* Participant #1 said *“The best decision I made at MIT!”*

We found participants were more actively exploring the campus during the experiment. Participants #1 said *“If I get a free food notification, I need to run and it makes me exercise.”* Participant #2 said *“I never went to seminars before. But during the experiment, I went to several and had a chance to explore many interesting research areas! I will continue to attend even after the experiment!”* It suggests academic institutes should have more free food events to encourage their students to explore their many resources and different research groups around campus.

However, we also observe limitation of free food. Participant #2 complained about limited diet range of free food. *“I don’t eat pizza. But a big portion of free food is pizza,”* and *“I used to like Indian food. But I think I now have it way too much. I literally had Indian food 6 times in a row.”* Participant #1 *“I’m from India. I want food other than Indian.”*

As a future work, we will implement an interface to offer students notification of available free food option around campus.

6. Acknowledgement

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References

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