Jenny Gernhart [00:00:00]:

To me, the thing to clear up is this isn't supposed to be daunting. It's not punitive, it's not evaluative. It is in no way held against you. It is simply an opportunity to improve. And most faculty that we've found, it's like there has been such a want and a need for this, like they're thankful to have someone else to bounce ideas off of and to get feedback.

Chisa Uyeki [00:00:23]:

Welcome to the Mount San Antonio College Podcast. I'm Chisa Uecki, a Mount SAC professor and librarian and and I'm pleased to be your host for this season. Our goal is to keep you connected to our campus by bringing you the activities and events you may not have time to attend, to share the interesting things our colleagues are creating and innovative ways they are supporting and connecting with Mount SAC students. Join me as we explore Mount sac. If you teach online, this episode is for you. You may have heard of RSI or Regular and Substantive Interaction. In today's episode, Mount SAC Podcast co host Ivan Sanchez will be talking with the two faculty who are serving as Mount sac's RSI coordinators, Sheila Wright from English Literature and Creative Writing and Jenny Gernhardt from FROM Biology. They will discuss what regular and substantive interaction in the online learning environment is and how it connects to Mount sac's ACC JC accreditation and most importantly, why it matters to you.

Chisa Uyeki [00:01:39]:

MOUNTSAC faculty are committed to delivering quality instruction in all modalities. Listen in and learn more about the opportunities to connect with your students through RSI. Faculty teaching in the spring of 2025 will learn how and why to take advantage of the opportunity right now and through winter to work with an RSI mentor in a supportive process to enrich your online class with interaction enhancing online teaching and learning. Thank you for joining us and enjoy today's episode.

Ivan Sanchez [00:02:19]:

So we are here with Sheila Wright and Jenny Gernhardt and we're going to be talking about Regular and Substantive Interaction or RSI for the podcast. So to start off with if you all could introduce yourselves.

Sheila Wright [00:02:37]:

My name is Sheila Wright. I am a part time instructor in the English Department. I have been at Mount Sac for over 17 years. I also teach at Clovis College which is up in the Fresno county area and I have been a proponent for distance learning since I I was in graduate school wishing there was some way that I could take online courses but that was back when wifi was like brand new so but I've always faced people who said it could never be done and I always believed it could be so it's really important to me that we prove that it can be done and that we're able to offer that to students who wouldn't have access to higher education another way and to those who sometimes thrive in this modality.

Jenny Gernhart [00:03:24]:

Love that. I guess my thoughts are pretty similar. You know, Sheila and I met through this initiative, but man, she's awesome. So for me, I'm Jenny Gernhardt. I have been a full time professor for 13 years. The last four of them have been here at Mount Sac. I teach microbiology. This is definitely an area where people thought that online education can't be done well, and it can be done well.

Jenny Gernhart [00:03:52]:

And I have found that some of the most meaningful relationships that I've been able to develop with students have come through my online students. And I swear there's something special about having a screen between you, whether it's synchronous or asynchronous, that tends to have people kind of put down their guard a little bit and be their real selves. And I find it really lovely. I also was a very non traditional student, so I single parented throughout my higher education experience. And I wish that I had had a profess like Sheila or like myself to do online online education. Right. And to make it engaging and fun and to build that sense of community, which is what RSI allows us to do.

Ivan Sanchez [00:04:33]:

Yeah. I just want to add, I love that you all focused on the strengths of online learning and the importance of this option for students who just come from different backgrounds and whose strengths are also to take classes online and do really well in this setting. And thanks to just dedicated faculty like yourselves and others, we have a really robust online presence at Mount sac. And not just that. I think it's of very high quality and high caliber. And students get a lot out of our online classes. And so I love that explanation from you all. So my first question is just to kind of get a overview of what regular and substantive interaction is or rsi.

Ivan Sanchez [00:05:25]:

Can you briefly explain what regular substantive interaction or RSI is and its importance for online learning?

Sheila Wright [00:05:33]:

Sure. Rsi, regular substantive interaction is a federal and state requirement. And it's one of the key things that differentiates distance learning and distance education from a correspondence course because of that crucial interaction between the student and the instructor and the students and other students. And so there are requirements to use 2 of 5 criterion for substantive interaction in a predictable pattern. And so there's providing direct instruction, like holding, you know, your office hours, assessing and providing substantive feedback. So personalizing it, giving them actionable. Feedback to help their learning, to obviously respond to their questions and be available and be very present to help them understand the concepts. You know, using the tools in Canvas to continually, again, remind them that you were there and to further explain things, facilitating discussion as well.

Sheila Wright [00:06:34]:

That's something I rely on a lot, is to help build that community. I always tell my students these discussions are one of the most crucial pieces in our course because you get that back and forth. There's another criteria yet to be defined by the accreditation agencies, but at Mount sac, we have a student to student requirement. Well, criteria where they also interact with each other. And then all courses have to have monitoring student of student engagement and monitoring success. So, you know, when students kind of disappear from the course, you check on them and give them that guidance, be there to give them an outline of like, here's some next steps to get caught up and to make sure that it's not just the transaction of the content, but also that you're there. You're there like you'd be in the classroom, that you're a guide and it's not independent study, that they're not on their own.

Ivan Sanchez [00:07:29]:

Absolutely.

Jenny Gernhart [00:07:29]:

Which I really love about rsi. You know, it personalizes online education the way that it should be to where you're not isolated, you're not lonely.

Sheila Wright [00:07:37]:

Right. And I think sometimes I know for me, as an introverted student, I participate more in an online class because I can think about what I'm going to say before I release it out, you know, into the world. And I find students also kind of have that opportunity to kind of think before they speak. And everybody kind of has the equal opportunity to chime in. So, you know, sometimes classes, you get the student who speaks up a lot. And sometimes you can see someone wants to talk, but they're afraid to raise their hand. I think the online modality offers those opportunities to students who might be apprehensive or just not the kind to kind of raise their voice all the time.

Ivan Sanchez [00:08:14]:

Yeah, they may not be very vocal in the classroom, but in an online setting with a sense of anonymity, they feel a lot more comfortable expressing their ideas, their thoughts. And so I think you highlighted, Sheila, the great importance that RSI has in that process and how each course, she must feel, like, unique, that even if you took the course twice, let's say it's going to be a completely different experience because you're going to have different classmates and your instructor is going to be interacting with you in a live fashion. And thank you for highlighting the Various criteria as well. And maybe Jenny, did you want to talk a little bit about the importance that it has for how students learn? Or Sheila, you can also jump in on this as well.

Sheila Wright [00:09:00]:

I'll just add that the humanizing of the course is the importance of RSI to online learning. And it's such a key part of making a course, a high quality course is to have that very visible and very predictable interaction with your students. And that it's not just talking, but it's also, you know, in different ways. I think it gives you an opportunity, different ways to communicate the material as opposed to just kind of, you know, the lecture and, and things. So to me it's the importance is the human element and the fostering that learning community and putting those social elements of learning in a course and those social elements being available to students who might be on the more introverted side. And then because I think in an in person classroom, extroverts probably are more comfortable there. So it kind of equalizes those social elements of learning which are important.

Ivan Sanchez [00:09:55]:

Absolutely. Thank you so much. So how is RSI connected to accreditation and what is the importance of accreditation?

Jenny Gernhart [00:10:03]:

So I wanted first just to mention what accreditation is in general, because some people just might not know. So accreditation basically involves some, an outside body coming in to look at our institution's programs and look at our instructional quality and evaluate that. And so for us here at Mount sac, the ACCJC or the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, that is who basically the Department of Ed has said, you know, they recognize as this authority to come in and say, yes, Mount SAC is meeting standards or no, we're not. And this is important because accreditation is tied to things like do our students get federal financial aid and are their transfer credits going to be accepted? And the other reason that this is important is because the ACCJC could also restrict our ability to teach online courses if we do not meet these RSI standards. These are federal guidelines. And so we actually were evaluated back in spring and fall, fall of 2023, both times, unfortunately, we failed to meet the RSI standards. We're found to have significant deficiencies. So this is our third chance and probably the final chance before there are some pretty potentially dire consequences that could happen.

Jenny Gernhart [00:11:15]:

In spring of 2025, they're randomly going to choose 50 asynchronous online courses to evaluate. And they've set the threshold as far as the amount that have to pass pretty high. So 85% of those 50 courses that they pull to evaluate must meet those RSI standards that Sheila was describing. And just to give this to you in the actual numbers, that means if more than seven of the courses chosen don't show rsi, all of our livelihoods could be affected. Because if we don't meet standards, we could get a warning. This could mean more visits, just more scrutiny for the next up to 18 months. But another thing that could happen in that timeframe is that they could limit or disallow us to teach our online course offerings. So.

Jenny Gernhart [00:12:06]:

And none of us want that to happen.

Ivan Sanchez [00:12:08]:

I completely agree, and thank you just for expressing and laying out the importance of this accreditation process for us. So on to exploring the RSI review, which is something that we are doing for folks in the fall and winter in order to get them prepared for the spring 2025, when the real round of RSI accreditation reviews will start. How would you explain the goals of the RSI, or regular and substantive interaction review to someone who may be hesitant to sign up? How would you sort of describe what the review process is like and what happens when they sign up and what is involved in all of that?

Jenny Gernhart [00:12:56]:

So I'd like to take this one just to build on, because I know before I was saying that it's such a dire situation, and so there is that piece. You know, there is this immediate goal, but there's also a long term, bigger picture goal here. So, yes, right now we have this need to make sure that all of our Mount SAC online instructors know what those different criteria for RSI that they have to meet are, and that we're ensuring that they're meeting at least two of those standards. And that is crucial for our online course offerings. But really, there's a bigger picture here. The ultimate goal is that we all as professors are providing a meaningful and engaging experience for our students. And going through RSI review can really, really help support professors and just hone their skills to make sure that they're effectively engaging students. And it builds community.

Jenny Gernhart [00:13:43]:

It really, truly does. As you're saying that anonymity that's involved in online courses, I really think frees people up to be their real themselves. When it's through that screen, as Sheila said, it gives them time to think about their responses and to respond in just more thoughtful and measured ways. And so we can build upon that. We can help improve retention. By doing that, we can make sure that students are getting the sort of quality instruction that we all got involved as professors because we want to offer that it's, you know, for everyone. We all want to be good at our jobs. But I think for teachers in general, we're here because we have a passion for helping others.

Jenny Gernhart [00:14:18]:

So it's, it's really important to us to do that. And this allows us to have this sort of meaning, meaningful connection that we want by following these RSI guidelines. And so that, to me is the first thing, like, don't be hesitant. This program is, yes, there's this other part, this dire need that we're a little behind the wheel on, but ultimately we all want to move in this direction anyway. As far as the actual steps, it's pretty easy. So first the professors can fill out a smartsheet. So you can go, we have a canvas shell, we have this online hub, just a quick little click of a button. When you go to that RSI hub, you fill out a smartsheet.

Jenny Gernhart [00:14:53]:

Takes you about one minute. And then after you do that, that's going to trigger messages that will go out to Sheila and I. And so then we will assign you a mentor. This is going to be someone who is spot certified, who has a lot of experience teaching online, is passionate about online teaching, and has gone through some norms training with us to where they know what those standards of RSI are and can help support other professors in learning those and making sure they're offering them. And so then we assign that mentor, the mentee, the professor who signed up for the review. They're going to get an email, just an automatic generated one, and then they're going to get a personal one, probably shortly after from the mentor. They're going to add the mentor to their course shell so the mentor can look it over and give them some feedback. And then another important piece, after they get added to the course shell, when the mentor reaches out to them, they're going to say, oh, hey, please fill out this self evaluation rubric.

Jenny Gernhart [00:15:46]:

And so this rubric has all of those standards that Sheila mentioned that are part of regular and substantive interaction. And so it give as a professor a chance to do self reflection. And then so you fill out the form to figure out what criteria you're meeting. You send that back to your mentor, you've given them access to your class so they can go look for those items that you mentioned in your review. And then they're just going to go through and make sure that it actually is meeting those standards. And in some cases it is. And they're just going to sign you off and say, oh, hey, great, I really liked how you did this and this, you know, good job here, and, and you pass. And in some Situations, professors need more support.

Jenny Gernhart [00:16:24]:

It just kind of depends, you know, situation by situation. But sometimes the mentor is going to follow back up. And so in any rate, they're going to meet with you, typically through like a zoom meeting, and go over that review and talk about what they saw when they reviewed your course. And in some situations, they might give you some feedback about, you know, hey, maybe add a live zoom office hour or make sure you're giving personalized feedback when you're using rubrics or just little things like that.

Ivan Sanchez [00:16:50]:

To be clear, there's no connection with passing or not passing and your position at the college. There's no penalty or any sort of extra scrutiny that you're going to get from administrator or chair or anything like that.

Jenny Gernhart [00:17:08]:

So this isn't supposed to be. And that's one of the things that I wanted to mention. So I know that one of the things that you had asked us is about was there something to clear up anything from the process? And so to me, the thing to clear up is this isn't supposed to be daunting. It's not punitive, it's not evaluative. It is in no way held against you. It is simply an opportunity to improve. And most faculty that we've found, it's like there has been such a want and a need for this, like they're thankful to have someone else to bounce ideas off of and to get feedback. I know Sheila and I were talking about even as being the RSI coordinators and we feel very passionate and experienced with online classes.

Jenny Gernhart [00:17:48]:

We exchanged self evaluation rubrics with each other so that we could help each other. Like that's how we improve. My online instruction has improved tremendously since I took on this role because it's made me be reflective and get feedback from my peers. That's what it's about. It's not going to be held against you. It's going to make you better.

Ivan Sanchez [00:18:06]:

Thank you. Thank you so much for that answer. We also want to encourage anybody who hasn't signed up for regular and substantive interaction review. I love that you mentioned how collaborative it is, how not that punitive it is, and how it's just about getting better and making more connections with our students, which is, I think, a big part of the reason of why we signed up to teach. If we could talk a little bit about some more reasons to be encouraged to sign up to do the review process. Do you have any words for folks to encourage them to sign up? Especially for those who have not signed up and are maybe Planning possibly to sign up in the winter, obviously, all.

Sheila Wright [00:18:49]:

The things Jenny mentioned that we are working collectively to improve as a college and of course as instructors, we're always looking to evolve our teaching. There's also the benefits. We're signing up for the review in winter to earn a stipend, two hours, the non teaching rate, and also to get some credit for your upcoming spot recertification. So in addition to the overarching benefit of helping our students, there's also those things to honor your time for going through this review and kind of kill two birds in one stone and do this as well as to check off a box towards your spot recertification.

Ivan Sanchez [00:19:30]:

So Lulu, if you could explain the spot recertification just a little bit, just in case we need a explanation for folks.

Jenny Gernhart [00:19:37]:

So as you guys know, typically spot recertification has to happen every four years, right? So that is the certification that we've all done to be able to have the ability, ability to teach online courses at Mount sac. And so with that recertification process, we've updated a little bit to roll the RSI review into that. And so part of the recertification process, typically you have to do a regulations update just to make sure that you're actually meeting whatever the state and federal guidelines around online courses are. So you should do that. So for example, me, I'm due for spot recertification July of 2025. And so this school year, then right fall and then this coming spring, I would want to make sure that I've done the regulations update. That's just an asynchronous, self paced little piece and that counts for one hour. And then you also need to get two more hours of additional spot recertification, like through professional development style workshops.

Jenny Gernhart [00:20:36]:

You could, if you go into like our POD page or the POD calendar, you could find workshops that meet those requirements. And then for the fourth hour, for those who are set to be recertified in July, that fourth hour, the RSI review counts for that. So even though on spot research it counts for one hour, if you volunteer and get it out of the way by this winter, you actually get paid for two hours at the non credit rate. But so that's that spot recertification process that we're talking about. And then there are some pieces that are in the works, but with people who are getting certified beyond 2025 or who are getting certified but are not teaching online right now, they can't do the review. So instead they would have to get some other RSI related credit. You know, maybe doing an additional RSI.

Ivan Sanchez [00:21:23]:

Related workshop in response to that question, too. I love how you all are focusing on more on, like, the benefits that we get from teaching students. So maybe we can sneak in a couple words for folks to encourage them to sign up. Because this is going to help you build a connection with your students. It's something that is going to be rewarding for you as an instructor. So maybe some evidence or some reasoning that speaks to that.

Jenny Gernhart [00:21:48]:

I traditionally have good relationships with students. Like, that's not necessarily a new thing. But this semester in particular, just the level of fun that my online courses have been, the level of engagement has increased. And I swear that it's because I learned little tweaks, little things to do different for me. I incorporated a course Q and A that I keep open all semester and I respond every weekend. And then the other thing I've started doing is doing optional live zoom review sessions for my asynchronous class. And the I'm telling you, probably close to 50% of the students show up as a way to review before their quiz. It's made the entire tone of the class different.

Jenny Gernhart [00:22:32]:

Like, students joke with me. Students can come to me when they're going to miss a deadline because they're sick or they're having a family emergency. And it's just like adding these little extra humanizing pieces has just, just changed the trajectory of my class. It's been amazing.

Ivan Sanchez [00:22:49]:

I love it. Yeah, that's exactly what I'm referring to. We want to give folks, like, monetary incentives. But in honesty, like, I can definitely relate to what you're saying, Jenny. With such a heavy focus on rsi, like, my relationship with my online students have gone from, you know, collegial and helpful. And students say they enjoy my class to, like, getting to know students and really helping them to dive deep into the material. I'm helping a student with a literature review. They just feel so comfortable coming up to me and asking me questions because of all of the extra stuff that I have been doing in terms of regular and substantive interaction and the, you know, substantial feedback that I have been leaving them every single time.

Ivan Sanchez [00:23:40]:

They feel like I'm somebody that is going to care, someone that they can go to and ask questions. And that's what I signed up for as a professor. Like, I love being helpful. It's something that just fills my bucket. And when students, you know, email me back, like, thanks, that was so helpful. It just, like, makes my day. So I can definitely also relate to how different it is to teach with these principles in mind. And so the last thing I'll talk about is maybe for folks who have already signed up and maybe even completed the review process, we are all in this together.

Ivan Sanchez [00:24:14]:

Have you all seen from your perspective what successful strategies have departments employed to get all the full time and all the part time faculty who are teaching online to sign up for this review?

Sheila Wright [00:24:27]:

Okay, so there's been a variety of things and people have been wonderful in sharing their strategies. Obviously messaging, email has been one of the key ways. It's the way they send out the message, it's supportive, acknowledging who's already taken part in this, reminding faculty, you know, how good RSI is all about student success. There has been some cautioning some of the things Jenny mentioned about what's at stake if we don't get it right this time for students, for those of us like me, who rely on the flexibility of online teaching so I can live one place and, you know, collect courses and teach them elsewhere. I think one of the things that's been important is kind of getting people to kind of see how teaching online asynchronous courses impacts, you know, the college as a whole, to kind of get you out of your own little bubble to see that maybe you're doing it right, maybe you've got everything in a row, but maybe someone out there is afraid to ask, they're afraid to say, could you look at the. And so getting people to share their experiences with the process has been helpful. One particular example, one of the department chairs went through the review process and used the stipend that they earned to buy some raffle prizes to encourage their department to sign up and got 100% participation in the review process. Another one was a targeted outreach.

Sheila Wright [00:25:53]:

So we provided a list of the part time faculty that we haven't seen. And as a part timer, I'm getting emails from multiple colleges depending on the semester and so sometimes those things get lost. So that targeted outreach, in addition to what we're doing and just encouraging, I think as a part timer that's something you can kind of feel like, oh, no one's kind of paying attention to me over here. And someone, yeah. And someone says like, hey, come do this. Like, and it's not a lot of your time, you know, and it's going to help you be better. And of course as a part timer that's something like I want to do my best so that they ask, asked me to come back next semester. So again, it's been that targeted outreach and that everybody's on Board.

Sheila Wright [00:26:36]:

It's not just us. It's not just has to do with accreditation. Department chairs are on board. They're getting their RSI reviews done and having us come to meetings and speak, you know, about the process, not just giving it to sec, you know, as secondhand information and people asking us, can we use your slides? Can we borrow this? And so it's been a really good collaborative effort and also just kind of that targeted outreach, but also acknowledging that, you know, we could do better. And I think even if we weren't worried about the ACCJC visit, I just feel like faculty here just always wants to like, how can we step it up, how can we make it better and such a huge college to kind of like, how can we kind of take the lead in this, be an example of how good online learning could be?

Ivan Sanchez [00:27:26]:

I love it. Yeah, absolutely. Those are all great ideas. Thank you for sharing. Jenny, did you want to add any other ideas?

Jenny Gernhart [00:27:33]:

Oh, I feel like Sheila really covered the as far as our outreach, the way that department chairs have responded. So like we said, we cross listed. We took an email of all the instructors who are set to teach online and then all the ones who have signed up to teach RSI review and just kind of targeted the chairs and said, hey, we haven't heard from these people yet. That seems to have been pretty effective. And for any department chairs who are out there listening, we're getting ready to do a similar cross list for the winter and spring courses. So they'll be hearing from us shortly.

Ivan Sanchez [00:28:04]:

Well, wonderful. Thank you both for your efforts, your passion, and the knowledge that you have shared with us today. This has all been really helpful, enlightening and making us see the bigger picture of all of this and connecting the dots. So I hope everyone else found it really helpful. I guess I will just ask if there's anything else you'd like people to know about rsi, the review process.

Jenny Gernhart [00:28:30]:

To me, just go to the RSI hub on canvas. It's in the comments. You can easily find it there. You can find all the resources you could possibly want. And on the homepage is a link. You just click that link and it takes you to the smartsheet and you'll be signed up in one minute.

Ivan Sanchez [00:28:45]:

It absolutely. And we'll definitely include links in the show notes as well.

Sheila Wright [00:28:50]:

I probably just add we have an incredible group of RSI mentors with just a wealth of experience with distant education. You're in really good hands if you have your RSI review to kind of maybe eliminate some of your blind spots and also learn different things. And also for us through our mentors, it's an opportunity for us to see the best practices that people are doing. You know, I and across disciplines. Something that we don't get a chance a lot to do that is to kind of share out beyond our departments.

Ivan Sanchez [00:29:23]:

Well, thank you both so much for taking the time to talk about RSI and to talk about all the wonderful work that you all are doing to help us get ready for this spring accreditation.

Sheila Wright [00:29:36]:

Thank you Ivan.

Jenny Gernhart [00:29:37]:

Thanks for having us.

Chisa Uyeki [00:29:39]:

Thank you for listening to the Mount San Antonio College Podcast brought to you by Mount Saks POD Office and created in partnership with Avant House Media. Original music created and edited by Neera Azira. Be sure to check out our growing library of over 230 episodes and let us know your thoughts. You can reach me Chisa Ueki at C U Y E K I at mountsac. Edu. Wishing you an amazing year and happy listening.