

I teach ethics to a class of 70 or so. Large classes breed disengagement, which in turn often hurts learning. How can I get students to come to a large class without penalizing them through amorphous “participation” credits or burning class time by calling roll?

The answer: bribes.

The University of Florida’s enrollment management system does not capture student pictures. I need to see pictures if I’m going to learn names. So I ask students to email me a picture, which I print out and tape to a biographical index card they complete in class. As I shuffle cards throughout the semester, I eventually learn all their names.

To encourage them to give me their pictures – and to come to class – I hold a drawing each class from the index cards for some “ethical chocolate” – fair-trade chocolate. Only those who have submitted an index card and a picture are entered in the drawing. Students must be present to win.

The chocolate bars cost me \$2 a class, when I do it. I don’t hold a drawing every time. Sometimes I mix it up: a copy of Columbia Journalism Review, a Gator trinket, fair-trade coffee, etc.

Yes, it’s money I don’t have. (Our governor last year cut my pay by 3 percent just because he could.) But the bribe has worked. Attendance is pretty good for a big class. The reinforcement is positive rather than negative. And the “fair trade” bit can spur discussion about ethical philosophy, too.

Besides, who doesn’t like chocolate?