GUIDANCE ON THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S REQUIREMENT FOR REGULAR AND SUBSTANTIVE INTERACTION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES

The U.S. Department of Education requires that online courses eligible for Title IV funds (meaning that students may use financial aid to take the courses) must have meaningful and frequent engagement between students and instructors. This requirement is known as regular and substantive interaction (RSI). While RSI is not an expectation of correspondence courses, which don't require a high level of interaction with an instructor, it is an expectation of online courses like the ones we offer at CMU.

HOW DOES RSI AFFECT A STUDENT?

RSI helps support student success by ensuring that there is sufficient engagement between a faculty member and a student. While this kind of engagement is typical in an in-person class where students can ask questions in real-time, stay after class to talk to their professor, or visit a faculty member during office hours, these opportunities are not always afforded to students in online courses. Engaging in good RSI practices can help level the playing field by giving students in an online course or program the ability to engage with their faculty in meaningful ways.

HOW DOES RSI AFFECT A FACULTY MEMBER?

Faculty teaching online courses may have to adjust their practices if they are not currently engaging in RSI for each online course. Regular and substantive interactions should be (1) mainly instructor-initiated, (2) regular, scheduled, and predictable, and (3) substantive.

Substantive interaction is engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion. **Regular interaction** means providing students the opportunity for substantive interactions that are predictable and that occur on a regular basis. It includes monitoring student engagement.

HOW CAN A FACULTY MEMBER ENSURE REGULAR AND SUBSTANTIVE INTERACTION WITH STUDENTS?

Substantive interaction must include <u>at least two</u> of the following:

- Providing direct instruction (example: synchronous lecture)
- Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework (this cannot be automatically graded feedback; the instructor must provide specific feedback)
- Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency (example: weekly email or announcement to students about the week's content; follow-up email or announcement to students about areas of confusion)
- Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency; or
- Other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency.

Examples of Substantive Interaction:

Professor Snape:

- Requires a high-engagement activity the first week of class where students get to know each other's and the professor's pet peeves by posting an introduction video and posting to the discussion board three areas they have in common with their classmates or the professor.
- Holds virtual office hours on Monday from 1-2 and Thursday from 6-7.
- Has a weekly discussion board requirement where students post the fuzziest concept for the week (where they are most confused) and the professor provides additional support/response on the fuzziest concepts.

Professor McGonagall:

- Holds virtual office hours on Mondays from 7:00 – 7:30 and Tuesdays from 4-5.
- Requires students to use the *Ask a Question* feature in the LMS at least 2x during the semester and responds to questions every Friday by noon (as indicated on the syllabus, of course).
- Reviews participation and course engagement in weeks 4, 8, and 12 and reaches out to students individually about course progress.
- Posts a weekly discussion question on course content, monitors discussion/posts, and provides responses.
- Writes an individual letter to each student at the end of the course about their progress and growth.
- (Professor M. is an overachiever)

Mr. Hagrid

- Holds virtual office hours each day between 6:00 and 6:30; has option for reserving a drop-in virtual office hour at other times.
- Sends a weekly announcement letting students know how to prepare for the weeks' lessons and where to find help on difficult topics.
- Requires students to upload at least one video of their handling of magical creatures and provides individual feedback to students (sometimes via text, sometimes on recorded video).

Professor Trelawny:

- Provides synchronous study/tutoring sessions 1 hour per week online to help students master difficult aspects of divination.
- Requires students to submit a learning log every 3 weeks and then provides individual feedback.

Other strategies to consider:

- "Ticket Out the Door" assignments that require students to submit or post something such as (1) one thing I learned today or (2) one thing I'm really confused about or (3) what I need to study most for this class this week or (4) what I think this course is about/for (first day activity) or (5) what I hope to learn in this course (first day activity) or (6) how I think this course will apply to my life beyond college (early course activity) or (7) one surprising thing I wasn't expecting to get out of this class (end of term activity).

  Here's how to write it on your syllabus:

  Students will be required to post "Ticket Out the Door" responses on the Course Discussion List in all even weeks. Due dates are on the calendar on the syllabus. I will respond within one week of these postings.

- Hold virtual study sessions (synchronous) the week before each exam or major assignment. Record them so others can view.

  Here's how to write it on your syllabus:

  On the Thursday prior to each exam, I will hold a virtual study session between 2:00 and 3:00 pm. This is a chance for you to ask questions about areas/concepts/procedures where you need additional help.

- Require students to engage with you and make it part of their grade.

  Here's how to write it on your syllabus:

  Active learning is the key to success, and to help you practice active learning in this online course, you are required to do the following:

  - Set up and attend at least two virtual meetings with me either during or outside of office hours. The first must occur in weeks 1, 2, or 3. The second must occur within two weeks of the midterm.
  - Post 4 times to the "I don't get it" discussion board. The first post can be made any time between weeks 1 and 4; the second between weeks 5 and 8; the third between weeks 9 and 12; the fourth between weeks 13 and the final. The post must be about a confusing area of the course content. I will monitor the board weekly and respond to help you get past the confusing parts of the course content

- **Up your game with student feedback.**

  Here's how to write it on your syllabus:

  Throughout this course you can count on getting meaningful feedback from me. All homework, tests, and exams will be graded and returned within a week; projects and papers may take up to two weeks.

  o For homework assignments that are automatically graded, I will review student responses. If there are areas where additional support is needed, I will post an announcement that includes clarification on difficult concepts or common areas where students are struggling.
  o For instructor-graded assignments, I will provide feedback on your work. I encourage you to visit virtual office hours, set up a time to talk, or send an email if you would like to discuss the feedback or get additional help.
  o When grading tests, exams, projects, or assignments, when there are common areas where I note that students are struggling, I will post an announcement that provides clarification or point you to additional resources.

- **Up your game with communication and engagement. You can even add an assessment element.**

  Here's how to write it on your syllabus:

  Every week I will post an announcement to let you know how to prepare for the week. There will be a reminder of <u>what</u> you need to prepare and what you need <u>to do</u>. To ensure you read these, there will be a graded assignment due every Friday. On this assignment, you'll log the time you spent preparing for class, how you prepared, what you completed, and whether you met all assignment deadlines. There will also be quiz questions related to the week's content. I will provide feedback on these assignments and will be available during virtual office hours to discuss any areas where you need additional help.

Do you have an idea for an RSI we can include? If so, email your idea to [Chad Middleton](#).

NEXT STEPS

If you are teaching an online course, be sure to document RSI on your syllabus. Remember, you must include at least two forms of RSI. One of those may be regularly scheduled virtual office hours. If you use this option, put the day/times you will be available virtually and how students should plan to meet with you. To be <u>really clear</u>, think about having a section on your syllabus for RSI. It might look like this:

REGULAR AND SUBSTANTIVE INTERACTION

In this course, you can expect regular and substantive interaction with the instructor. You are expected to be an active learner in this course and engage with your class peers and the instructor. To support this, our course includes the following:

1. **Virtual Office Hours**. I will be available Tuesdays from noon to 1pm and Wednesdays 3pm to 4pm to discuss any course-related issues. During these times, you may call me via Teams (phone or video). If you need to meet outside of those times, email me to set up a meeting.
2. **Discussion Board Interaction.** You are required to respond to discussion board prompts each week. These prompts will be available each week by noon on Monday, and you must respond by Wednesday at noon. This means you have two days to think about the prompt and provide a response, which will be graded. I will respond to the class as a whole, based on your posts, by Friday of the same week. My response will help clarify any confusing points and may include additional resources that will support your success.

MONITORING RSI

The Office of Distance Education will review all syllabi for online courses to ensure RSI is part of all courses. Documentation is required to fulfill federal and accreditation requirements. If you need additional help with establishing RSI for your online course, please reach out to the Center for Teaching & Learning or Dr. Chad Middleton, AVPAA for Faculty Success.

THE FINE PRINT

If you'd like to know more about the federal policy, keep reading!

RULE LANGUAGE (found [here](#)):

Distance education:

(1) *Education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (2)(i) through (iv) of this definition to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor or instructors and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor or instructors, either synchronously or asynchronously.*
(2) *The technologies that may be used to offer distance education include—*
    (i) *The internet;*
    (ii) *One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;*
    (iii) *Audio conference; or*
    (iv) *Other media used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (2)(i) through (iii) of this definition.*
(3) *For purposes of this definition, an instructor is an individual responsible for delivering course content and who meets the qualifications for instruction established by an institution's accrediting agency.*
(4) *For purposes of this definition, substantive interaction is engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the other content under discussion, and also includes at least two of the following—*
    (i) *Providing direct instruction;*
    (ii) *Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework;*
    (iii) *Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency;*
    (iv) *Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency; or*
    (v) *Other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency.*
(5) *An institution ensures regular interaction between a student and an instructor or instructors by, prior to the student's completion of a course or competency—*
    (i) *Providing the opportunity for substantive interactions with the student on a predictable and scheduled basis commensurate with the length of time and the amount of content in the course or competency; and*
    (ii) *Monitoring the student's academic engagement and success and ensuring that an instructor is responsible for promptly and proactively engaging in substantive interaction with the student when needed on the basis of such monitoring, or upon request by the student.*