

THE FELLOWSHIP

The **Molloy University Partnership for Global Justice Fellowship** is committed to the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and requires the fellow to become familiar with each of the UN goals, especially as they pertain to Long Island. The Fellowship also necessitates the fellow to select a goal and undertake a project to address that goal locally.

This semester's Partnership for Global Justice Fellowship recipient, Cassidy Shillingford, centered her work on United Nations Sustainable Development Goal #4: Quality Education. As a first-generation Afro-Caribbean college student, Cassidy is deeply committed to addressing literacy disparities and closing the literacy gap in underserved school districts.

Her project focused on the far-reaching effects of reading and writing proficiency in under-resourced schools and the ways these foundational skills shape students' academic and professional futures. Cassidy explored how prepared university students are in terms of literacy, designing a survey that gathered insights from 15 participants about their experiences and attitudes toward reading and writing. This survey helped shed light on both awareness and gaps in literacy development among university students.

In addition, Cassidy organized an on-campus event titled *Bridging the Gap: An Interactive Discussion to Empower Students in Literacy*. The program included a film segment and a keynote presentation by an accomplished educator with deep experience in literacy development. His hour-long talk offered strategies to support young readers and fostered empathy for adults facing literacy challenges. After the presentation, attendees participated in roundtable discussions led by three literacy specialists—Dr. Vicky Giouroukakis, Dr. Katherine Patterson, and Ms. Michele Peterson-Davis. Their expertise sparked thoughtful, enriching dialogue around current literacy issues and helped frame the discussion in terms of practical action. The evening concluded with a full-group discussion that gave space for reflection and follow-up questions. The event provided attendees with valuable insights and practical tools for promoting literacy.

Cassidy also led a book drive in her role as secretary of the Molloy Chess Club, collecting books to support students in a local school district. To underscore the importance of the initiative, she gathered local data on literacy rates and educational outcomes, helping frame the urgency of the problem for the campus community.

Through these efforts, Cassidy advanced the mission of the Molloy University Partnership for Global Justice Fellowship by promoting equitable access to literacy. Her dedication to education and community engagement has helped build a stronger foundation for future advocacy and action in literacy on behalf of students in need.



FELLOW PROFILE



CASSIDY SHILLINGFORD

- Fourth-year undergraduate student at Molloy University, majoring in Adolescent Math Education
- NOYCE Ambassador Scholar, a National Science Foundation program supporting future STEM educators committed to teaching in high-need school districts
- Undergraduate student researcher under the mentorship of my education professors, Dr. Francine Wisnewski, Dr. Madeline Craig, and Dr. Katherine Patterson
- Presenter at the 2nd Annual Molloy University Undergraduate Research Conference (April 2025)
- Inducted into the Omicron Alpha Zeta Honor Society, the academic dean's honor society at Molloy University
- Inducted into the Kappa Mu Epsilon Honor Society, the national math honor society at Molloy University (April 2023)
- Teaching assistant for a graduate-level course that incorporated social-emotional learning and literacy
- Secretary of the Molloy Chess Club (2024-2025)
- Member of the Social Media Committee for the Undergraduate Education Program at Molloy University

IN CASSIDY'S OWN WORDS

INTRODUCTION:

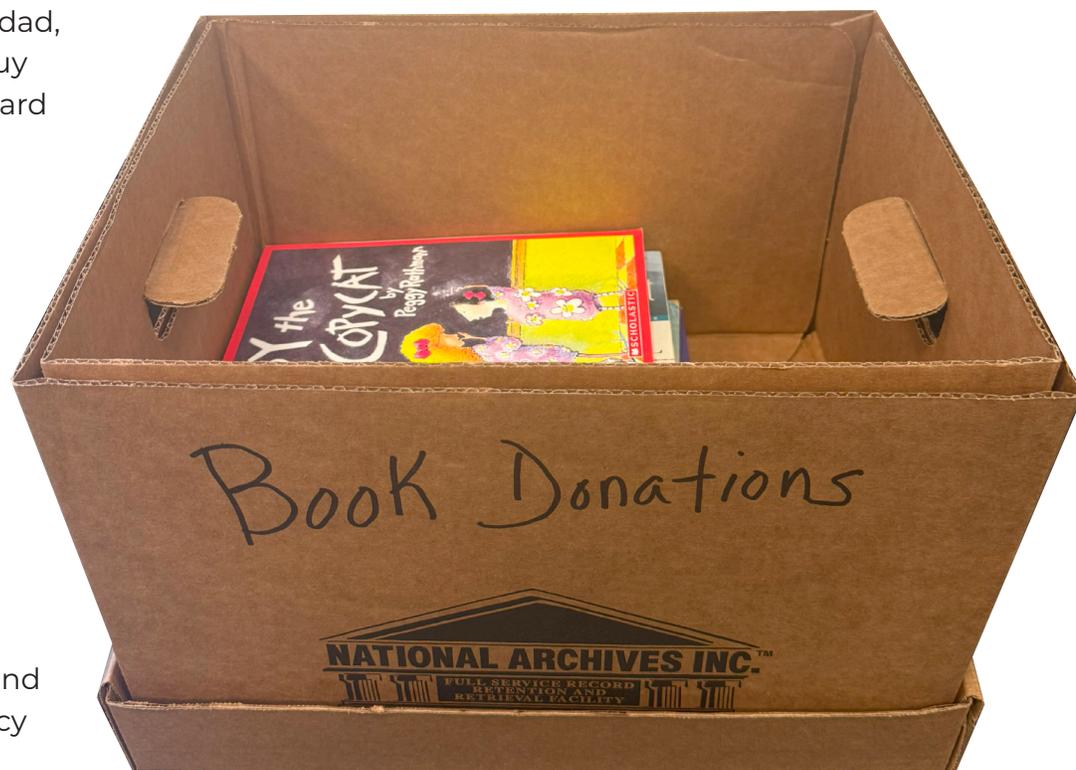
Reading and writing are essential key factors in every child's life. They help us to engage in meaningful discussions, make informed decisions, adapt to new challenges in an evolving world, empower people to navigate daily life, from understanding financial documents to evaluating news and media, and enhance personal growth, professional success, and active participation in society. Literacy also supports personal growth, professional success, and active participation in society. It builds critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and the ability to analyze complex ideas from many sources. With strong literacy skills, we can better understand and process the information we receive.

Growing up, I adored reading. My love for books came from trips to the library and Barnes & Noble with my dad, where we would borrow or buy books together. I looked forward to picking out a new story or a workbook to practice my writing. That kind of excitement around reading and writing feels rare, almost unusual, today. With the rise of AI and digital technology, children do not seem to connect with books in the same way.

My years at Molloy have been crucial in shaping who I am and why I chose to focus on literacy as my primary goal.

As an education major, I gained valuable insight into the challenges posed by the lack of books in the classroom. In the post-COVID era, many schools rely heavily on electronics for education, which has resulted in a decline in students' reading and writing skills.

At Molloy, I was encouraged to think critically, act thoughtfully, and care deeply about the world around me. Through classroom discussions and service opportunities, I was consistently reminded of the impact we can have when we combine knowledge with compassion. These experiences inspired me to focus on literacy, not just as a subject in school, but as a fundamental human right and a vital bridge to opportunity for every child and adult.



PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

1. Cassidy chose the goal of quality education, with a specific focus on literacy, because she believes that literacy is the foundation of all learning and a powerful tool for individual and societal transformation. For her, literacy is more than just the ability to read and write—it is the gateway to knowledge, empowerment, and opportunity. Without it, people are denied access to information, struggle with daily life, and are often trapped in cycles of poverty and inequality. Her commitment to improving literacy stems from a deep conviction that every person, no matter their background, deserves the chance to learn, grow, and contribute meaningfully to their community.
2. Growing up, Cassidy witnessed the difference literacy can make in a person's life. In her own community, she saw

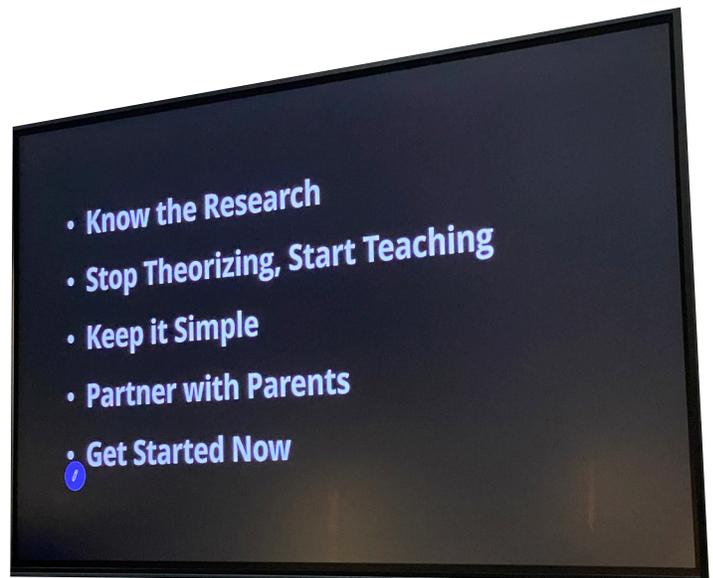


children fall behind in school simply because they lacked basic reading skills. Their struggles affected their confidence, academic success, and future employment prospects. In contrast, she also saw how children with strong literacy skills flourished, both in school and socially. These experiences inspired her to make literacy the foundation of her



educational goals. To Cassidy, if we want to tackle broader social challenges like poverty, unemployment, and inequality, we must start with education, and that begins with making sure everyone can read and write.

3. She also sees literacy as a basic human right. According to UNESCO, “worldwide, at least 754 million adults still cannot read and write, two-thirds of them women, and 250 million children are failing to acquire basic literacy skills” (UNESCO, 2025). To Cassidy, this is not just a statistic. It reflects millions of lives limited by illiteracy— people who are more vulnerable to exploitation, unable to advocate for themselves, and excluded from full participation in society. This reality drives her to advocate for global efforts to improve literacy for everyone.
4. Through her work and advocacy, Cassidy hoped to achieve several outcomes.



This project aimed to raise awareness about the importance of early literacy and the need for accessible books and programs in underserved communities. She promoted community-based initiatives, such as an in-school book drive, that meet learners where they are and adapt to their specific needs.

5. She also hopes to support policies that prioritize literacy education in schools, especially in low-income areas where students often lack resources. This includes advocating for well-trained teachers, culturally relevant curricula, and equitable access to tools like public libraries. To her, education should not be a privilege— it should be a right that is available and effective for all.
6. Ultimately, Cassidy wants to be part of a generation that refuses to treat illiteracy as an inevitable issue. She believes that with focused effort, creative solutions, and a shared commitment, quality education and universal literacy are within reach. Her goal is to help build a world where everyone can read, write, and thrive—and where education becomes the true key to a better future.

METHODS AND EXECUTIONS:

To address the issue of literacy in her community, Cassidy designed a multi-phase project focused on raising awareness, gathering data, and directly supporting literacy development. The project combined community engagement, research, and educational outreach. Below is a detailed breakdown of the methods, steps she took, and the timeline of execution.

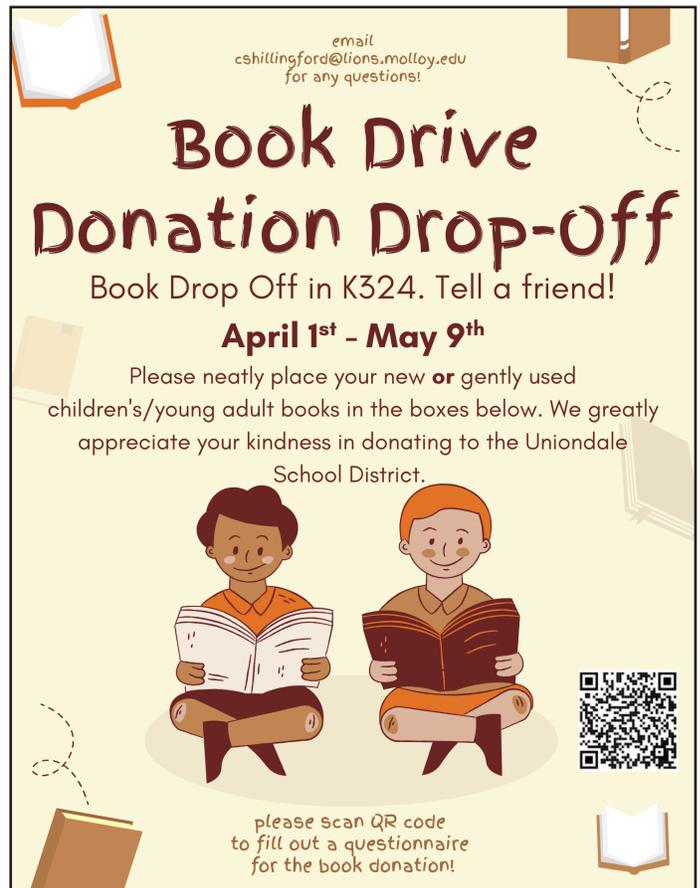
The first step in her project was to conduct background research on literacy challenges specific to her community. She met with local educators at a school district to gain insights into the gaps in literacy support. Based on those conversations, she developed a clear objective: to assess community attitudes toward literacy and promote accessible opportunities for reading and learning.

In February 2025, Cassidy created a questionnaire to gather input from English teachers about their students. The conversational survey included questions about reading during classes, access to books, literacy resources at home, and perceived obstacles to reading. It was designed to be simple and anonymous, as the school district wished to remain unnamed.

Once the questionnaire was finalized, she organized a “tabling day” at Molloy University to communicate her concerns with fellow university students. She set up a table with a sign reading “Let’s Talk About Literacy” and invited or approached students to take the survey. She also handed out flyers with literacy facts and shared tips for encouraging reading at home. The tabling session lasted about two hours.

The tabling event served a dual purpose: it allowed Cassidy to collect survey responses

and also acted as a mini-awareness campaign. Many students expressed surprise at the local literacy statistics she shared, which helped spark meaningful conversations and increase interest in the upcoming literacy event. It also served as an announcement for the book drive she was hosting. The 15 participants were invited to spread the word about the drive, which was held from April 1 to May 9.



Building on that momentum, Cassidy organized an informal discussion event called *Bridging the Gap: An Interactive Discussion to Empower Students in Literacy*. It took place in Casey Room 109 and featured a film documentary and discussions with literacy experts.

She invited Dr. Vicky Giouroukakis, Dr. Katherine Patterson, and

Ms. Michele Peterson-Davis to contribute their knowledge of literacy and offer resources to help others take part in the movement to bridge the literacy gap among their generation. The event was promoted through social media, school emails sent to Education majors at Molloy University, and flyers distributed during the earlier tabling event.

After the event, Cassidy compiled and analyzed the survey results. Common themes included a lack of access to age-appropriate books, busy schedules limiting reading time, and a need for more engaging literacy activities. She used these insights in this report to continue her call for awareness.

Overall, Cassidy's literacy project was an eye-opening experience that combined research, action, and community collaboration. It taught her that real change starts with



listening to people, meeting them where they are, and offering simple yet powerful ways to support growth, like putting a good book into a child's hands.



CAPACITY BUILDING, EDUCATION, AND OUTREACH ACTIVITIES:

As part of her literacy initiative, Cassidy designed a series of outreach and educational activities to raise awareness and promote reading and writing in the community. Each effort was planned to engage people of all ages, increase access to literacy resources, and spark meaningful conversations about the importance of reading.

The first step in her outreach campaign involved designing a set of informative flyers for the book drive and informal discussion event. The flyers were visually engaging, with bold headings, colorful graphics, and quick questions about literacy in the community. Key messages included “Is reading and writing important in life?” She also included a QR code linking to her literacy questionnaire, which posed additional questions such as “Are you familiar with the definition of literacy?” “How important do you think literacy is in shaping opportunities, communication, and daily life?” and “Do you feel that your education before college adequately prepared you with the literacy skills needed for success?”

Cassidy distributed these flyers across buildings at Molloy University and through email, where she was able to briefly explain the project to students. Many appreciated the practical tips and expressed support for more literacy-related programming.

She hosted one tabling event at Molloy University and spoke to the Molloy Student Government in April 2025 about her project. The table was decorated with copies of the literacy questionnaire and information about the upcoming literacy event. Students were invited to stop by, ask questions, and complete the survey. Overall, the experience was very

positive, and Cassidy collected 15 completed surveys from students.

To directly improve access to books, she organized a community book drive at Molloy University. She partnered with the university’s Education program and set up collection bins in Kellenberg Room 324. Over six weeks, the drive collected nearly 100 books, ranging from picture books to high-grade novels. After sorting and organizing them by age group, the books were distributed on May 28, 2025, with the help of the school librarian at the local school district. Any remaining books were set aside to be donated to other schools in the district.

To further engage the community in a thoughtful conversation about literacy, Cassidy hosted a film screening of a documentary featuring keynote speaker Spencer Russell, which explores literacy gaps in America and the importance of early reading instruction through his program, Toddlers Can Read. The event was held in Casey Room 109 and drew around 15 attendees. After the screening, participants joined a round-table discussion circle where they shared their reactions and ideas for addressing literacy challenges. The discussion was both insightful and heartfelt, with teachers and students offering diverse perspectives and advice.

Each of these efforts contributed to building momentum and community support around the cause of literacy. Through hands-on engagement, open conversations, and resource sharing, Cassidy succeeded in making a tangible impact and helped lay the groundwork for continued advocacy in the community.

PROJECT OUTCOMES:

Cassidy's literacy project involved a questionnaire, a book drive, a film screening, and feedback from a tabling event. These elements provided valuable insights and shaped the overall impact of the initiative. As a result, university students gained a deeper understanding of the importance of literacy, and the local school district, with its refurbished library, received more books to support student reading resources.

The questionnaire was a key part of the project to gauge student interest and literacy habits. It included multiple-choice and short-answer questions about challenges and access to resources. Cassidy received 15 completed responses.

Key findings from the survey showed:

- 53% of respondents felt they had a good understanding of literacy's definition.
- 100% agreed that literacy is crucial for shaping opportunities, communication, and daily life.
- 47% said their education before college adequately prepared them with the literacy skills needed for success.

These results highlighted that many students still lack basic literacy knowledge, access to books, and the time or tools to develop strong reading habits. This underlined the need for accessible, community-based literacy support.

In response, the community book drive collected over 100 books, donated by students and faculty at Molloy University. The books

were sorted by age and genre, then donated to the local school district. The district committed to distributing them through the in-school library, ensuring the books would reach students who might otherwise have limited access to reading materials at home.

The screening of *It's Time to Stop Talking About the Literacy Crisis* by Spencer Russell attracted about 15 attendees and sparked a strong conversation about systemic barriers to literacy.

During the informal discussion that followed, several themes emerged:

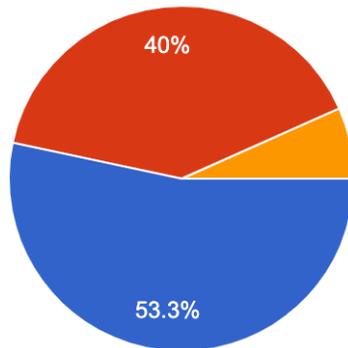
- A strong desire for more resources to support reading at home.
- Frustration with gaps in literacy programs across schools.
- Interest in expanding local organizations to offer more reading support.

Participants praised the event as both informative and action-oriented. Many asked how they could stay involved or contribute to future efforts.

Overall, the project successfully raised awareness about literacy, increased access to books, and brought people together to discuss solutions. It showed the impact of youth-led initiatives in driving change and inspired ongoing collaboration among educators, parents, and students. Most importantly, it planted the seeds for a more literate, engaged, and empowered community—one book at a time.

Are you familiar with the definition of literacy?

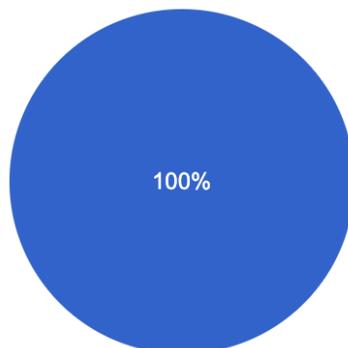
15 responses



- Strongly agree - I am very familiar with the term, literacy and all its aspects.
- Agree - I know that it includes reading and writing.
- Disagree - I believe it involves reading of some sort, but not entirely sure.
- Strongly disagree - I do not know the definition of literacy.

How important do you think literacy is in shaping opportunities, communication, and daily life?

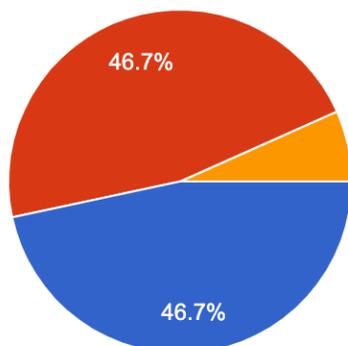
15 responses



- Extremely important – Literacy is essential for success and everyday functioning.
- Important – Literacy plays a significant role, but other skills are also crucial.
- Somewhat important – Literacy matters, but its impact depends on the situation.
- Not very important – People can succeed in life without strong literacy skills.

Do you feel that your education before college adequately prepared you with the literacy skills needed for success?

15 responses



- Strongly agree – I feel fully prepared and confident in my literacy skills.
- Agree – I was well-prepared, but I still had to improve in some areas.
- Disagree – I often felt unprepared and had to develop my literacy skills on my own.
- Strongly disagree – My education did not provide me with the literacy skills I needed for college.

FUTURE PLANS AND FOLLOW-UPS:

Throughout the semester, working on this literacy project proved to be a rewarding and eye-opening experience. From the early planning stages to executing community events and engaging in meaningful discussions with professionals, each step revealed more about the complexities of the literacy crisis and the potential of grassroots efforts. The challenges along the way made the successes feel even more significant, strengthening the commitment to continue this work beyond the classroom.

At the start, there was confidence in the passion for literacy, but some uncertainty about how to turn that passion into a measurable impact. Learning how to organize events, create engaging materials, communicate with community partners, and adapt to unexpected obstacles were all part of the growth process. For instance, gathering enough survey responses required more outreach than expected, and coordinating the literacy event involved managing volunteers, logistics, and promotion. These experiences fostered growth as a leader, problem-solver, and communicator.

One of the most meaningful moments was donating the collected books to the local school district. Watching the librarian and students light up upon receiving the donations reinforced the importance of this work. Conversations with teachers also highlighted that literacy challenges often stem from broader issues, such as economic inequality, limited time, and lack of resources. This confirmed the belief that addressing literacy goes beyond distributing books—it requires building sustainable support systems that empower families and educators.

Looking ahead, plans include building on the momentum gained during the fellowship. Pursuing a master's degree in Literacy Studies at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate



March 12, 2025

Dear Cassidy,

Congratulations! The faculty is pleased to offer you Fall 2025 admission to the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE) Literacy Studies M.S.Ed. program. In addition, we're delighted to be able to offer you \$10,000 in need-based aid to help you achieve your academic goals. We are pleased to inform you that you have also been awarded a Dean's Fellowship: Power of Possibility in the amount of \$42,206. In selecting you for this award, the faculty noted your commitment and service to communities in need.

We chose this year's class from an exceptional applicant pool whose abilities, talents, and research interests will enrich your experience. The faculty is impressed by your achievements and promise and looks forward to the contributions you will make as a member of our dynamic community.

We ask that you respond to this offer of admission by completing the enrollment form available from your application status portal. Please also complete the Penn GSE Award Agreement to accept your scholarship. Scholarships can only be guaranteed until April 15, the date until which the [Council of Graduate Schools agreement resolution](#) allows you to make a decision. In order to guarantee your scholarship and seat in the program, please complete both the enrollment and award agreement form by April 15.

This offer of admission is contingent upon receipt of official transcripts from all colleges and universities attended within the United States. If you have attended college or university outside of the United States, a course-by-course evaluation from a NACES member is required. If you are currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program, please note this offer of admission is contingent upon your successful completion of that program. You cannot begin a graduate program at Penn GSE until official notification of your baccalaureate degree conferral has been received. Finally, if you are enrolled in another degree program, your admission is contingent upon maintaining your strong academic standing in that program.

We are confident of the impact you will have at Penn GSE and the rewarding experience that lies ahead; welcome to our community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Leslie M. Levin'.

Leslie M. Levin
Vice Dean of Admissions & Student Affairs
University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education

School of Education in the fall will support this ongoing commitment. There is also an intent to connect with the Philadelphia Writing Project to mentor young readers, organize events, conduct research, and promote literacy within local schools. Early networking efforts have already begun to establish ties within the literacy community. The project's focus on youth involvement is seen as a key strength, with potential to grow into an even more impactful initiative with proper structure and support.

Raising awareness will continue through presenting the project's findings to the school board and advocating for increased funding for early literacy programs. The long-term goal is to support policy changes that prioritize literacy at every stage of education.

This semester marked just the beginning. The literacy crisis is urgent yet solvable with commitment, creativity, and community engagement. The project's accomplishments inspire confidence and excitement to keep pushing forward.

PERSONAL IMPACT:

Education is a tool for character development and a foundation for lifelong learning. Working on this project has been a transformative experience, both personally and intellectually. It pushed me far outside my comfort zone and helped me grow in ways I had not expected. The process taught me to lead with empathy, advocate with purpose, and believe that small actions can spark lasting change.

One of the most important lessons I learned is that change does not always require huge resources or influence—it often begins with listening and showing up. Every flyer I handed out, every conversation at the tabling event, and every student who donated books showed me the impact of genuine effort and care. This project helped me realize that community outreach is not just about sharing information; it is about building relationships, understanding real needs, and showing people that their voices matter.

My perspective on literacy has also changed. I now see it as a social justice issue. Literacy affects everything—education, employment, civic engagement, and overall quality of life. The stories I heard from teachers and students

opened my eyes to how deeply inequities in literacy access can affect someone's future. This deeper understanding has inspired me to continue advocating for educational equity beyond this project.

I am proud of the dedicated efforts of everyone who donated their time and resources to help develop this project. This achievement shows the importance of ensuring quality education for all and helping others gain the literacy skills they need.

Thank you to Dr. Wisnewski for expanding my research through the Education program's Weekly Wednesday emails. That promotion helped me collect over 100 donated books for the drive. Thank you to Dr. Giouroukakis for helping me plan and organize the informal discussion. Your guidance throughout this process was invaluable. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Barbara Black for this transformative opportunity. This fellowship marked the beginning of my literacy journey, allowing me to make connections and speak more deeply about these issues. I look forward to continuing this work and promoting reading and writing in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

The *Sustainability Institute at Molloy University* acknowledges the generous endowment to establish the **Partnership for Global Justice Fellowship at Molloy University** and is very proud to be administering this unique opportunity for Molloy students. Since its establishment, this competitive fellowship continues to generate quite a bit of interest from many worthy applicants, and in keeping with Molloy's mission, has provided a meaningful student experience while contributing directly to the identification of approaches to ending, or at least mitigating, environmentally or socially damaging decision-making on Long Island.

