REGULAR AND SUBSTANTIVE INTERACTION IN ONLINE AND DISTANCE LEARNING- DEPT OF EDUCATION

The U.S. Department of Education issued Final Rules on Distance Learning and Innovation in September 2020, with the rules going into effect on July 1, 2021. The new regulations update the definitions of distance and correspondence education with the intent to provide more clarity on the differences between these two modes of course delivery. The U.S. Department of Education requires that all online courses for which students may use Title IV funds (federal financial aid) include regular and substantive interaction between students and instructors. In short, regular and substantive interaction (RSI) is one of the key elements distinguishing distance education from correspondence education and thus one of the central determinates for students' ability to use Title IV funds.

AN EMPHASIS ON REGULAR AND SUBSTANTIVE

An emphasis on regular and substantive interaction is entirely consistent with well-documented research-based effective practices in online course design and delivery. In online teaching and learning environments of any kind, (asynchronous, synchronous, blended/hybrid), regular and substantive interactions must:

- Be **initiated** by the instructor.
- Be **scheduled and predictable**.
- Be **academic** in nature and **relevant** to the course.
- Substantive interaction assumes *direct interaction between the learner and the instructor* and requires **direct instruction** from the instructor including:
    o **Assessing** or **providing feedback** on a student's coursework.
    o Providing **information** or responding to questions about the content of a course.
    o Facilitating a **group discussion** regarding the content of a course or competency.
    o **Other instructional activities** approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency.

Here is a visual example of how to meet this standard:
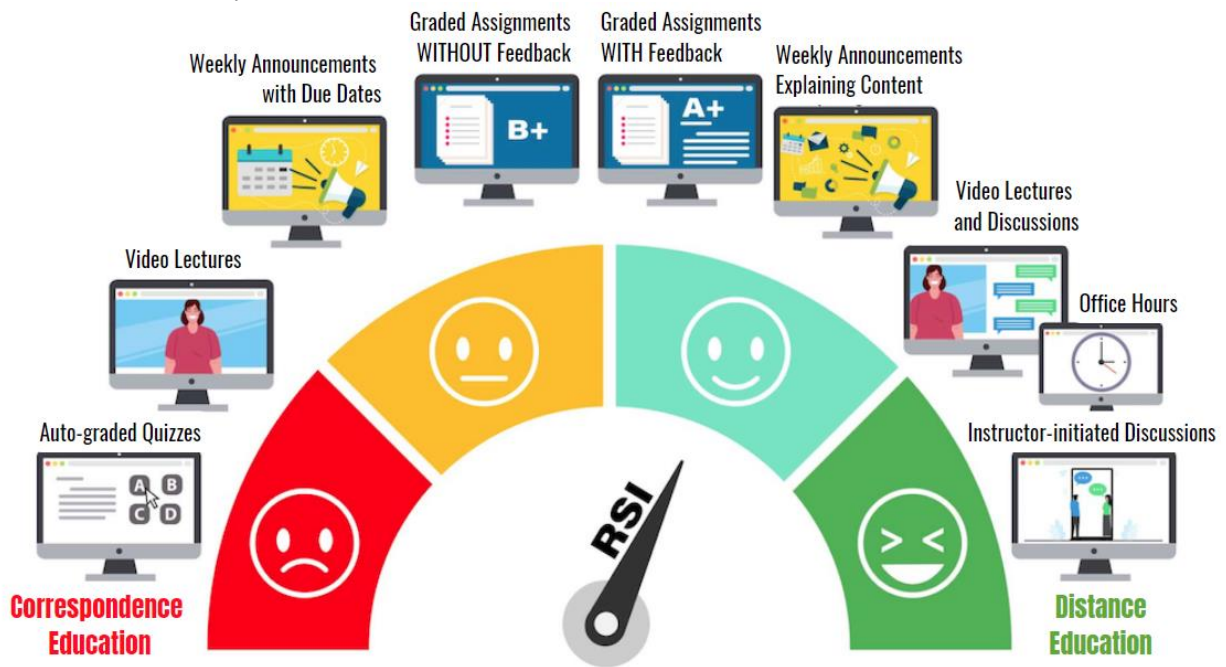
RSI Dashboard Illustration taken from SUNY Online RSI Webpage

WHAT FACULTY CAN DO

- **Design your course from the ground up** to integrate strategic points for instructor interaction. Regardless of modality, have a course schedule that includes written assignment due dates, exam dates, readings, and other assignments as relevant. Ensure that there are predictable opportunities for feedback throughout the semester.

- **Develop a communication plan** to help guide and manage your interactions. This can be done in your syllabus by setting expectations for instructor response time, grade turnaround time, student participation, and instructor participation

- **Plan** to interact meaningfully with each student.

- **Lead discussions** that invite students and instructors to share their ideas, share resources, and expand on others' understandings.

- **Set up regular announcements** to go out automatically at key points in the term.

- **Identify students who are struggling to** meet objectives by observing discussions, assessments, or user activity, and **reach out to them individually**.

- Provide **rich feedback on assignments** rather than just using auto-graded quizzes.

- Provide students with opportunities to **describe what is helping or hindering** their learning in the course.

RSI Examples

Online instructors initiate interaction and communication with students, as a group or individually. The course design materials describe the type of instructor interaction that students can expect.

Examples of Instructor-Initiated Interactions

Individualized emails

Feedback on assignments

Instructor-facilitated discussion forums

The course design materials describe the expected frequency of interaction with the instructor, including grading feedback, announcements, and potential email communication.

Examples of Frequent & Timely Interactions

Weekly announcements

Weekly summaries or highlights of discussion posts

Regularly scheduled online review or help sessions

The course design materials describe student interaction with the instructor specifically on the course content, such as feedback on a discussion post or assessment.

Examples of Substantive Interactions

Announcements previewing or reviewing difficult content

Discussion posts illustrating real-world applications of course concepts

NOT CONSIDERED to be RSI by the US Department of Education are objective assessments where feedback is computer-generated, and recorded webinars, videos or reading materials that do not require interaction with the instructor.

SOME RESOURCES

https://wcet.wiche.edu/frontiers/2023/03/02/rsi-resources-to-support-learning-neuroplasticity-and-regulations/

https://www.sunyempire.edu/dlis/design-your-course/regular-and-substantive-interaction/

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cajqp4izPIcENyDNWCAK8G72ksvIgXLWb0ViYT6FLwI/edit

https://docs.google.com/document/d/19GPh6BiWTMbwh0q-9pr-MspSzv9i-sF7aF8F7gUq5gk/edit

https://www.hlcommission.org/Accreditation/substantive-change-distance-or-correspondence-education.html