Quick Reference: Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI)

Oregon State University faculty must ensure that their online courses meet U.S. Department of Education's requirements for Regular and Substantive Interaction, or RSI, in order for those courses to be eligible for federal financial aid. RSI is meant to distinguish "correspondence" courses (those with little or no instructor interaction, and ineligible for federal financial aid) from "distance" courses (those with significant instructor interaction, and therefore eligible for federal financial aid).

There are three key pieces to RSI, which are described in more detail below. We also offer practical strategies for establishing and sustaining RSI throughout the academic term. For an additional reference point, the Ecampus Online Teaching Principles outline research-based approaches for online teaching; faculty who strive to incorporate the Online Teaching Principles into their teaching are likely to meet RSI requirements and to be providing additional support to student success that goes beyond what is required by RSI.

"Regular" Interaction

Under RSI, regular interaction:

- Is **predictable and scheduled;** in our quarter system format, regular interaction should happen weekly and throughout the term.
- Includes **monitoring** of students' academic engagement and success, and proactively engaging in substantive interaction when needed as prompted by that monitoring (e.g., reaching out to a student who is not participating or whose work quality is below a satisfactory level) or upon student request.

"Substantive" Interaction

To be engaged in substantive interaction, the online course instructor must do **at least two of the following:**

- Provide direct instruction (only pertains to Ecampus hybrid courses with mandatory, scheduled synchronous meetings; is not relevant for fully-online, asynchronous courses). Recorded lecture videos are an important part of learning materials in Ecampus courses, but *do not count* in this category.
- Assess or provide feedback on student work. The instructor must be the "human in the loop"; fully automated grading and grading completed wholly with artificial intelligence tools would not qualify as substantive interaction.
- Provide information or respond to questions about course content (e.g., regularly scheduled office hours).
- Facilitate a group discussion regarding course content (includes asynchronous discussions).
- Other instructional activities approved by the accrediting body.

Instructor-Led Interaction

Under RSI, regular and substantive interaction:

- Should be initiated **by the instructor**, meaning that it does not include interaction prompted by the request of a student (e.g., responding to a request for an office hours appointment).
    - The "instructor" who is engaging in RSI with students is defined by our accrediting body (NWCCU) as qualified faculty member (a subject matter expert), which may include Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs); Undergraduate Learning Assistants (ULAs) or undergraduate peer tutors would likely not be considered "qualified faculty members."
- Does not include interaction that is wholly optional to students.
- Should be **prompt and proactive.**
- Should be carried out in accordance with institutional policies (see the Ecampus Online Teaching Principles; an example would include the 24-hour response time on business days to student messages).
- Is demonstrated by faculty evaluations based on these policies, and that are conducted by the academic unit.

Strategies for Establishing and Sustaining RSI

As the course begins…

- Respond to each student in the course introductions discussion forum.
- Add a course Q&A forum and respond regularly.
- Begin holding virtual office hours (see our guide), perhaps with a more engaging name (coffee hour, get to know you meeting, etc.).
- Reach out to students who haven't started the course.

Once the course is underway…

- Keep up the timely responses to student messages and emails!
- Post an announcement each week that covers more than logistics and that is unique to this offering of the course: helping students make connections to a current event, highlighting valuable contributions out of the previous week's small group discussions, etc.
- Facilitate course discussions (respond to students, play a particular "role," etc.).
- Engage in the learning activity that accompanies a recorded lecture and clear up misconceptions.
- Provide specific, constructive, personalized feedback on assignments beyond filling out the rubric, either in text or audio/video ("great job" or "needs improvement" doesn't count).
- Reach out to students who have missing assignments or who did not perform well on a major assessment and offer additional support and resources (the "message students who…" feature in the Canvas Gradebook and New Analytics area is a helpful tool).
- Create a mid-term survey for feedback, review responses, and then make reasonable adjustments/share back results with the class.

As the course wraps up…

- Post announcements or initiate individual student contact based on common errors or challenges.
- Hold an optional review, study, or work session.

Additional Resources

1. WCET policy analysis of the RSI guidelines
2. Department of Education Final Negotiated Rulemaking 2020

Contact us at ecampusfacultysupport@oregonstate.edu if you have additional questions or would like to discuss RSI strategies specific to your course.