

Text Transcript of Interview with Nicole Finkbeiner

Recorded on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Learn more about [Nicole Finkbeiner](#)

Learn more about [ACRL-IS Instructional Technologies Committee](#)

- 00:00 **Nicole:** My name is Nicole Finkbeiner, I'm the Director of Institutional Relations at Rice University working on the OpenStax project. So I spend the majority of my time coaching colleges and universities on their effort to encourage OER use at their campuses. And when I'm doing that coaching it's not just about OpenStax OER, but it's encouraging all forms of OER that are currently available. [00:28] And my background is that I come from community colleges, I worked at two different community colleges one in Michigan and one in Texas in college relations and community relations roles.
- 00:43 **Interviewer 01:** Great, thanks Nicole. Could you tell us a little bit about OpenStax and what it has to offer?
- 00:52 **Nicole:** So OpenStax is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based at Rice University. We report up to the president's office at Rice and we are Rice University employees. We were founded by Dr. Richard Baraniuk, who is a Signal and Computer Engineering professor here at Rice University. And we're most known for our thirty-two high-quality peer-reviewed open source college and advanced placement textbooks. [01:22] But as a part of Rice, we also conduct a significant amount of teaching and learning research around content, and particularly open source content. And we also run a nationally recognized OpenStax institutional partner program, which is the main program that I work on. It coaches colleges and universities in their efforts to encourage OER. And again, that's not just OpenStax OER, it's all OER.
- 01:53 **Interviewer 02:** Okay, wonderful, thank you. So what is the development process like for OpenStax textbooks?
- 02:02 **Nicole:** Rice University has thirty-two OpenStax textbooks, and the development process for these books looks very similar to that of a traditional publisher. We use grant funding from a wide variety of foundations to fund the initial development of the books. And the reason for that is that we spend somewhere between half a million and two million dollars per textbook. So where does that money go? [02:28] It goes towards paying our faculty authors of the book, our senior contributing authors and our contributing authors, we also typically have approximately fifty peer reviewers per textbook. And it's always a mix of community college, four year, private, all of the above, and we also pay them a stipend for their time. We have to typically develop the art for the books from scratch. So there are art designers, art editors, things like that. [03:00] And also our editorial team. So that's really the full development process.



Interview with Nicole Finkbeiner Transcript, from an interview recorded February 25, 2019, by Nicole Finkbeiner, Rashelle Nagar, and Jill Hallam-Miller, is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](#) license.

It goes from being written by a faculty member, or in some cases we are able to purchase a textbook that was already in production and then just revise it. Then it goes through that very extensive peer review process, it typically gets a whole new art program, it goes through an editorial process before publishing online. So all of our books meet the standard scope and sequence, are expert written, [03:30] are extensively peer reviewed, go through and editorial process. And we also have a process to do regular errata industry updates and even new editions of the textbooks as well, and I'll talk about that a little bit later in our conversation.

- 03:50 **Interviewer 01:** Okay, great. What are some strategies that librarians and other OER advocates can use to encourage faculty to engage with open textbooks?
- 04:03 **Nicole:** So OpenStax runs a program called the OpenStax Institutional Partner Program. It is a free program to institutions that helps coach colleges and universities through the process of encouraging OER. And we have approximately two hundred schools in that program. It is a competitive application process to get into that program. We typically accept between nine and twelve institutions each year. [04:30] And what we've learned from that is that there are two main things that you need to be successful. And the first one is that you have to incentivize in some way. The most successful tactic no matter if you are a community college or a four year university or a private college is to offer adoptions and adaptation grants. So this is typically where you are providing a faculty member with a small grant to compensate them for their time to switch to an open textbook, [05:03] such as an OpenStax book, or something in OER Commons, or MERLOT, or Open Textbook Library, all of those different places. Another successful way to incentivize is to work to host the Open Textbook Network workshops on your campus. So this is a program out of the University of Minnesota in the Open Textbook Network, where they come on your campus and they do workshops for your faculty on OER. [05:29] And during that workshop each faculty member is assigned an OER to write a public review of. And these reviews look somewhat like an Amazon five-star review but they are way more extensive than that. And for doing so, if a faculty member completes that review, you as the institution typically give the faculty member a couple hundred dollars for doing that. [05:52] So that's another way to look at incentivizing, because from their own statistics, forty-five percent of the faculty who complete that writing of a review will then go ahead and adopt an open textbook. The second main tactic that we found that you need to do to be successful with an OER initiative is to go out and have conversations. We describe this at OpenStax as the difference between direct tactics and indirect tactics. So indirect tactics are things where you're not particularly going out and having conversations, you're not get a yes or no answer from faculty. [06:31] I nickname them "If we build it, they might find it." So it's things like having an OER task force



and having a display in your library, putting books on the library reserves, things like that. We have found that those things can be helpful but they are not necessarily a successful way to encourage adoptions. OER websites are another way of doing that. Very helpful, just not great at adoptions. [06:54] On the flip side, direct tactics are those things where you are actively going out and approaching faculty. So not waiting for them to come to you, but you going up to them and approaching them and talking to them about adopting an OER textbook in some sort of way. [07:10] So this typically means meeting meeting one-on-one with faculty to show them a couple OER that might be right for their course and asking them to adopt. So one way to do this, for example, is if you have a biology professor to schedule a meeting with that biology professor and take one to two, maybe three, OER textbooks for them to take a look at, [07:30] and then go ahead from there. And ask them to take a look at those and then follow up with them later and ask them if they would be willing to pilot one of those or adopt one of those for their courses. It also can take the form of presentations at places like department meetings. I've found that it can be really successful to have a presentation at your faculty convocation and new faculty orientation -- that's particularly successful for community colleges. [07:55] But for each of these, you must find a way through some sort of sign-up sheet that you pass around, a sign-up sheet on the table, I don't find it works if the sign-up sheet is in the corner. But if it's something they actively have put in their hands or some other way to have faculty tell you that they have expressed interest in OER and that they are willing to talk to you about OER. And then you need to follow up with each of those faculty members to meet with them and ask them to adopt.

08:27 **Interviewer 02:** Wonderful, thank you so much, Nicole. Those are some great tips for thinking about faculty engagement. So related to that, one of the challenges that faculty identify frequently about open textbooks is the lack of ancillary materials. What are some ways that this can be addressed?

08:46 **Nicole:** Here at OpenStax at Rice University we started publishing some free ancillaries along with our books to help address this issue. Because we do find that some basic ancillaries, some basic lecture PowerPoint slides, or image PowerPoint slides, potentially a test bank, potentially a solution manual can really make the difference in faculty adoptions by having those ancillaries readily available. [09:13] So we do publish those and we find that it can be particularly helpful for adjunct faculty or faculty who find out at the last minute that they are teaching a course. The other thing we've done here at OpenStax is that we've partnered with OER Commons and started community hubs for each of our books. So what this is is where faculty have written into me or our support department and said, [09:37] "You know it's really great that you offer some basic resources around your books. But I've created some additional ancillaries around the



books. I've created key terms guides. I've created videos. I've created lectures. I've created all these different things about your book. And I would like to donate those back to OpenStax." [09:58] And so what we've done is we've partnered with OER Commons and they have a separate hub for each of our books where you can see the additional ancillaries that faculty have developed around the books. Now with all that said, I think we as a community have to think about how we're going about developing ancillaries and the efficiencies of doing so. It's really common for colleges and universities to offer a grant for a faculty member to develop additional ancillaries around the book that they need to teach the book. [10:30] And I think that's okay. The thing that concerns me is how do we prevent these same ancillaries from being created a hundred times? So how do we prevent each college or university from having to spend the money to develop these ancillaries? And instead create one way for all the faculty to work together to develop those ancillaries. [10:55] And I think that's a question that still very open in the community right now, and we really haven't figured out a way to do that. How do we prevent everybody from reinventing the wheel? One experiment OpenStax is doing right now at Rice University to try to see if we can figure out a way around that is we are hosting our second year of a conference that we're calling Creator Fest. And Creator Fest is a meeting of faculty only who are either using OpenStax books or are planning to use OpenStax books in the near future. [11:29] They come to Houston and they work at Rice University's campus on working together as a group. So all the biology faculty members go in one room, all the sociology faculty members go in their own room, all of the psychology faculty members go in a different room. And they work together on what ancillaries they think are needed to really help not only the people in the room, but the community as a whole to be able to adopt those books. And they work together on those. [11:55] So I think that's one model that may be successful to encourage that collaboration versus everybody creating the same thing over again. Now one thing I do want to mention about ancillaries is that you really need to think through how you are going to license ancillaries as well. At OpenStax our test banks and our instructor solution manuals are still copyrighted. [12:23] We do not release those under an open license. And the reason we don't do that is if we did, then we would have no legal recourse for anyone who published those resources online. So any of the cheating websites you think of, or the student websites you think of that are providing all of those answers to students. And so we do keep those under copyright. On the flip side, we think it's really important to openly license the PowerPoint slides. And that helps faculty to take those, modify them, but also you them in a variety of ways. [12:57] One of the most interesting use cases I've come across was at MiraCosta Community College in their college Physics Department. There they have faculty who are adjunct faculty who are teaching at four or five different colleges and universities. They're teaching college physics, so pretty much the same class, but they're teaching out of different books.



And most of them are publisher books, which means the PowerPoint slides are copyright and cannot be moved from one to the next. [13:25] Which means the adjuncts are actively doing their prep four or five times easily, because they're teaching out of four or five different books. And so the department chair worked with them and said, "Listen, take this openly licensed college physics book, take the OpenStax openly licensed college physics PowerPoint slides, and why don't you all work together to create one master course prep, so that you don't have to continually continue to do that." [13:55] So continuing to look at all those different ways that we can encourage efficiency and not create more work for faculty.

14:06 **Interviewer 01:** Thanks, Nicole. That's really interesting, I hadn't given any thought to the idea of licensing the ancillary materials and having to be careful about how those are licensed. We talk about open textbooks being free, and one of the great things about them is that they're free for anyone to use. But they're obviously not free to create. What are some things people should think about, from a sustainability perspective, when they are creating open educational resources?

14:39 **Nicole:** I think the biggest thing that faculty and administrators need to think about when we are looking at a sustainability perspective when we're creating OER is that one of the biggest concerns faculty have is the relevancy of the content. The question that I get most often from faculty is, "How do I know this is going to be kept up to date? It's great to have an openly licensed textbook that's free right now, but how do I know those updates are going to happen?" [15:09] So I think as part of the creation process, before you even begin to create, you have to have a plan and time and funding in some way to keep the content up to date. So OpenStax at Rice University is a nonprofit, but we do have a sustainability model. And what that means is that we make just enough money to sustain our organization and also update the books that we currently have. [15:39] So with our sustainability funding we are able to do errata updates as well as full revisions to the books that we have. And so again going back again to that question of "Will the content be kept up to date? Will it be available in a long time?" One of the questions we get at OpenStax is "How do I know that you're going to be around in ten years? And what happens if all of your grant funding goes away?" [16:01] Well Rice University has been working on OER for over twenty years now, so that helps that. But if all of our grant funding went away tomorrow, the only thing that would change is that we would not publish new titles, but we would be able to continue to update the titles we have through errata updates as well as full revisions of the books. So you need to think through that from the beginning and have that sustainability model in mind. [16:29] I also think it's important to think about when you do the updates. We do our errata updates between semesters. We used to do them right away, but that caused a lot of different issues. Number one, some students have purchased a print copy



of the OpenStax books, or they just download the PDF at the beginning of the semester. Which I do recommend that every student download that PDF, that's so important so that they have it even if they don't have internet access. But then what was happening is what the students who were using the online version were seeing something different than the students who had bought the print or downloaded the PDF at the beginning of the semester. [17:09] When we were making those changes in the middle of the semester, and that was causing confusion. The second thing that happened was that faculty were getting really frustrated in the fact that the book was changing in the middle of a semester. And that was very frustrating for them and causing a lot of additional work. So we went to a model where we only do errata updates between the semesters. And any faculty member who has reported their adoption back to us, we let them know when we do those errata updates. [17:38] And we send them a guide that lets them know every change that we made to the book, so they know what changed and they know before the next semester. Then you have to think about when to do full revisions of the books, because that is something that you need to think about. For the full revisions, we have this model right now of the publishers always doing a full revision every three years. And that comes from them wanting to get old textbooks out of the market so that there's not a lot of used books in the market. [18:10] And we don't think that's necessary. And most faculty have provided us feedback that it doesn't make a lot of sense from their perspective either, to have to continually move to a new edition even if the changes are only minor. So what we've done here at OpenStax to think through that is that we only update our books when it's pedagogically necessary to do so. So that's really going to depend on the subject matter as well as on the feedback that we get from faculty. [18:41] For example, pre-calculus doesn't change very often. American government, psychology, economics change very often. So we have to continually think through those and only do that. The other really great thing about an open educational resource from this model of sustainability is that faculty still have the right to use the old edition and redistribute the old edition if they do not want to move to the new edition. [19:09] The last thing I'll say about sustainability and maintaining the content is that how you do updates is also important, because through your update model you also need to maintain the quality of your work. So OpenStax spends a significant amount of money at the beginning of the development process to make sure that we hire the best experts we can to write the books, the best peer reviewers we can to peer review the books. [19:36] And so if we didn't also peer review all of those errata updates and changes we were making, it could deteriorate the quality of the books. So every time a faculty member submits an errata update to OpenStax, that errata suggestion goes back through a peer review committee process to ensure that the quality of the text is maintained. [20:00] And just this past week I had one that was rejected by the peer review committee that did not feel that the change needed to be made. So it's important to have that peer



review committee to make sure that the quality continues, and then move forward with your updates as well.

- 20:19 **Interviewer 02:** Wonderful, thank you so much. So you talked a bit about the peer review process, so would you mind elaborating about what that process is like for an OpenStax textbook?
- 20:31 **Nicole:** The peer review process, specifically?
- 20:35 **Interviewer 02:** Correct, yes.
- 20:37 **Nicole:** The peer review process for OpenStax textbooks looks very similar to that of a publisher. However, I have heard from our senior contributing authors talk about, on webinars and such, how they actually felt it was more robust. One of my best webinars that I listened to was our American Government author, Glen Krutz, talking about how he thought he'd really written brilliant chapters for our American Government book. [21:06] And when he got back the feedback from the peer review, which is typically more of a checkbox, maybe some minor modifications, but our peer reviewers really dug in there and really had a significant amount of changes and suggestions and thoughts for him. And he had never really seen how robust it was to have so many peer reviewers, and so many peer reviewers from different diverse backgrounds as well, come into the text and really go through it to make sure that the quality was there. So the peer review process at OpenStax is not a checkbox, it is something that is incredibly robust, and takes a lot of time, and can sometimes even slow down the textbook development process. [21:50] But we feel that that's worth it. We will not release a book until the peer reviewers and everybody are satisfied that the book is at the quality level that we need it to be at. And so that can take multiple rounds even to get to the point where we are satisfied that the book is at the quality level that is needed for instruction.
- 22:18 **Interviewer 02:** Wonderful, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. Before we let you go, are there any last thoughts that you have about open educational resources or open textbooks that we haven't covered during our conversation so far?
- 22:36 **Nicole:** I think that one thing about open educational resources and open textbooks that's really important to know is that it's great that they are free, or low cost sometimes as well, but I think that really misses the point of OER. Because publishers can lower their cost down to a level where they can compete sometimes with OER. I have heard faculty say "Oh such-and-such publisher gave me a great deal on one of their books so I no longer see the benefit of an open educational resource." [23:10] And I think that really misses the true benefits of open educational resources. When we think about students and what it means for students to use openly licensed materials. Number one, they can access their content wherever they want. We often see students who, because we have multiple free formats, juggle



between the different formats depending on the device and situation. And if you've ever tried to read a PDF on your cell phone, you'll know why. [23:42] So it's not uncommon for us to hear from students that they bought the low cost print copy, and they keep that at home for the really intensive reading and studying. And then when they get into their course, then they crack open their laptop and use the PDF. Then they'll jump on the bus and either use the online version or the Amazon Kindle. So they're constantly juggling between these. [24:06] I think it's also important to note that students not only have immediate access, but unlimited access for the rest of their lives. So there is absolutely no excuse for a student not to have access to their content at any time during the course. Because for most OER, there's no access codes, there's no login, there's none of that. And I heard this best from a faculty member at Thomas Nelson Community College during a faculty panel. She said, "Before, I didn't know if my students weren't reading the text because they couldn't afford it, or if their financial aid hadn't come in, or they had an issue with their access code, or anything like that. [24:42] But when I started using an OER, I realized that the only reason a student couldn't have not read the content was because they chose not to. Because there were no barriers for them." And then we think through how students can use their content in their work to do videos and class assignments. And another thing is how students take the content and put it in a format that meets their study habits. [25:05] When I'm out at campuses, I often see students who have created PDF study guides from the OpenStax content and shared that out with fellow students. We were tagged in a post on Facebook not too long ago because there was a Facebook page for a psychology class, and students were copying and pasting parts of the OpenStax book to talk about their points and to debate with one another about different psychological concepts. That would be illegal with a copyright text, but you absolutely can do that [with OER]. [25:36] So why do I think it's important for students to have access to the content once the course is over? For a lot of reasons. Number one, multiple semester courses means that a student has to typically rebuy their content. You also think about having the content for them to refer back to for more advanced courses. For example, we received a major adoption at a university, and when we looked at the adoption it was for a statistics book, but the professor was a psychology professor. [26:07] So we thought she just clicked the wrong button when she filled out our adoption form. So we emailed her and asked her that question, and she wrote back and said, "No, I teach all the advanced research methods courses at my university. And I found that the students had forgotten their basic statistics, they needed to brush up on it." And of course they didn't have access to their content. [26:28] They sold it back, their access code had worn out, all of these different things. And she said, "I didn't want to make them rebuy that content, so I have them use the OpenStax statistics book." You think of the GMAT, the GRE, the MCAT. I don't know about you, but I paid Kaplan a lot of money to relearn the circumference of a circle. Now students can just



use the OER to do that. And then you think about how many of us have actually end up in the career that we went to college for? And how important that is to have access to a broad variety of high quality information. [27:02] So I worked with Rice University's library, and we tried to find studies that show how many of us actually end up in the career we went to school for. And it was very difficult to find any research on this, but the one study we could find showed that approximately twenty-seven percent of us actually end up in the career that we went to school for. So yes, that physics major may need that sociology book at some point in their life, we just don't know. And then on the faculty side, being able to know that every student has immediate and unlimited access means moving forward in your learning objectives on the first day of class with absolutely no excuses and no barriers. [27:38] Having the ability to choose different technology partners and not being locked into particular platforms or systems. Not having those traditional copyright restrictions. Being able to edit, adapt, modify the content as you see fit. Being able to show the content on things like public YouTube videos for flipped classroom environments or lecture videos. [28:01] Moving to a new edition is absolutely optional. So all of these things, while we talk so much about price, my suggestion is to talk about price and the fact that OER are free, but then move the conversation from there into the benefits of open beyond free. And really talk about the additional student freedoms, and the additional faculty academic freedoms that they have, and the fact that faculty are taking back control of their courses by using an OER.

