

Token Economy Frequently Asked Questions

1. Can you describe the system as simply as possible?

The token economy is a system for encouraging desirable behavior through systematic rewards.

Token economies have a history in behavioral psychology, specifically in operant conditioning. Operant conditioning forms the basis for behavior modification. The basic notion is that behavior that is positively reinforced (rewarded) increases in frequency. Behavior modification programs tend to emphasize positive reinforcement rather than punishment because research has shown that reinforcement is more powerful in changing behavior than punishment.

Our system consists of two parts: the tokens and the bank. The tokens represent immediate, concrete rewards (“brain bucks”) that students receive from faculty and staff and may redeem at the GPGC bank. The bank also dispenses allowance money according to evaluations of class performance by faculty and staff, which represent a delayed reward. Students who behave in ways that result in tokens and who get high grades receive more money than those who do one, the other, or neither of these things.

2. What is the major point of the system?

The major point of the system is to encourage desirable behavior, such as paying attention in class, doing a good job of assignments, completing work on time, interacting with other GPGC students and faculty in appropriate ways, etc. In addition, the system starts everyone out with the same amount of money and the same opportunities to make more money.

3. Wait, “behavior modification”? That sounds scary, why does my child need that?

The term “behavior modification” does sound scary, but it is actually a technical term for what people do every day. We all seek to modify the behavior of others in many ways. Indeed, you reward and punish your children for their desirable and undesirable behavior. You probably don’t use tokens, but you may use money or other incentives, so the token economy system is a more formalized and systematic version of attempts to change behavior that everyone does all the time.

4. Kids should be learning and behaving well because they want to. Aren’t we teaching them a poor lesson about the value of their work and behavior if we tie it to money?

Kids **should** be learning and behaving well because they want to. That is, good behavior should be intrinsically rewarding and should require no extrinsic reward such as money.

But if you look at the world, it doesn’t seem to go that way in many instances. For example, would you continue to go to your job (and stay there for the same number of hours) if the paychecks stopped?

5. Really, how does it hurt anything if my kid has an extra \$20 or so “just in case?”

For a token economy system such as the GPGC token system to work, it must be a “closed” system. That is, the rewards must come from within the system. Students should receive rewards for their good behavior in the program and should understand that getting money depends on their good behavior. If they choose not to do their work or to behave in unacceptable ways, they should have less money.

When money comes from outside the system, it subverts the entire economy in a way analogous to counterfeiting. Bringing in extra currency devalues the “real” money. Students enjoy the benefits of money they have not earned, and they are rewarded for cheating. Most parents would not like to assist their children in doing either, and they may not think of giving their child an extra \$20 as counterfeiting and cheating, but it has those effects.

If you ever think your child needs extra money for something, please contact the staff – we will be happy to help solve the problem within the token economy system.

6. Ok, I think I understand about the money aspect of the token economy. Why does it have to include food and drinks that I want to provide to my child?

If students don't have to purchase food and drinks that they consider "treats" this will devalue the impact of earning (or not earning) spending money through the token economy system.

The prohibition of food items is not intended to restrict the foods that students may have. Students may have just about any food item they want, but they must purchase some of those items rather than have the program or parents provide them. Our general strategy is that the program provides and parents may provide nutritious food; "junk foods" are luxury items that students must purchase. We have struggled each year with the issue of what specific foods parents may provide and which are limited—deciding what is junk vs. nutritious food is not that easy.

7. Are there any disadvantages to the token economy system at the GPGC?

There are disadvantages to the token economy system at the GPGC. It is a complex system in which many people participate, which leads to misunderstandings and incomplete understandings of the program. These misunderstandings can create problems.

Faculty and staff give tokens and grades that affect students' allowance/salary. When faculty and staff fail to understand the principles of dispensing reinforcements appropriately, that misunderstanding leads to inconsistent reinforcement, which is a problem. We are working toward helping faculty and staff to better understand the system.

Parents often fail to understand the complexities of the system, which may lead them to believe that they do not need to follow all the rules. This misunderstanding can create major problems, such as sending their child money.

Students do not have a complete understanding of the system, which may lead them to believe that breaking the rules is not as serious as it is. We are trying to find ways to give students a fuller understanding of the token economy system.

8. What happens to cheaters?

There are a variety of penalties for those who violate the token economy system, including penalties for both students and parents. The most serious penalty is dismissal of the GPGC student, which can occur for violation by parents as well as by students.

However, most penalties are less severe and assessed on a case-by-case basis, depending on the severity of the violation. Typically, students forfeit smuggled money plus a fine and must participate in some other activity to help them understand the severity of their violation. In past summers, penalties have included helping the counselors with chores, writing papers on the token economy, and preparing to give a presentation to the GPGC students about the token economy.

