

# REGULAR & SUBSTANTIVE INTERACTION

MEETING THE REQUIREMENTS

Both quality student/instructor interactions and instructor presence are key online course elements that foster student motivation and success. In line with these findings the US Dept of Education (ED) requires that regular and substantive interaction (RSI) occur between faculty and students. Courses that do not meet this requirement are considered “correspondence courses” and are not eligible for federal Title IV financial aid.

How can an instructor enable BOTH regular and substantive interaction in an online course so that it complies with federal regulations? The information on this page provides guidance and examples for meeting RSI requirements.

Let's start with the second concept

## SUBSTANTIVE

*The ED defines substantive interaction as “engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion, and includes at least two of the following, although best practices in course design support the use of more than just two.”*

- 1** Provide direct instruction of course content.
- 2** Assess and/or provide feedback on a student's coursework.
- 3** Provide information or respond to student questions about the course content or a competency.
- 4** Facilitate a group discussion regarding course content or competency.

*Note: RSI regulations additionally permit UTK or UTK's accrediting agency to determine other activities not included in the above categories to be constituted as substantive interactions. If you have suggestions, please share them with the Digital Learning.*

## REGULAR

*According to the ED, to qualify as “regular,” instructor/student interactions should be:*

- Conducted throughout the course on a predictable, scheduled basis
- Proportionate to the course length and amount of content/competency involved
- Initiated by a qualified instructor (i.e., accredited), who monitors student academic engagement and success; and
- Initiated by the instructor who, based on concerns resulting from monitoring students' engagement and/or at the request of the student.

Regular & Substantive Interaction (RSI) compliance is the legal federal requirement that distinguishes the status of courses between distance education & correspondence courses, the latter of which are ineligible for federal financial aid. This chart provides recommendations for meeting RSI requirements in online courses using categories established by the US Dept of Education (ED).

## GOOD PRACTICE:

Items in this column reflect practices that may be effective, but alone would not meet the substantive interaction guidelines. Be sure to supplement these practices with items from the right column.

## WAYS TO MEET THE REQUIREMENT:

Items in this column are deemed to meet substantive interaction guidelines. **Utilizing these elements from at least two of the categories would qualify the course as meeting RSI.**

1

### PROVIDING DIRECT INSTRUCTION OF COURSE CONTENT

This includes any “live, synchronous instruction where both the instructor and the student are online and in communication at the same time.”  
(USDE Letter to WCET, 2022)

- Pre-recorded video lectures of slide content.
- Readings.
- Any other web content, podcasts, videos, etc.

- Synchronous lectures with a potential of two-way communication.
- Instructor led synchronous discussion around the course content.
- Regularly scheduled synchronous office hours or 1:1 meetings.

2

### ASSESSING AND/OR PROVIDING FEEDBACK ON A STUDENT'S COURSEWORK

Communicate to students the expected schedule for grading assignments & posting grades, & the frequency & type of feedback students can expect on their assignments & other activities.

- Auto-graded quizzes with feedback for both correct & incorrect answers.
- Graded assignments with generalized, whole-class feedback.
- Graded assignments only, without feedback.

- If using Canvas auto-graded quizzes, add an application question with **individualized feedback**.
- Include graded assignments with individualized feedback **in alignment with syllabus feedback timelines**.
- Using Canvas learning analytics, provide whole-class feedback on common questions, strengths, and “stickiest point” **at regular intervals**.

3

## PROVIDING INFORMATION OR RESPONDING TO STUDENT QUESTIONS ABOUT COURSE CONTENT OR A COMPETENCY

Include details in the course syllabus & site about instructor availability, including office hours & contact information, response time to student inquiries, & protocols for using email & other communication tools.

- Weekly reminder of due dates (via Canvas chat, announcements, email, etc.).
- Responding in a timely manner to student emails.
- Hosting regularly scheduled office hours.

- **Make weekly, scheduled announcements** answering common questions or summarizing class progress.
- Use emails/messages to **regularly check on the academic aspects of the course & to provide additional information relevant to the class content.**
- **Hold weekly office hours** for content / topic reviews & **record & post Q&As for class to access.**

4

## FACILITATING A GROUP DISCUSSION REGARDING COURSE CONTENT OR A COMPETENCY

Expectations about instructor & student engagement in forums is included in the syllabus & course site.

- Instructor provides an open-ended forum that is not moderated.
- Student facilitated group discussions.
- Instructor responds to questions posted in group discussions.

- Instructor-facilitated\* discussion forums are included **throughout the course** if applicable to the course context and outcomes.
- **Instructor regularly posts to course discussion forums** in a variety of mediated formats to pose guiding questions related to the course subject.
- Instructor **actively moderates** peer-to-peer discussions.

*\* active facilitation: to prompt critical thinking, expand conversation, clarify, make note of strengths, indicate off-task/wrong input, redirect to resources, suggest improvements, motivate & encourage.*

## REFERENCES:

- WCET Frontiers. (2022, February 17). Regular & Substantive Interaction Refresh: Reviewing & Sharing Our Best Interpretation of Current Guidance & Requirements. <https://wcet.wiche.edu/frontiers/2021/08/26/rsi-refresh-sharing-our-best-interpretation-guidance-requirements/>
- USDE Letter to WCET (2022, March 10). <https://wcet.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2022/11/RSI-Response-letter-signed.pdf>
- SUNY Empire State College. (2022, March 29). Background: Definitions of Distance Education & Correspondence Courses. <https://www.esc.edu/dlis/design-your-course/regular-and-substantive-interaction/>

