Classroom Projects to Motivate Student Involvement in Behaviorally-Based Community Initiatives

Forrest J. Toegel, Elizabeth M. Kerber, Bryan T. Yanagita, and Dr. Carla H. Lagorio
Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

INTRODUCTION

Service to the community is a valued practice, essential to optimize many city operations we enjoy as individuals. Indeed, UWEC places such a high value on such activities that service learning is a requirement for graduation, offering "rich experiences for UWEC students and substantial benefits for the community" *(Center for Service Learning, UWEC)*. Service activities span a wide range, from enriching lives of others (e.g., volunteering at the Boys and Girls Club, at the County Humane Association) to maintaining city conditions (e.g., removing litter from highways, clearing bike paths) to improving environmental sustainability (e.g., increasing food composting efforts).

Several courses within the Behavior Analysis major (among other university majors) are *proposal courses* – meaning that students gain the experience in drafting a research proposal that has potential to be implemented in the future.

Previously, the Experimental Analysis of Behavior course (Psychology 412) required students to write proposals on any research topic relevant to the field. Over the past year, however, students have been instructed to draft proposals around a research idea that could feasibly be implemented to **benefit the local community of Eau Claire**. As an incentive beyond course points, students who perform well are asked to continue assisting with the lab research efforts upon completion of the course (adding to their research vitas).

Meanwhile, students take part in data collection efforts for the community-based projects to learn more about data collection, how to assess reliability and validity of findings, and to overall gain increased exposure into how research is conducted. Throughout this process, instructor micro-management of research is faded to permit students to be shaped by direct exposure to consequences (rather than instructed rule-following).

The following data will highlight several of the projects the students have focused on over the past year. Some have yielded promising methodologies/initial results and have been continued by several advanced students after completion of Psychology 412.

PROPOSED PROJECTS

Students have proposed many feasible research projects aimed at bettering the community, including:

- Increasing student's choices of healthy dining options on-campus
- Increasing pedestrian safety by implementing better pedestrian walkways and reducing jaywalking by making it more challenging to do so
- Increasing/promoting Random Acts of Kindness
- Reduce energy expenditures by students living in on-campus dorms
- Reduce drunk driving by extending free bus access to prime river "floating" times (mid-day on weekends)
- Improve recycling/composting efforts by increasing student awareness of appropriate sorting

INCREASING PAPER RECYCLING IN FACULTY OFFICES

Behavior is influenced by many factors, and research has shown that response effort is one such variable (e.g., Friman & Poling, 1995). Making a behavior harder to do reduces its likelihood; alternately, behaviors can be increased in probability by making their execution simpler.

It has been observed that there are not always paper recycling bins in professor's offices or – if they are present – they are not always placed in a convenient location.

The current project assessed the **impact of response effort on altering probability of paper recycling** in three professor's offices in the Department of Psychology. Response effort was manipulated by moving paper recycling bins to different locations within the offices. Some locations were convenient (i.e., low response effort such as right next to their desks); other locations required a larger response effort to recycle (e.g., placing the bin behind their door). Researchers measured the paper weight (g) once/week. Weights are observed for stability prior to condition changes.

## DECREASING FOOD WASTE IN THE CAF

Recent environmental and social justice movements have emphasized the importance of reducing food waste, due to the energy required to produce/transport, as well as the millions of individuals living in food deprived conditions. At UWEC, we "regard stewardship of the earth as a moral commitment and an obligation of our planetary citizenship".

In the current project, undergraduates measured basal rates of **student food waste** in UWEC's Hilltop cafeteria. Food waste was measured each weekday at 2pm by weighing compost bins containing all waste from student's plates. Numbers of students entering the cafeteria between 7am-2pm was recorded to assess the average waste per student.

Following stable basal rates of food waste, researchers will implement "infographics" on the cafeteria tables in an attempt to increase awareness of the impact of their choices and ultimately reduce food waste. The informational signs will provide facts pertaining to local and global sustainability.

Initial measures indicate that each students wastes .1347 lbs/day between 7am-2pm, equaling roughly **50.18 lbs/year** (not counting food wasted during between 2pm-12am). Our continued research will compare the impact of several interventions to determine which will be most effective.

Student Entries into Cafeteria
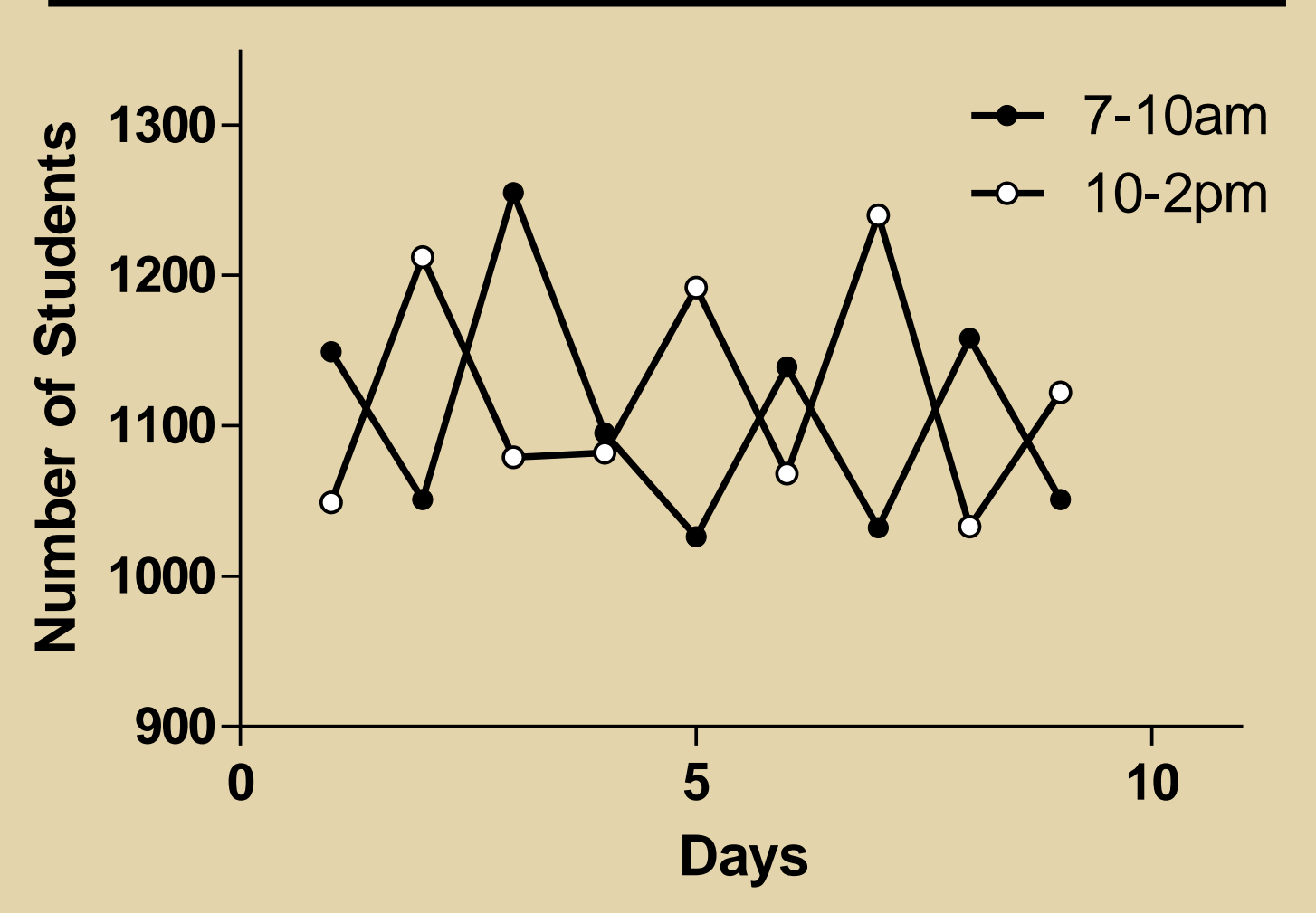
Daily Food Waste per Student

Amount of Paper Recycling
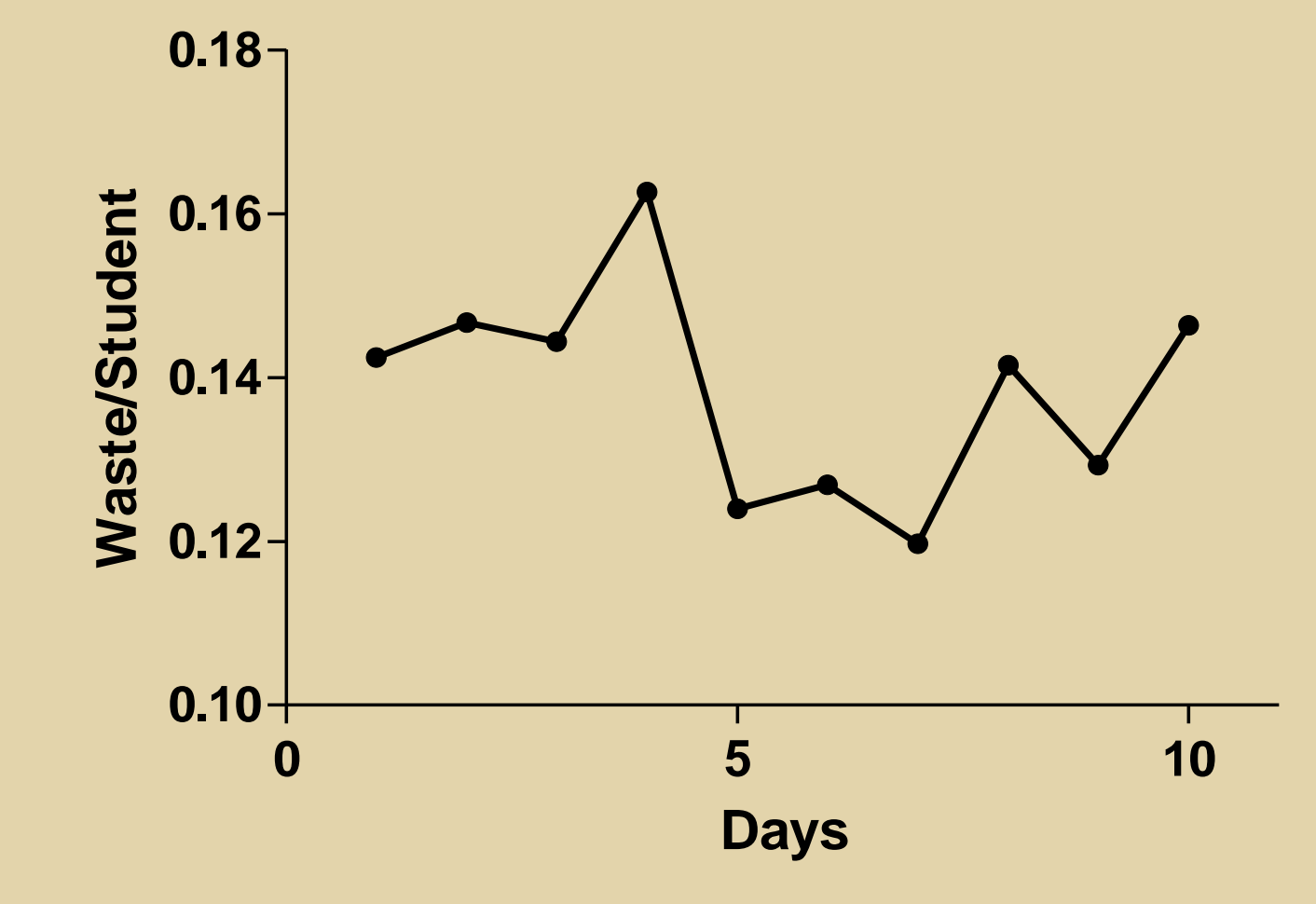
MAKING THE HILL MORE "FUN" TO CLIMB

Many walk up the hill… few claim to enjoy it. Maybe that's because it's somewhat effortful, and we don't get a lot in return. Can we change this by making walking up the hill fun to do? So you are not just rewarded with a better physique.. you also may win a gift card.

Data collection took place on a large walking hill on campus. A set of stairs began partway up the hill. Two students counted the number of people walking up the hill versus taking the stairs. Fewer people walked up the stairs, so it was considered to be less preferred.

To make the hill more fun to climb, we implemented a weekly raffle where students could win a gift card for taking the stairs versus the hill. One student collected data on people walking up the hill and the stairs, and another student handed out tickets and an informational slip explaining the raffle. Data were also collected on the number of "Likes" the hill's Facebook page received.
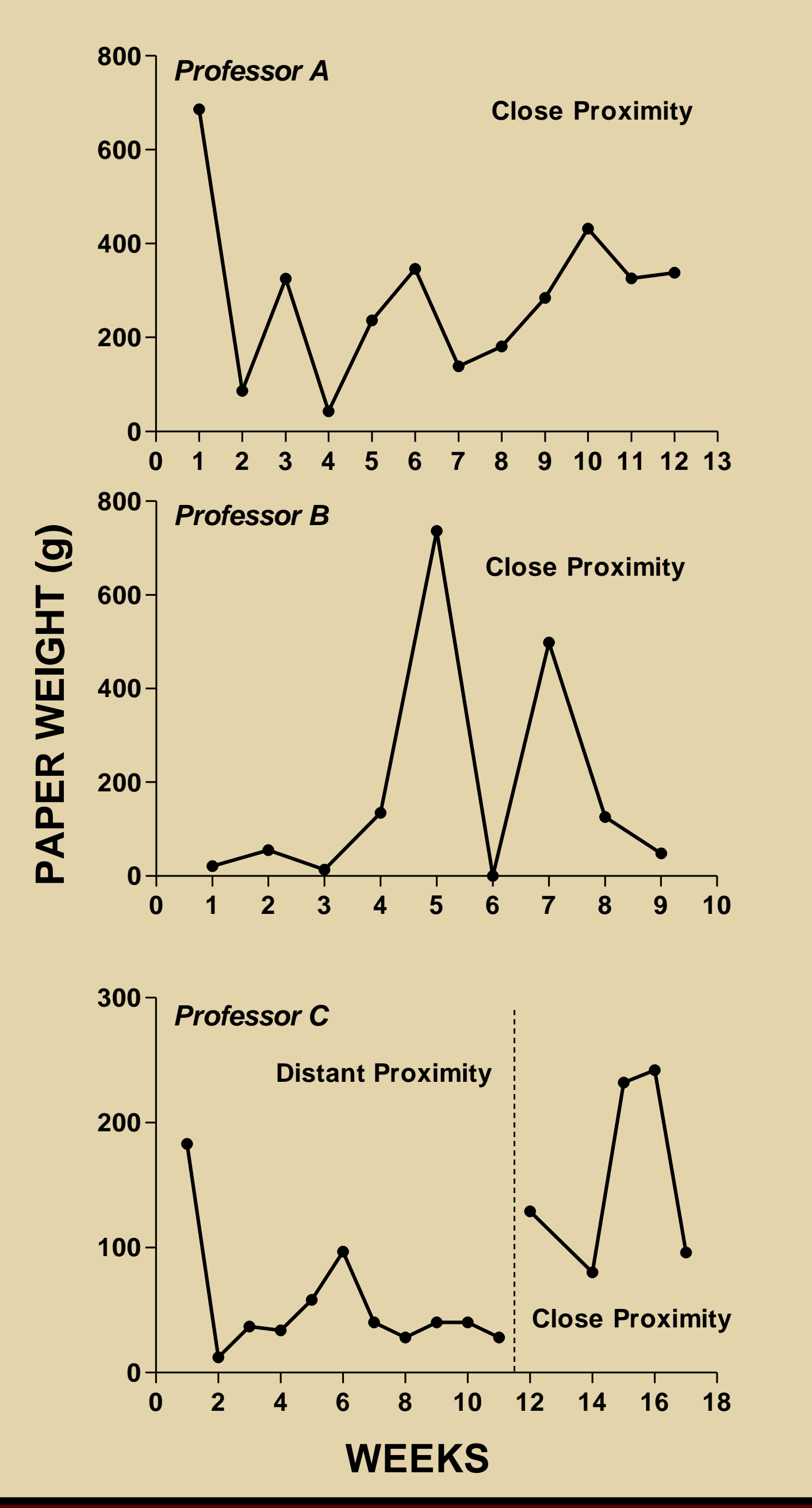
Data collected were not sufficient to suggest whether the raffle made the stairs more favorable. The rate at which the FB page received "Likes" increased dramatically when tickets began being handed out, but new "Likes" became more infrequent. Continued research could examine differing ways to make the hill more fun to climb.