

Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI)

Overview

The U.S. Department of Education implemented Final Rules on Distance Education and Innovation, effective July 1, 2021. These revised regulations clarify the distinctions between distance education and correspondence education, defining each delivery method more precisely. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education requires that any online course qualifying for federal financial aid must include continuous and meaningful interaction between students and their instructors.

Purpose

This policy aims to ensure that the University of Nebraska Kearney (UNK) maintains compliance with the U.S. Department of Education's regulations regarding regular and substantive interaction (RSI) in distance education courses. This policy is designed to uphold our distance education programs' academic integrity and quality by establishing clear expectations for faculty engagement with students in online courses. It applies to all faculty, instructors, and staff involved in designing, developing, and delivering distance education at UNK.

UNK is committed to providing students with an educational experience that is both rigorous and engaging, regardless of the delivery method. By adhering to these guidelines, we aim to foster meaningful academic interactions that contribute to student learning and success in the online environment. This policy outlines the responsibilities of faculty in ensuring that all distance education courses include consistent and substantive interactions, which are essential to maintaining the standards of our academic programs and fulfilling our obligations under federal law.

Definitions

34 CFR 600.2 defines distance education as follows:

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.

Policy Statement

The University of Nebraska Kearney (UNK) is committed to maintaining the highest standards of quality in its distance education programs by strictly adhering to the U.S. Department of Education's requirements for regular and substantive interaction (RSI). To ensure that our online courses provide a robust educational experience equivalent to face-to-face instruction, all faculty teaching distance education courses must actively engage in ongoing, meaningful interactions with their students throughout the course.

Faculty Expectations:

- Regular Interaction:
 - Faculty are required to initiate frequent and predictable communication with students. Communication should be weekly. This may include emails, discussion posts, announcements, and assignment feedback. This will ensure students will know the class expectations and their standing.
 - In a typical semester-length course, the instructor is expected to monitor course activities at least twice a week and engage with students. Monitoring the course involves regularly reviewing student correspondence and activities, including those within the learning management system (LMS), to support students in staying actively engaged and on track for success.
 - Holding weekly office hours is a mandatory requirement for all courses at UNK, and times and clear instructions should be included in the course syllabus.
 - For courses with non-standard lengths, the same level of interaction should be maintained proportionally.
- Substantive Interaction:
 - Faculty must provide academic instruction that directly relates to the course content and contributes to the learning process. This includes offering direct instruction, facilitating discussions, providing detailed feedback on assignments, and responding to student inquiries about course material.
 - These interactions aim to promote critical thinking and deep engagement with the subject matter.

Course Design Requirements

All distance education courses at UNK must be designed to incorporate mechanisms that support regular and substantive interaction. All courses will be created to follow the American with Disabilities Act Title II guidelines for accessibility of digital experience. All online classes will be given through Canvas using the accessibility shell. UNK Learning Designers will evaluate classes to ensure that they are fully accessible beginning May 2026.

Course Review

Distance education courses at UNK will undergo periodic reviews to assess compliance with the RSI policy and digital accessibility. The same review process that is applied within departments for all classes will be followed to ensure that regular and substantive interactions are being implemented effectively. Courses that do not meet the required standards will receive feedback and guidance for improvement, and follow-up reviews will be conducted to ensure that necessary changes have been implemented.