Last updated 9/5/2024 by Robin Hill, Ph.D.

RSI (regular, substantive interactions) Definitions

This federal ruling went into effect as of July 2021.The definitions come from the US. Department of Education in 34 C.F.R. § 600.2. These definitions clearly differentiate between correspondence and distance education courses for the purposes of accepting federal funding. They also provide explicit criteria for how classroom faculty demonstrate the requirement of **regular and substantive interaction.**

Distance education means education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (4) of this definition to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either **synchronously or asynchronously**. The technologies may include:

1. The internet;
2. One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;
3. Audio conferencing; or
4. Other media used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (3) of this definition.

Correspondence is a course provided by an institution under which the institution provides instructional materials, by mail or electronic transmission, including examinations on the materials, to students who are separated from the instructor. Interaction between the instructor and student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student. Correspondence courses are typically self-paced and do not qualify for federal funds.

Regular interaction requires an institution to ensure, "prior to the student's completion of a course or competency," that there is "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." The institution also is responsible for 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.

Substantive interaction means engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion. It must include at least two of five components:

- Providing direct instruction
- Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework
- Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency
- Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency
- Other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency (such as MSCHE).
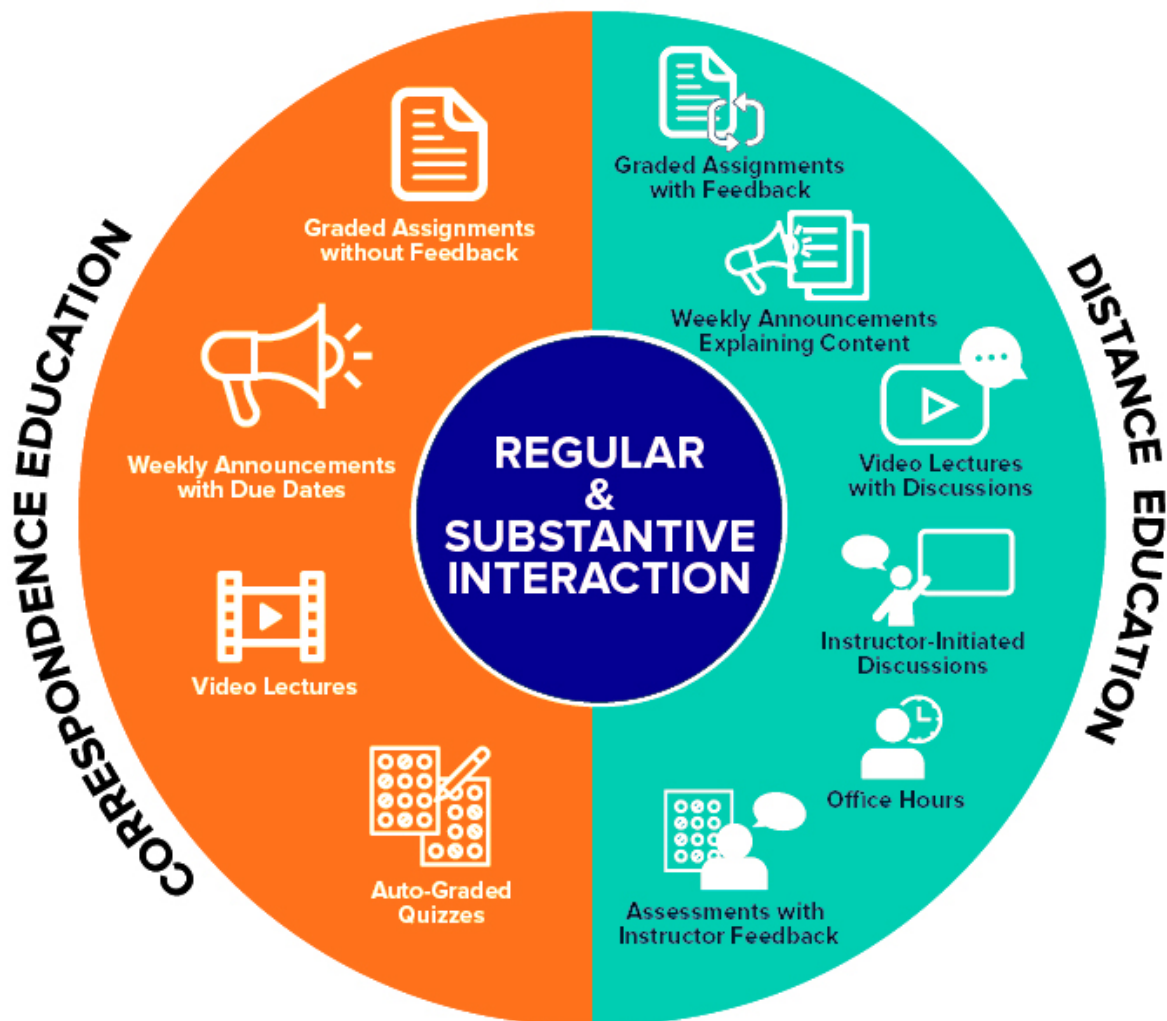
Source: The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

An institution ensures regular interaction between a student and an instructor or instructors, prior to the student's completion of a course or competency by:

a. 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

b. 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.

Criteria to Address RSI

There are four criteria that ensure the course meets regular and substantive interaction.

The interaction must be:

I. With an instructor that meets accrediting agency standards.

II. Initiated by the instructor.

This criterion states that the interaction must be mostly faculty-driven. **This does not include** interaction that is optional or initiated primarily by the student. **Students interacting with an online textbook does not count.**

Examples of Instructor Initiated:

a. Individualized emails.
b. Personalized feedback on assignments.
c. Instructor-facilitated discussion forums.
d. Scheduled virtual office hours.

[Video: Faculty Insights video with Dr. Lomeli on instructor-initiated interaction](#).

III. "Regular" and sometimes frequent.

Interaction between students and the instructor is regular (**at least once weekly**), and interaction is of an academic nature. As explained in its definition, the interaction should occur with **reasonable frequency** considering the length of time the course is run.

Examples:

    a. Weekly course announcements.
    b. Weekly summaries or highlights of discussion posts.
    c. Regularly scheduled online reviews or help sessions.
    d. Scheduled office hours.

Video: Faculty Insights with Erika Perez on regular interaction.

IV. "Substantive" of an academic nature.

This means students are engaged through teaching, learning, and assessment. In addition, the course must involve **at least two** of the following five activities:

1. provide direct instruction.
    - o **This does not include micro-lectures, recorded webinars, or the use of third part publisher's materials.**
2. assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework.
    - o Limited feedback such as posting "good job" or just entering a numerical grade does not qualify as substantive.
    - o Feedback should be meaningful, both when a student is doing well and in areas where they could improve.
3. providing information or responding to questions about the course content or competency.
4. facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency.
5. or other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency.

Video: Faculty Insights video with Dr. Falk discussing substantial feedback in online courses.

Checklist to address RSI

- The online course is set up in a logically organized manner; including assigned content in weekly modules.
- The online course contains a welcome message.
- There is a Start Here/Course Information module containing a Course Outline (syllabus) that includes specific time frames describing when students can expect feedback for assignments and turnaround time for communications. **Student questions and emails should be addressed within 24-48 hours. Assignment grades and feedback should be provided within 1-2 weeks.**

- The course outline is easily located in the course shell and is in an ADA compliant format such as a Word document or pdf.
- The course outline contains specific time frames describing when students can expect instructor feedback for assignments and turnaround time for communication. **See guidelines above.**
- There is a weekly announcement identifying feedback on assignments, instruction for upcoming assignments, and other course or institutional reminders.
- Assignments create opportunities within the online course to provide an assessment of student learning through substantive feedback comments from the instructor. Feedback is meaningful, both when a student is doing well, and in areas where they could improve.
- There is substantial interaction in the form of audio, written content, or video.
- There is at least one assignment per week where substantial feedback from the instructor is provided.

References

Empire State University Office of Digital Learning, Innovation, and Strategy. (n.d.). *Background: Definitions of distance education and correspondence courses.* https://sunyempire.edu/dlis/design-your-course/regular-and-substantive-interaction/

NC SARA. (2020, October 1). *U.S. Department of Education issues final rules on distance education and innovation.* https://nc-sara.org/news-events/us-department-education-issues-final-rules-distance-education-and-innovation

Office of the Federal Register, 85 Federal Register 54742–54818 (2020). Office of the Federal Register.

Online Learning Consortium. (2019). (rep.). *Regular and substantive interaction: Background, concerns, and guiding principles.* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED593878.pdf.

Purdue University Innovative Learning. (n.d.). *Hy-Flex and resilient pedagogy resources.* https://www.purdue.edu/innovativelearning/tools-resources/teaching-guides/pedagogy/

Sanchez, J., Garza, R., & Vela, C. (n.d*.). Regular and substantive interaction (RSI) in distance learning.* The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Center for Online Learning and Teaching Technology. https://www.utrgv.edu/online/teaching-online/process/regular-substantive-interaction/index.htm

The Ohio State University Teaching and Learning Resource Center. (n.d.). *Regular and substantive interaction in online and distance learning.* https://teaching.resources.osu.edu/keep-teaching/regular-substantive-interaction-online

Umpqua Community College. (n.d.). *Regular and substantive interaction (RSI) guidelines.* https://www.umpqua.edu/images/ucconline/RSI_Guidelines.pdf

UTRGV - Center for Online Learning and Teaching Technology. (2022). *Instructor initiated interaction by Dr. Arlett Lomeli* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/embed/3CUsGoPHHko?si=ewyzgY44dFNEOT-b

UTRGV - Center for Online Learning and Teaching Technology. (2022). *Substantive interaction by Dr. Falk* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/embed/ReduAn5qprA?si=oCi1XZIc7N5XWa5a

UTRGV - Center for Online Learning and Teaching Technology. (2022). *Regular interaction by Erika Perez* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/embed/GJz-hqckz04?si=9Zz-6b8EoOjQWViK

WCET. (n.d.). *Regular and substantive interaction*. https://wcet.wiche.edu/policy/regular-and-substantive-interaction/