

# I Love My Librarian!

2018 Award

## Jennifer Berg Gaither

Baltimore City College  
Baltimore, Maryland

**Nominator:** Monica Donnelly

- 1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award. What sets them apart?**

I have known and admired this candidate personally and professionally for 15 years. What sets Ms. Jennifer Berg Gaither apart is unwavering belief in her students' ability to achieve and her unrelenting commitment to developing in her students the skills they need to realize their goals and ambitions. Ms. Berg Gaither's colleagues and the students and families she works with now know not even trying to tell her something can't be done. She empowers young learners to set high goals for themselves and ensures they have the necessary skills and connections to succeed in high quality, competitive educational landscapes, regardless of their prior learning experiences or what conventional wisdom tells us they're capable of.

As the librarian and International Baccalaureate Extended Essay (EE) coordinator at our Baltimore City public high school, Ms. Berg Gaither builds relationships to understand problems that students and teachers face, and develops personalized solutions to resolve those challenges. She does not let common roadblocks - lack of resources, transportation challenges - stand in her way and inspires students to commit to developing their own solutions to the roadblocks they encounter.

Throughout this application, Ms. Berg Gaither's colleagues, students and families share how Ms. Berg Gaither sets herself apart and helped her student to achieve these remarkable results.

- 2. How has the nominee helped you and/or students at school? For example, did the nominee help you with a project, recommend resources or collaborate with you to enhance student learning?**

A key role Ms. Berg Gaither plays in her students' lives relates to the Extended Essay - an externally graded and extremely challenging academic undertaking necessary to earn the prestigious International Baccalaureate Diploma that students work on in their junior and senior years.

Ms. Berg Gaither travels all over the area on her own time to find and bring in extra resources and materials for students. "Ms. Berg Gaither was the most vital part of the extended essay process," shares one of her students. "She was always able to find sources for any topics that I not only needed but many other students, no matter the eccentricity of the topic. Also, she was able to give revisions to help us maximize our grades on the extended essay projects. She even provided us with encouragement and a constant positive attitude to keep us from giving up, even though I personally wanted to many times."

Ms. Berg Gaither goes far above what is typically expected of a school librarian, and even drove students with transportation challenges to school, even if it meant driving across the City in the early hours of the morning so students could get to school on time. Ms. Berg Gaither spends late nights and early mornings at school with her students, and coordinates study sessions and writing blocks. When school hours aren't long enough to accommodate students' needs, Ms. Berg Gaither meets her students at coffee shops and bookstores, for extra help during the evenings, on the weekend, and even during Spring Break. "I never had a teacher who believed in me as much as Mrs Berg," shares one of her students. "We literally could not find an excuse she would accept for not getting our work done, and she was with us every step of the way with our Extended Essays - even when we were uploading our work into the system at 2:00 am!" A recent graduate shares, "From the very beginning, she had my back. Without her I do not know what I would have done! I am eternally grateful for all the late nights she stayed at school with me. She taught me perseverance and to believe in myself. I wish I could take her to college with me - but I know I can rely on the confidence she helped me to gain."

Students affirm the special environment Ms. Berg Gaither has created: "During the stressful times of junior and senior year, Ms. Berg Gaither had been instrumental in helping me and other students do much more than pass. The dreaded extended essay was a daunting task in junior year, but Ms. Berg Gaither pointed us all to great search engines to help us find sources and to refine our writing. Ms. Berg Gaither is amazing not only for helping us throughout the day, but also for keeping her doors open for any questions. This space is much more useful than the typical library, simply because of Ms. Berg Gaither's awesome presence. The library was extremely important during stressful periods of school. Amidst all the assignments, she offered us a guiding light."

Further, “Ms. Berg Gaither was always there to help me with my sources and my course load for IB. Every minute spent with Ms. Berg Gaither was extremely helpful especially during the final two weeks of IB submission. Thank you, Ms. Berg Gaither, for believing in me.”

**3. How does the nominee make the school a better place? Please be specific.**

To develop and sustain a culture of high engagement and achievement for students, Ms. Berg Gaither launched several critical and impactful initiatives: She started the BCC Extended Essay library - a collection of student essays, bound and published, both as models and inspirations for junior students and to honor the work and achievements of graduates; a Summer Academy for juniors and seniors; designed video series of student advice, student accomplishments, and student created tutorials in English and in Spanish; created peer process sheets and stations; and - so appreciated by students navigating this stressful experience - a library relaxation station, with mandalas and meditative coloring, essential oils, massagers, and a hot water urn for hot cocoa. Ms. Berg Gaither also created opportunities for students through peer tutoring, expanded and thoughtfully curated collections, individualized instruction, increased technology access, and expanded hours for students to work. Finally, she brought in community volunteers and developed important connections to outside experts and supporters.

To increase participation in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program among traditionally underrepresented students in Baltimore City, Ms. Berg Gaither launched a new project featuring videos in Spanish that highlighted IB program at City College, with the intention of increasing equity in engagement and access of Latinx students. Ms. Berg Gaither continues to expand the scope of the project, and through the library, she is leading the creation of recognition videos, advice videos, promotional videos, and instructional videos to honor and inspire students on their journey toward to IB diploma.

Specific results of these efforts include increased rates of comfort in the program for Latinx and other nontraditional IB students, as reported through monthly reflections and feedback sessions. Students and teachers also indicate increased interest in and awareness of the IB program and its required components, and teachers are even integrating elements of this video series into regular classroom instruction.

Ms. Berg Gaither also led important library initiatives such as migrating collections from Dewey to DP categories, for ease of student access, created a physical presence for electronic resources by creating eBook bookmarks, and strengthening the school’s collections so that students had access to resources more in line with the rigorous standards and expectations of the IB Diploma program, both by culling dated materials and securing new acquisitions.

Ms. Berg Gaither also serves as a model of lifelong learning, by actively participating in multiple, systemic, ongoing, and sustained professional development opportunities, and creatively applying insights gleaned from professional development to her practice. Ms. Berg Gaither also formed valuable connections to her peers at other schools, first by seeking out experts in the field and successful models, and now, by serving as a model host site for others looking to learn from City College.

Ms. Berg Gaither has also secured further support for our school flagship program by presenting to the Board of Commissioners for Baltimore City Schools and before the Kirwan Commission - Maryland's special Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education - in order to inform budget talks on the value of her work at City College and its potential reach and impact on students.

**4. How has the library, and the nominee in particular, had an impact on students and the learning process?**

Ms. Berg Gaither is City College's only librarian, and receives over 100 student visitors a day, but somehow, she has time for all her students and differentiates support for the diverse range of learners she serves. Colleagues remark on the extensive writing support Ms. Berg Gaither provides students, guiding them to be better researchers, scholars, and writers. "Ms. Berg Gaither has had a remarkable impact on students' ability to write comprehensive and cogent papers across different discipline, with an eye toward accurate, relevant sources and tight structure, while reinforcing the importance of process, specifically, the feedback and revision loop. These are critical skills for our students, and we are pleased to see the impact of Ms. Berg Gaither's work with the students extend to other disciplines and classrooms."

Ms. Berg Gaither is determined to expand equity in our International Baccalaureate (IB) program. To earn the IB diploma, students must write the Extended Essay (EE), a 4,000 word essay that develops a range of skills that students will need to succeed in college. The EE is externally graded and as the culmination of academic skills and habits developed throughout their schooling, it poses unique challenges for many of our students that have been disadvantaged by systems that did not adequately serve them during their formative academic years. In her role as the librarian and IB Extended Essay coordinator, she implemented a structure of supports to increase the number of students passing the extended essay from 28 in 2014 to 54 in 2016 to 109 for the Class of 2018, with traditionally underserved populations representing most of the growth. Additionally, the percentage of A's and B's earned by minority students increased, resulting in more IB Diplomas earned with students reporting dramatic academic impacts. She held students to higher standards and made them work harder than they ever had before. They had never

written even 5 pages and she asked many of them to start over and rewrite after writing 15 pages. From Ms. Berg Gaither, “I asked them to give up weeks of their summer break to come to the library in an empty school to research and write. The amazing thing is, most of the students wanted to come to the library and work with me. And even the ones I had to track down sent me thank you emails and recognized how much they learned and grew in the process. In return, I grew alongside them - they even encouraged me to join social media as a way to better connect. My experiences have made me realize that students want to be challenged as long as they are respected. And even at 17, they can make huge leaps in their skill levels.”

Ms. Berg Gaither is also a valued colleague in her school community. She goes out of her way to assist teachers that are not comfortable with writing in the classroom and inspired the science department to add argument writing assignments have been added to their curriculum. One of her colleagues shared, “Every time I attempted this assignment, I did not see any improvement in my students’ performance and they were not meeting the expectations of the rubric. English is not my first language, therefore, I, myself, am not confident to write the paper. Additionally, my training is in science, so I do not have strong strategies to deliver the skills to students. To help non-English teachers to incorporate writing into their classes, Ms. Berg Gaither and I teamed up to help my students write argument papers. Ms. Berg Gaither and I decided to collaborate so she could focus on scaffolding the assignment and breaking down what to look for when they are researching and I could concentrate on the science content. After Ms. Berg Gaither put into place her lessons, the percentage of students turning in their final paper increased dramatically compared to the previous semester when the students did not work with Ms. Berg Gaither Gaither. The students were much more able to produce a quality final product after Ms. Berg Gaither Gaither worked with them. The lesson was much more interdisciplinary and the students improved their skills in supporting their claims and using in-text citations. The tone was also more formal because of improved word choice. More students were not only able to meet the expectations on the rubric, but exceed it. Their scores for analysis went up an average of 5 points which exceeded our expectations. I was very happy that we were able to improve their writing and I am excited to continue to work with Ms. Berg Gaither Gaither to improve it further.”

**5. How has the individual demonstrated leadership in the school community?**

Ms. Berg Gaither is an inspiring colleague, who challenges and inspires her peers to commit as fully as she is to their students’ success. Ms. Berg Gaither implemented Extended Essay Blitz days - an intensive block of time for students to make progress on this important assignment. One of her colleagues shares, “I visited the library where students were working and witnessed a hive of activity. Suddenly, our library looked like a college library where students were tucked into every corner working assiduously. I

saw students writing, revising, and peer reviewing, and as I passed through, many students took the opportunity to ask my advice on their work. The next day when my students returned to my class, they reported that the day had been a huge help to them in managing their workload and meeting their goals in the IB program.”

Another colleague shares, “The day also gave me much needed time to check in with my advisees. In fact, just knowing they would have that day to work provided me with a concrete deadline to read their drafts and motivated me to prepare feedback for them so that they would be able to use the day productively. I met with both advisees once on the first day and twice on the second day, which was especially helpful because I could see the progress they made in only a few hours. The most striking evidence to me, however, of the success of the Blitz is that one of my advisees who had been behind and unmotivated throughout the process, emailed me the day before to ask for a conference on his paper. Every other time we have met, I had to seek him out and require a meeting; this is the first time that he reached out to me, and I’m sure it’s because the Blitz Day got him far enough along in the process that he finally feels confident enough to ask for help because he has a draft to work with.”

Colleagues across departments as well as administrators celebrated Ms. Berg Gaither’s leadership and the positive results of this structured work time with critical supports embedded into the work day.

Ms. Berg also positively influences the practice of her peers by offering Extended Essay supervisor trainings, and through the creation and implementation of an Extended Essay afterschool course for teachers. Each Extended Essay candidate needs a subject specific advisor. When Ms. Berg Gaither came to the school, only 10 teachers had ever served as advisors. She set up two PLS’s for supervisor training and held individual meetings with teachers to help familiarize them with the process. The teacher/advisor relationship is now far more structured and supported, making this connection a more effective use of limited time and increasing advisor ownership, engagement, and skill level. Advisors also need to be experts in their advisees’ topics, and Ms. Berg Gaither goes above and beyond to bring in primary documents and other exciting resources and materials. Ms. Berg Gaither also offered teachers materials and assistance with the process, including through the creation of an Extended Essay advisor handbook with clearly stated expectations as well as key due dates and rubrics.

When Ms. Berg came on board she also identified the need for an extended essay coordinator and requested training. After returning from her training, she revamped the writing process to embed more extensive scaffolding and support for students. As the Extended Essay Coordinator, the support that Ms. Berg Gaither has given both the

students and teachers as well as the organized process she has put in place has significantly improved the ability of more students to complete this very complex task of writing the EE, as evidenced by a 44 percentage increase in students completing the essay.

A colleague shares, “As a first year EE advisor, I felt in the dark about how to help my advisees. Thanks to her training, the facilitated small groups she organized and quick guide facts I feel more confident in my ability to support my advisees.”

Ms. Berg Gaither also revolutionized our school’s approach to the role of deadlines and external constraints. Ms. Berg Gaither instituted a new strategy by accepting all late work, unconditionally, without penalties. In her own words, “Though this has resulted in quite a bit of extra work and eleventh hour editing and grading for me, the payoff is absolutely worth it. Students that were giving up because they felt they were too far behind decided not to drop out of the IB program because they worked out alternate timelines with me. That’s the point of this program!”

Ms. Berg is determined to challenge the assumptions about which students are capable of being successful in an IB program, works tirelessly to support their achievement, and inspires others to do the same.