

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Interview

In the PaLRaP Spotlight: Erica Getts

*Librarian and Instructor
Penn Foster Group, Scranton, PA*



Interview by Stephanie Campbell

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Tell us a little about your background, what led you to librarianship?

It seems like the majority of folks in the field come to it in a career change, but I decided to be a librarian right out of high school. I toured colleges thinking I would be a social worker, but as I got closer to making a decision I

wondered if I could go to school to become a librarian. It was something no one ever talked about, and I genuinely didn't know if it was an option. I asked one of my teachers about it and he told me that if he could go back for any degree that's what he would choose. Also, I was in Library Club (I know, right?), so it all just kind of clicked!

My undergraduate degree is a Bachelor's in Education in Library Science from Kutztown University, so right out of college I started working as a school librarian. I never planned on staying in K-12 education, but I really loved working with high school students in a way that surprised me. I was a high school librarian for about 3 years before I went back to school to get my MLS. While working on my Master's degree I worked at the University of Maryland's Libraries, which was an excellent introduction to academic librarianship. After completing my degree, I got a position as a distance education librarian at Johns Hopkins University where I worked on a small team that provided cost-recovery services to the library. The bulk of the work we did was providing a virtual library and library services to a completely distance community. This was a well-oiled team that I learned so much from and which greatly prepared me for the position that I am in now where I wear all the hats!

Penn Foster Group is a portfolio of companies that provide online education and training solutions. Can you tell us more about its long history?

Penn Foster Group, including Penn Foster High School, Penn Foster Career School, Penn Foster College, CareerStep, Ashworth College, James Madison High School, the New York Institute of Photography, the New York Institute of Art and Design, and other online learning platforms, has quite an interesting history! Thomas J. Foster founded the school to offer educational opportunities to those who might not otherwise have them, which, at that time, was specifically coal miners and their families. When the school became known as the International Correspondence Schools (ICS) in 1890, it was headquartered in what is now known as the Finch building on Wyoming Avenue near downtown Scranton. In fact, it was the first building ever constructed solely for the purpose of providing distance education to students from around the world. The school founded by Foster became Penn Foster in 2006 and has since adapted to the times by offering online programs to continue the mission of expanding access to education. While some of the original programs, like Dressmaking, are still offered, we have expanded our offerings to include programs like High School and Veterinary Technician, among others.

This appears to be a great match to your background/skills in K-12 school libraries, academic libraries, and distance learning. Describe your role at Penn Foster Group.

I have found myself on a unique career path within the library world and I love it! At Penn Foster Group my title is Instructor and Librarian. I largely work with college students, but I am here to support students in any of our programs. The Penn Foster schools are the biggest group that I support, but, for example, Ashworth College students have their own library that I manage (e.g. website, subscription resources, learning objects, one-on-one appointments, etc.). It's quite different from any other librarian position I am familiar with!

Do you have a physical library location? What is the size of the library staff? Talk about resources and your day-to-day tasks and schedule.

There is no physical library, so every student across the globe has equal access to our resources. It is a library of one, but we function on such a unique model that it works. All of our resources are digital. We rely heavily on a plethora of open access resources along with a few subscription databases that meet the unique needs of our learners across our high school, college, and career programs.

I don't know if any librarian has a standard day-to-day routine, but, especially as a library of one it seems like I am always doing something different! Student needs come first, so my top priority every day is to assist them—usually via email or one-on-one appointments. I manage our Library, Learning Resource Center (LRC), LibCal appointment scheduler, and LibWizard for interactive digital learning objects. The Learning Resource Center includes additional student support resources like our Writing Center, Student Success Resources, Job Search and Career Readiness materials, etc. I am not the subject matter expert for these resources, but I partner with them to publish and maintain a collection of materials in LibGuides that our students can refer to at any point in their program.

Some days I might be training a new instructor on how to use LibCal or updating the content stored in our LRC. Other things I am regularly involved in include: data reporting, managing/teaching our Information Literacy course, participating in accreditation meetings, creating customized learning objects, collection development, policy development, etc.

When I first started at Penn Foster Group in December of 2019 I was working a hybrid schedule based out of the Scranton office. It was perfect timing for me because I had just moved back (I am originally from Scranton) from Baltimore, and I couldn't believe my luck in finding a position so aligned with my experience and interests! Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have been working remote full-time.

Finally, can you tell us why you do what you do?

I genuinely enjoy helping people, especially in an educational setting. I love that Penn Foster offers a variety of options for people because traditional college isn't the right choice for everyone. Sometimes people come to us to upskill for the promotion or raise they've been working towards or to complete the high school diploma that life originally took them off track from—whatever their reason is, I am so happy to be a support that helps them get there.