

Text Transcript of Interview with Nicole Allen

Recorded on March 6th, 2019

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00:00 **Nicole:** Hi, I'm Nicole Allen, Director of Open Education for SPARC. SPARC is an alliance of academic and research libraries that works to make open the default for research in education. We have over two hundred member libraries across North America who are deeply committed to making open part of their institutions and that works across open access, open data, and open education. [00:30] I lead the open education part of SPARC. My job is complex, but it's split between running SPARC's open education policy efforts and also creating programs for on-campus work with our libraries. Lately our focus has been on our Open Education Leadership Program, and doing convening for librarians to build a community of practice. [00:59] And my story actually starts before SPARC as an undergraduate student when I was really frustrated by the high cost of textbooks, and ended up turning my early activism into a career in grassroots organizing on these issues. First, I worked with students across the country to mobilize for OER throughout the late-2000's and early-2010's. And in 2013 I joined SPARC to develop a new program on open education. And the rest, I think, is history.

01:40 **Interviewer 01:** Thanks for sharing your story, Nicole. Could you tell us what do we mean when we talk about "open education policy?"

01:52 **Nicole:** The word "policy" can be a little bit of a loaded term. We often think about it in its most formal sense, when we're talking about public policy like laws and regulations that are adopted by governments or by boards of trustees. But policy can actually play out in lots of other more informal ways that intersect directly with practice and impact our everyday work on open education. Sometimes I just say to think about policy that's a practice, any kind of practice, that's written down. [02:28] Open education policy ranges across the entire different spectrum. So we're seeing a lot of states and the federal government adopting broader policy frameworks, and encouraging institutions to start expanding the use of open educational resources and use open licensing for publicly-funded resources. [02:53] We're also seeing campuses start to adopt policies that are focused around providing encouragement or frameworks for professors to adopt OER. I think a really exciting example is around OER coursemarking, where institutions add designations in their course schedules to show which courses are using



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OER or maybe other free or low-cost materials. [03:22] And this is actually a good example to illustrate the spectrum of policies, so there are at least five states that have adopted legislation requiring some form of OER coursemarking. But on a lot of campuses, it's actually just a voluntary decision that they've built into their local course-schedule software. So policy can come from the top or it can come from simple administrative changes to the way that coursemarking works in their systems. [03:53] So when open education advocates think about policy, it's really important to approach policy as one of many tools in our toolbox. I think sometimes when it's slow going on campus, or people are reluctant to maybe dive into open education, it seems like "Oh if we could only just pass a policy, everybody would see that this is okay." [04:20] But actually policy is not always the right tool for the job, and it's important to think about whether you need a policy to clear a barrier, or give permission, or if there are other ways to go about it that don't involve policy. It's kind of like thinking about any advocate having a toolbox, and sometimes you need a hammer, and sometimes you need a screwdriver. When you approach policy, it's thinking about how policy can help clear pathways to success as opposed to be the goal and an end in itself.

05:03 **Interviewer 02:** Wonderful, thank you. So you talked about policy developments and how it can be applied. So what are some exciting policy developments with regard to open education at either the institutional level, state, or national level, and how can open education advocates stay apprised of these policy changes?

05:23 **Nicole:** SPARC has been working on open education policy tirelessly over the past five years, and we started to make a lot of progress, which is really really exciting. At the federal level, last year for the first time, the US Congress appropriated funding to support an open textbook pilot program that funds programs at colleges and universities to expand the use of open textbooks. [05:53] This was actually the first time that Congress really backed the idea of open textbooks and textbook affordability as part of the national higher education affordability conversation. This victory was a long time coming. Congress has considered legislation over the past decade, really, around this idea, and this was the first time that they really took a real step toward it. [06:25] SPARC is working hard to renew that funding for a third year, and also include some stronger requirements to ensure that it's implemented according to plan. There have been some hiccups in the process of the way that the Department of Education has gone about it that we want to smooth out going forward. There's also legislation called the



Affordable College Textbook Act, which would actually permanently authorize an open textbook grant program and also increase transparency for students around the use of open educational resources in their courses. [07:03] We're actually expecting that to be reintroduced in this Congress very soon. Just one more thing at the federal level, a new trend that we've seen unfold over the past couple of years has been open licensing policies among federal agencies. Now both the US Department of Education and the Department of Labor have adopted policies that any time they give out discretionary grants, [07:36] any educational materials that are developed through those grants need to be openly licensed and freely shared with the public. It makes sense right? We, as the public, are funding the development of these resources through our tax dollars. So we should be able to get the full benefit from them and be able to use and build upon them. That idea has started to gain steam with those two agency policies. Several other grant programs at the program level have adopted policies and other agencies. [08:13] There's also quite a bit of action at the state level, about twenty states have adopted higher ed focused OER related policies or major programs. More states if you include K-12. The most common types of policies are around OER coursemarking, which I mentioned, also really important work states are doing to fund open textbook grant programs. In some cases states are giving huge amounts of money, like New York has given eight million dollars for the past two years to their SUNY and CUNY systems for OER programming. [08:55] The other end of the spectrum, North Dakota a few years ago appropriated about a hundred thousand dollars. And their state auditor actually just did a review of that program, and found that the return on investment for student savings - for that one relatively small investment - ended up being ten-to-twenty times the amount of state funding that went into it. [09:20] It's one of those rare areas of public policy where every dollar you spend achieves a much larger impact. So much of higher education funding conversations are about finding one dollar here to pay for another dollar there, in terms of student loans and grants, which is necessary and important. But if we can find ways to save students an even greater amount of money, that's something that really resonates with policy makers. [09:50] And we're especially starting to see State Legislatures think about ways that they can leverage OER as a solution in their contexts. At the institutional level, policy is more varied. And again, we're straying into that more "practices that are written down" territory in a lot of cases. [10:13] Some of the exciting developments are around tenure and promotion. One of the most prominent examples of that is with the University of British Columbia, where



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in their Professor of Teaching tenure track they actually added formal recognition for open educational resources as a contribution towards scholarship. [10:39] Those types of changes to policies can make a really large difference in terms of realigning our incentives to support faculty to who want to use and share open educational resources to benefit their students.

- 11:01 **Interviewer 01:** Thank you, Nicole. It sounds like there is a lot of really exciting stuff going on. What can campus advocates for open educational resources and open practices do to help affect change in policy either in their institutions or at the state or national level?
- 11:21 **Nicole:** SPARC has a lot of great resources about working in government policy. So we actually published a state policy playbook, which is available on our website, and it's a great resource to hand out to state-level legislators or your government affairs office. In a lot of cases, legislators are actually introducing OER legislation without necessarily really realizing that there are experts on our campuses who can help give advice on that. [11:51] So by reaching out proactively, it can help make sure that the legislation that gets introduced is as strong as possible. And when legislation does get introduced, making sure that you're communicating with that office and any relevant government affairs people at your institution to provide feedback on how to make it better. [12:14] I think sometimes, especially at the state level, people feel like policy makers are so distant from them, and maybe that your voice doesn't matter a lot. Sometimes it can be easy to think that, but especially at the state level, legislators are really responsive to their constituents. And it's just as simple as reaching out. [12:39] State Legislators work on such a wide variety of issues and often don't have staff experts the way that national congress people do. They don't have the level of detailed expertise on issues as narrow as open educational resources. So reaching out and sharing your own expertise can actually be really really valuable and make a difference. [13:08] In terms of federal advocacy, there's a lot going on and reaching out to your representatives in Congress is a great way to help impact that effort. SPARC will send out action alerts when there are specific opportunities. But again, these people represent you. Hearing from you is the single most important reason why they would support legislation in support of open textbooks. [13:40] There are going to be a number of developments happening this spring around renewing the open textbook pilot funding and trying to pass the Affordable College Textbook Act where your voice can matter. At the institutional level, it's all about engaging stakeholders. I



think, especially at the institutional level, faculty are really the key partners in this. [14:08] Because in many cases, any type of open education policy is going to be impacting faculty in design to encourage or support their use of open educational resources or practices. Working with faculty leaders, identifying champions who can help build support among their peers or presenting to the faculty senate to discuss what kind of options they would view as helpful toward advancing the open education cause can be a really good start. [14:43] On the flip side, students are a really important ally who can help carry the message to faculty and administrators. A lot of times student government presidents will have standing meetings with the provost or the president of the university or college. They can help surface these issues and help provide political support for any policy changes that might help advance open education on your campus. [15:17] But again, I'll go back to what I said earlier about remembering that policy is a tool. So think about open education on your campus and what the key barriers are and think about policy as a way to unlock those barriers and what types of policies might help do that. As opposed to necessarily thinking about policy as an end in itself.

15:44 **Interviewer 02:** Thank you for that really insightful answer. So speaking about barriers with policy, what are some of the most common barriers in the current political climate to advocating for policies to support open educational resources?

16:00 **Nicole:** Well [coughs], excuse me. I'm sorry, I'm getting over a cold... you can probably hear that in my voice. One of the great things about all of SPARC's issues - open education, open access, open data - is that they are bipartisan. They're support for the idea of more effectively using government funding, for increasing transparency, for increasing the efficiency of our institutions, expanding access to knowledge, and supporting the freedom for people to adapt and share materials to support local needs. [16:38] Those are all things that people on all sides of the aisle care about and support. I think that's one of the really great things about working in open education policies is that there is something for everybody. We have run into a few challenges in our advocacy work. Sometimes the types of policies that we pursue are more difficult for one side or the other to support. [17:08] One example is that right now the reality in Congress is that the Republicans generally don't sign on to new grant program bills unless there is a specific pay for. It's not that they necessarily are against the idea of the grant program, it's just because of the current practices within that caucus, it's not something that they



do. [17:35] Sometimes it isn't visible how bipartisan the issue is. When the open textbook pilot funding was approved, that was part of a large bipartisan spending bill and part of a deal that was struck on both sides of the aisle. There is support across the political spectrum. [18:02] There have been a couple of challenges, as I mentioned earlier, around implementation of the open textbook pilot funding. As many people know, when the first round of funding opened for applications last summer, a lot of people were surprised at how the department wanted to award it in very large chunks to a small number of grantees. Some of the decisions they made about not collecting public comments in advance, as they typically would be required to do. [18:37] Later on in the second round, when Congress explicitly directed the department to run a new competition and they decided to not listen to those instructions and instead award the funding to proposals from the last round. There have been hiccups in the relationships between Congress and the federal agencies. [19:03] I think there have been certain norms we have counted on in the past in terms of how that legislation was written and how the funding was described to the department. We're just learning more about how those norms are evolving in the current political climate and working to make sure that when we go back for a third round of funding that we attach strong language that's written into the legislation itself that ensures that it's really implemented according to the way that Congress intends in order to have the greatest benefit for students. [19:44] I actually just got a message from a colleague in Germany who asked this very question about, "Is open education seen as a right issue or a left issue?" And it's refreshing to be able to say that it is the kind of issue that everybody can get behind.

20:11 **Interviewer 01:** Yeah, there are so few of those issues these days. So it is great to hear that. Nicole, one last question for you: what is one myth about open education that you would like to dispel?

20:25 **Nicole:** That's a really great question. Let me think for a second. So the biggest myth that I encounter on campus is that open education is hard. And the important thing that everybody should think about with open education is that everybody can do something. [20:53] There are ways: small steps that you can take to advance open education, and there are large steps that you can take. A professor isn't necessarily going to be able to write a whole open textbook before the next semester. But something small they could do is think about do they have lecture notes that they could post on their website under an open license and share those with the world. [21:21] Maybe you're not ready to write a whole book, but maybe



you can share something small that's of benefit to the world. I think this is an important lesson for open education advocates to think about as well. Small steps matter. Maybe you're not in a position right now to pass a policy at your institution that provides all of the support every professor would need to switch to open education. [21:50] But what you can do is sit down with a professor down the hall and look at their course objectives and see if you can find open educational resources that might be able to replace their expensive traditional textbook. I often describe open education as a movement, and movements are made up of lots of individual people taking sometimes small individual actions that add up into a greater whole. [22:22] Sometimes it can be easy to forget that when you're focused on one specific piece of it. I know when I have a challenging meeting with a certain policy maker, or have a publisher who gives a negative quote in the press, it can be frustrating. [22:45] But remember that all of our actions add up. Over the last the decade we've seen how open education has evolved from an idea, really, to something that is happening on virtually every campus in some way. So what we're doing is working. I think the message to listeners and readers is to just keep it up, and what you're doing matters.

23:20 **Interviewer 02:** Thank you so much for talking to us today, Nicole. You've had such wonderful things to say and this was really informative. Before we let you go, is there anything we haven't asked or talked about during our conversation about open education that you would like to speak about?

23:40 **Nicole:** Well thanks for giving me that opportunity. I'm in this sort of unique position where my entire career, my entire twelve year career, has been dedicated to open education. There's almost literally everything else [laughs] that I would love to talk about or say. But I think maybe what I'll say is ending on a note to remember that open education is a global community. [24:17] And if you're ever feeling lonely or frustrated, reach out to colleagues on other campuses and connect into some of the many great organizations that are working in this space. Whether it's one of SPARC's networks, or CCCOER, or even just hopping on the hashtag OER [#OER] Twitter chat, because we are all more effective when we support each other.

