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Regular and Substantive Interaction Guidelines

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) requires colleges and universities to ensure that distance education courses eligible for Title IV funds (federal financial aid) have **regular and substantive interaction (RSI)** between students and instructors. This requirement, effective July 1, 2021, aims to distinguish between *distance education* and *correspondence education*.

Institutions must have processes in place to demonstrate regular, meaningful engagement between instructors (an individual responsible for delivery course content) and students within distance education coursework. The University of Scranton, in alignment with these regulations, requires all distance education courses—whether synchronous or asynchronous—to include and be able to demonstrate opportunities for regular and substantive interaction.

RSI should be incorporated in a manner commensurate with the length of time and the amount of content in the course. All distance education coursework and programs must comply with other institutional policies and regulatory & accreditation requirements regarding credit and contact hours, which apply to any modality of course/program delivery.

Understanding Regular and Substantive Interaction

Embedding RSI in distance coursework ensures that learning isn't just self-paced study but supports active engagement within the course setting. Regular and substantive interaction is more than a federal requirement, however. it is also a hallmark of effective teaching. Regular interaction refers to the frequency with which students and instructors engage & communicate, while substantive interaction refers to the quality and depth of the engagement & communication. Both types of interaction are essential for creating a sense of community, promoting learning, and ensuring that students stay engaged and motivated throughout the course or program. So, while it may be tempting to see the DOE's RSI mandate as an external obligation, ensuring regular and substantive interaction is entirely consistent with the mission and values that the University of Scranton holds as a Catholic and Jesuit institution of higher education.

- **Regular Interaction** refers to frequent, predictable, instructor-initiated engagement between students and instructors. At a minimum, this should occur once per week and be integrated with the course's content and schedule.
- **Substantive Interaction** means engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion. It involves meaningful activities directly tied to teaching, learning, and assessment, and must include at least two of the following types of activities:
    - Direct instruction.
    - Other live sessions (such as lectures or moderated video conferences).

- Facilitating group discussions on course material.
- Discussion boards that engage students with course content.
- Personalized feedback on assignments or assessments.
- Working/study groups that are moderated by the instructor.
- Holding online review sessions at key points during the semester.
- Scheduled meetings between student(s) and instructor in person or via distance platforms (e.g., Zoom, Teams)

Interactions should be connected to the subject of the course and contribute to the students' progress toward course, program, and relevant learning outcomes/objectives. Routine procedural interactions, such as reminders of upcoming deadlines, open office hours, or activities like assigning grades are not 'substantive' on their own unless they are accompanied by personalized feedback or suggestions for improvement. This does not mean that interactions designed to welcome students or build classroom community are not important, merely that they are not sufficient by themselves to meet expectations for RSI.

What Does NOT Qualify as RSI?

Certain activities do **not** meet RSI requirements:

- One-time, optional activities (such as webinars, videos, and readings)
- Provision and student completion of required out of class assignments/homework
- Instructor feedback or grading provided solely through third-party tools (such as automated grading)
- Basic communication such as class welcomes, reminders of deadlines, or attendance policies
- A student dropping in during regularly scheduled open office hours
- Responding to a student reaching out via email, phone, text for additional help.
- Contact with instructors not related to the course subject matter, including checking in on a student's general well-being (although encouraged this is not a form of RSI).

Guidance for Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Courses

- **Synchronous courses**: Faculty who hold regular synchronous sessions (e.g., weekly Zoom meetings) that involve direct instruction, content discussions, and student feedback will likely meet RSI requirements, as synchronous classes generally follow regular meeting times where faculty and students are in a faculty-led learning setting simultaneously.

- **Asynchronous courses**: For fully asynchronous courses, instructors must demonstrate how they will meet RSI requirements by identifying opportunities for (1) regular engagement with students and (2) implementing at least two types of substantive interaction. Some recommended options include:

    1. **Incorporate Weekly or Bi-Weekly Synchronous Sessions**
    Include live Zoom or Teams sessions that provide direct instruction, promote engagement with course content, and facilitate meaningful student-instructor interactions.

    2. **Ensure Compliance with RSI by Addressing At Least Two Key Dimensions**
    If synchronous sessions are not feasible, document how your asynchronous course will meet at least two of the following RSI requirements:

        - **Providing Direct Instruction**
        Include materials or activities that clearly explain and guide students through the course content. This can be through videos, written content, or recorded lectures.

        - **Assessing and Providing Feedback on Coursework**
        Feedback should go beyond simple grades or generic comments like "Good job." It should include detailed critiques that explain what students did well and offer constructive suggestions for improvement. Feedback can take various forms such as written comments, video/audio notes, or personalized online meetings.

        - **Responding to Questions about Course Content**
        Instructors should provide thoughtful, detailed responses to student questions—going beyond yes/no answers. These responses should offer clarification, context, and further explanations to enhance understanding. Aim to respond within a consistent timeframe (e.g., 24-48 hours). This interaction should be primarily driven by the instructor, who actively solicits questions and provides thorough answers via discussion forums, email, live chats, or Q&A sections.

        - **Facilitating Group Discussions on Course Content**
        Instructors should actively participate in course discussion boards. This allows for deeper engagement with course topics, encourages idea exchange, and challenges students to think critically. Active instructor involvement in these discussions ensures greater student engagement and a more interactive learning experience.

        - **Other Approved Instructional Activities**
        Incorporate additional activities that meet the guidelines set by various

accrediting agencies. These may include peer reviews, collaborative group work, or other structured learning activities that foster meaningful interaction.

Sample RSI Statement for Course Syllabi

To ensure clarity for students and provide evidence of how instructors are intentionally including RSI in distance courses, the University recommends that instructors include an RSI statement in their course syllabus. For example:

"*In [course name], regular and substantive interaction is achieved through weekly online discussion boards where students engage with key course concepts. In addition, the instructor will provide timely feedback on assignments and respond to student questions about the course content*."

Support and Resources

The **Center for Teaching Excellence** (CTE) is available to provide support for instructors to incorporate RSI into your courses. This may include guidance at the time of course development or course revisions, as part of instructional design support. They offer confidential consultations, observations, and feedback to help ensure your course meets RSI standards. For more information or assistance, please visit CTE's website.

In addition to the guidance included here, college dean's offices may also provide additional specific resources to faculty.