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## From Read Ahead to Literacy Coalition: The Leadership Role of the Central New York Community Foundation in the Creation of a Local Institution

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## **From Read Ahead to Literacy Coalition: The Leadership Role of the Central New York Community Foundation in the Creation of a Local Institution**

*Frank Ridzi, Virginia Carmody and Kathy Byrnes*

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This paper applies the lens of recent literature on neoinstitutionalism and institutional entrepreneurship to understand the stages of growth in a community Literacy Coalition. It explores the interactional, technical and cultural phases of institution building identified in other case studies as they emerge in this community study. Finally, it emphasizes the work of local institutional entrepreneurs and acknowledges the involvement of macro-level institutional entrepreneurs that coordinate the approach of communities such as this one and help to bring about the isomorphic qualities seen in coalitions across the nation.

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Central New York is considered by many to be the birthplace of the modern adult literacy movement, which began to take shape in the early 1960s. Two of the most influential national literacy organizations – Laubach International and Literacy Volunteers of America – were founded in Syracuse in 1955 and 1962, respectively (The Literacy Capital of the World). Beginning in 2003, however, the region also became a pioneer of a new mode of community institutional transformation that places literacy at the center of networking relationships aimed at solving a panoply of social problems. As the following pages chronicle, this is a social entrepreneurial endeavor on multiple levels, which involves a number of innovations by direct literacy service providers in Central New York. It also involves the coordination of efforts by literacy advocates across the nation. In the middle-ground, holding these national and local forces together, is the coordinative work of the Central New York Community Foundation, which has taken a proactive community leadership role, beginning with an early “read ahead” campaign that evolved into the present day Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County (LCOC).<sup>1</sup>

In many respects, the Community Foundation’s work as proponent of literacy awareness and action has positioned it to become a catalyst and architect of a new system of social relations and ways of thinking

about literacy in Central New York (CNY). This new social awareness is the value added to the community that has resulted from the Community Foundation's investment of over \$3 million over 7 years in the improvement of local literacy.

Why invest so heavily in literacy? Illiteracy is a core issue that pervades nearly all of the major social problems – poverty, joblessness, health disparities – that address our nation, and the microcosm of this nation that CNY represents.<sup>2</sup>

Low literacy is highly correlated with poverty. Only 4% of adults with strong literacy skills live in poverty, while 43% of adults at the lowest level of literacy live below the poverty line (Reder 5). Low literacy as reflected in low school attainment is also correlated with high crime. High school dropouts commit 78% of juvenile crime (National Children's Reading Foundation). Increasing the graduation rate of males by 5% nationally would result in an estimated annual savings of \$4.9 billion in crime-related costs (Alliance for Excellent Education, *Saving Futures*). With regard to the U.S. education system, which many believe is failing (with one child dropping out of high school every 26 seconds (America's Promise Alliance<sup>5</sup>), low literacy is a factor that cripples students even before they enter financially challenged school districts, and becomes more onerous as students mature. Nationally, 41% of fourth grade boys, and 35% of fourth grade girls read below the basic level, and in low-income urban schools this figure approaches 70% (First Book; see also Donahue *et al.*). By high school, nearly half of incoming ninth-grade students read at a sixth- or seventh-grade level in high-poverty, urban schools (Balfanz, McPartland, and Alta Shaw).

With regard to health, low literacy levels are correlated with dramatic consequences. Older people with inadequate health literacy have an estimated 50 percent higher mortality rate over five years than people with adequate reading skills (Northwestern University "Low Literacy"). Overall, low literacy skills are estimated to result in annual costs of \$73 billion dollars due to preventable hospital stays, emergency room visits, more doctor visits, and increased medication (Herra; see also First Book).

In addition to health, low literacy has a cumulative impact on our workforce and our economy. The U. S Department of Education anticipates that the literacy gap that exists in our nation will result in a shortage of 12 million qualified workers in the next decade (D'Amico). With regard to the public coffers, a high school dropout contributes about \$60,000 less in taxes over his or her lifetime (Rouse). By extension, the estimated 12 million students that will drop out during the course of the next decade will result in a national loss of \$3 trillion (Alliance for Excellent Education, *The High Cost*).

Given its status as a major precursor to many of our nation's fundamental problems, tackling literacy early in life promises to have a

substantial ripple effect and a considerable return on investment (ROI). Children entering kindergarten with elementary reading skills are the most likely to do well in school later, even if they have various social and emotional problems (Northwestern University “Early Academic”). If higher literacy translates to higher graduation rates further down the “pipeline,” society will experience considerable public benefit, including financial savings. In the process, these youth will be far better off themselves, since the average annual income for a high school dropout is \$9,671 less than that of one who graduates (Alliance for Excellent Education, *The High Cost*). One often-cited statistic is that there is a return on investment of higher educational attainment; more specifically, bringing every recipient of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families to a high-school diploma level would result in an estimated annual savings of \$1.5 to 3.5 billion in reduced public assistance costs (Tienda). In addition to cost reductions related to these safety net programs, the nation could save another \$17 billion in Medicaid and expenditures for health care for the uninsured, if we were to find a way to graduate all students (Alliance for Excellent Education, *Healthier*).

Based on this knowledge, the growing Onondaga County literacy initiative promoted a vision of “100% literacy through 100% community engagement.” It also sought to enhance the county’s identity as the birthplace of the modern adult literacy movement by building and supporting community initiatives that improve literacy across the lifespan (Byrnes). In essence, this amounts to the thoughtful and calculated creation of literacy awareness and action as a local social institution.<sup>3</sup>

## Literature: How Institutions are Created

In organizational, business and social science literature, *institutions* are defined as “social systems which, once established, tend to perpetuate themselves” (Giddens qtd. in Dorado 387). Civic leadership via institutional change or “institutional entrepreneurship” has been defined as “strategic action” or “patterns of organizational action concerned with the formation and transformation of institutions, fields, and the rules and standards that control those structures” (Lawrence 168; Levy and Scully 974). Institutional entrepreneurship is an attempt to lead efforts to identify political opportunities, frame issues and problems, and mobilize constituencies” (Rao *et al.* 240; Levy and Scully 974).

This type of civic leadership adheres to a “new institutional” or “neoinstitutional” approach. Whereas the older “institutional” theories focused on one organization, company or government agency and defined institutions as being comprised of “rules, norms, and beliefs that describe reality for the organization, explaining what is and is not, what can be

acted upon and what cannot” (Hoffman qtd. in Garud, Hardy and Maguire 958), neoinstitutionalism conceives of institutions as broader than any single organization and seeks to instill “striking homogeneity of practices and arrangements” *across* formal and informal organizations (Powell and DiMaggio 9). The literacy movement in Central New York is an institution in the neoinstitutional sense. It is not encapsulated by a single agency or government office. Though a single entity such as the Community Foundation may be responsible for fostering the growth of literacy as a community institution, the work of Central New York’s literacy initiative is spread across multiple public and private organizations that share common goals and ways of thinking about the problem and its possible solutions. Beyond this, however, there is an institutional quality to the literacy coalition movement as a whole. It can be seen in the striking similarities between the work being done in Central New York and that being done in other coalitions across the nation.

Neoinstitutionalism as a field of study has dedicated itself to uncovering the ways in which patterns of thinking span various walks of life, giving daily personal experience a conspicuously isomorphic quality (as we will see, literacy coalition movements have done so in communities across the nation):

Tak[ing] as a starting point the striking homogeneity of practices and arrangements found in the labor market, in schools, states and corporations...the constant and repetitive quality of much of organized life is explicable not simply by reference to individual, maximizing actors but rather by a view that locates the persistence of practices in both their taken-for-granted quality and their reproduction and in structures that are to some extent self-sustaining [in other words institutions]. (Powell and DiMaggio 9)

Sociological and psychological literature argues that schemas offer sets of existing understandings and actions through which individuals interpret novel situations and craft responses. They furthermore assert that institutions play a large role in the establishment of such schemas by constituting an understanding of what interpretations and actions are favorable and acceptable (Hargadon and Douglas 478). Neoinstitutionalists such as Paul DiMaggio who have appropriated this language argue that “everyday cognition relies heavily and uncritically upon culturally available schemata - knowledge structures that represent objects or events and provide default assumptions about their characteristics, relationships, and entailments under conditions of incomplete information” (qtd. in Hargadon and Douglas 478). For Di Maggio, scripts represent localized

variants of broader schemata. “Institutions can thus be usefully viewed as performance scripts that provide ‘stable designs for chronically repeated activity sequences,’ deviations from which are counteracted by sanctions or are costly in some manner” (qtd. in Garud, Hardy and Maguire 958). In this way, institutions rely on culture, norms and sanctions to encourage community members to adhere to what are often designated as “best practices” in fields such as literacy. This saves each individual person, agency or collaborator the trouble of having to discern best practices for themselves.

How do such institutions come to be, and how does this literature provide a framework for understanding the efforts on the Central New York Community Foundation and its collaborators to institutionalize literacy? The answer lies in recent research on institutional entrepreneurship. Neoinstitutional research has historically emphasized the stability of institutions and, as a result, failed to focus on “the origins of new practice” (Lounsbury and Crumley 993). As Lounsbury and Crumley have argued, “diffusion studies treat practices as objects that are either adopted or not, essentially leading to the ‘black-boxing’ of practice... [with a] lack of attention paid to the role of actors in creating and promulgating innovations” (993). One response to this lack of understanding has been the concept and study of the “institutional entrepreneur” which highlights “the role of powerful actors such as the states and professions that are able to reshape the social organization of fields and/or help establish a new dominant practice” (Lounsbury and Crumley 993). “Institutional Entrepreneurship refers to the ‘activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones” (Garud, Hardy and Maguire 958). In simple terms, institutional entrepreneurs are “actors with social skills,” where social skills refer to “the ability to motivate cooperation of other actors by providing them with common meanings and identities” (Fligstein 397, Pacheco, York, Dean, and Sarasvathy 989).

Institutional Entrepreneurship “is most closely associated with DiMaggio, who argued that ‘new institutions arise when organized actors with sufficient resources see in them an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly.’ These actors – institutional entrepreneurs – ‘create a whole new system of meaning that ties the functioning of disparate sets of institutions together” (Garud, Hardy and Maguire 957; Garud and Kumaraswamy).

But how does an institutional entrepreneur create new institutions, such as one centered on a proactive approach to community literacy? To study institutionalization is, after all, to focus on “the creation and transmission of institutions [and] upon their maintenance and resistance to change.” True institutional entrepreneurship must always find ways to push past this resistance. As we will see in the case of the *Read Ahead* initiative

and the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County (LCOC), marketing literacy as an important social issue and getting the word out via a public relations campaign and community documents—such as a “community literacy plan”—were crucial components in the success of these programs. The production, circulation, and engagement of shared texts; not just written documents but also images (Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy 636) are central to creating the public discussion or discourse that shapes the contours of a community institution. Indeed, the work of Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy presents institutional entrepreneurs as “authors—generators of influential texts that are aimed at influencing the nature and structure of discourses and, in turn, affecting the institutions that are supported by those discourses” (648). They go on to explain that “actors are institutional entrepreneurs when they work to affect the discourses that constitute the institutions or mechanisms of compliance in a particular field in a self interested way” (648). Hence, “Successful institutional entrepreneurs will be those who are skilled at producing convincing texts that become part of central and enduring discourses in the field” (648).

Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy argue that “the relationship among action, texts, discourses, and institutions is both recursive and iterative: institutions are constituted in discourse, and to understand the process of institutionalization and how institutions enable and constrain action, we need to understand the discursive dynamics underlying them” (646). In essence, “Institutionalization is the process by which institutions are produced and reproduced. It is a “social process by which individuals come to accept a shared definition of social reality” that enacts an institution (R. Scott qtd. in Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy 638).

However, as we will see, the public relations campaign and effort to establish a vibrant community discourse around literacy was only the first step in redefining the literacy initiative in Central New York. The second step involved the translation of this discourse into action. This relationship between discussion and action is reflected in Parker’s definition of a discourse as “a system of statements which constructs an object” (Parker 5; Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy 636). “Discourse ‘rules in’ certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write or conduct oneself” and also ‘rules out,’ limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it” (Hall 72). In other words, discourses “do not just describe things; they do things” (Potter and Wetherell 6; Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy 636). Furthermore, they guide and shape the actions we take once they convince community members to act. It is within this context of institutional change via creation of a vibrant discourse around literacy that the CNY Community Foundation model for institutional change takes place.

## The CNY Community Foundation Model of Institutional Change

Though it corresponds with patterns of institutional change detailed in institutional literature, the approach of the Community Foundation to transforming the institution of literacy in Central New York is perhaps best described as “inductive.” Staff members began with a clear sense of community need and let that drive the process and outcomes. A needs assessment community scan conducted by Kim Scott (Community Foundation Vice President for program and donor services 2000- January 2008) and three other Foundation employees indicated that “Central New York is hampered by poor funding, spotty public awareness and a lack of political will among high-level community leaders” when it comes to “the battle against illiteracy” (Riede). “Part of the problem is that no high profile leader has made the issue a priority” (Riede). In the words of Scott, “You need a lightning rod, somebody who has the clout and the will to move this thing forward” (Riede).

Though the Community Foundation was willing to be the “lightening rod” and assume a high-level community leadership role for the sake of literacy, the process of institutionalizing literacy proved to be a give-and-take process. As one staff member explained, the processes in which the Foundation engaged were reflective of the book *The Wisdom of Crowds* (Staff; Surowiecki). This book examines how “when you put a large group of people together, they come up with an answer that is closer to the right answer than experts come up with” (Staff). According to staff thinking, for a project like this, “you want the wisdom of the crowd and the buy-in – not just to get ‘buy-in’ but also to get the right answer for the community” (Staff). As evidence of the legitimacy of this approach, the Foundation’s program officer, at the inception of its literacy work, pointed to communities across the country that have engaged in similar community discernment processes and have arrived at similar conclusions: “you want the right answer for the community, but these are often similar answers across the country” (Staff). However, she cautioned, “It doesn’t work without the networks that cross the boundaries between business and providers” (Staff). This process of network-building has been a large part of the value added by the CF’s model for institutional change.

Once a philosophy for approaching literacy was discerned, how exactly did the Foundation proceed? The following chart chronicles the stages as seen by program staff in 2007.



Background	read ahead Action Step Highlights to Create Community Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal Year: 2003</li> <li>• Community : fragmented</li> <li>• Structure: single service providers operating independently</li> <li>• Community Foundation Funds: \$0</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff conducted community scan and identified key literacy issues (Action type I)</li> <li>• Board developed vision and goals for literacy initiative (Action type: I)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal Year: 2004</li> <li>• Community: individual partnerships</li> <li>• Structure: providers collaborating on targeted activities</li> <li>• Community foundation funds: \$304,222</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implemented early literacy training programs in child care environments (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Added resources and built capacity in 6 family literacy programs (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Launched public information campaign with award-winning TV commercial; plus outreach for learners &amp; volunteers with billboards &amp; radio (Action type: C)</li> <li>• Clearinghouse added with phone number &amp; website for learners, volunteers &amp; donors (Action type: T )</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal Year: 2005</li> <li>• Community : silo collaboration</li> <li>• Structure: group of programs supported by same funding stream</li> <li>• Community Foundation Funds: \$482,164</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funded research on kindergarten transition // (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Began community effort to implement kindergarten transition strategies at school district level (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Early literacy training programs in child care environments continued (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Expanded adult literacy services in Madison County to 3 new towns (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Conducted organizational assessments of 2 key adult service providers (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Added resources and built capacity in 8 Onondaga County programs (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Invested in staffing network of service providers - FLAGS (40 members) (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Public information campaign enhanced with public art campaign featuring local artists' work (Action type: C)</li> </ul>

<b>Background</b>	<b>read ahead Action Step Highlights to Create Community Change</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal Year: 2006</li> <li>• Community : loose coalition</li> <li>• Structure: network of literacy service providers</li> <li>• Community Foundation Funds: \$514,361</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported implementation of kindergarten transition strategies at 9 school districts (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Early literacy training programs in child care environments continued (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Expanded adult literacy services in Madison County to 4th town (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Added resources and built capacity in 5 Onondaga County programs (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Continued strengthening FLAGS (55 members) (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Public information campaign broadened with 5,000 art-based calendars (Action type: C)</li> <li>• Issued report to community naming our 108 read ahead partners and work accomplished (Action type: T )</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal Year: 2007</li> <li>• Community Foundation Funds: \$294,500</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expanded into workforce development with new partners (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Literacy Impact Task Force set 7 community-wide literacy indicators with measurable outcomes (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Explored merger discussions with 2 key adult literacy providers</li> <li>• Made national-level presentations (Action type: C)</li> <li>• Issued report to community recognizing our 153 read ahead partners and work accomplished (Action type: T )</li> <li>• 1st Annual Ruth Colvin Literacy Symposium with over 100 attendees (Action type: C)</li> <li>• 5 community literacy planning meetings facilitated by Literacy Powerline (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Achieved consensus to hire an Executive Director for the Literacy Coalition (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Public information campaign expanded with Reading Radio program (Action type: C)</li> <li>• Continued strengthening FLAGS (85 members) (Action type: T )</li> </ul>

<b>Background</b>	<b>read ahead Action Step Highlights to Create Community Change</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal Year: 2008</li> <li>• Community: organized coalition</li> <li>• Structure: coalition of service delivery across programs &amp; funding streams</li> <li>• Community Foundation Funds: \$208,300</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convene Regional Stakeholders Meeting (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Hire Executive Director for LCOC (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Create LCOC budget (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Arrange for LCOC office space (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Formalize “Managing Partners” and “Leadership Council” (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Set up accountability structure for literacy indicators (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Install community governance structure</li> <li>• Start to fill gaps and take advantage of identified community funding opportunities (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Add resources to workforce development initiatives (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Build capacity in critical community literacy programs (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Support kindergarten transition work at school district level (Action type: I)</li> </ul>

<b>Background</b>	<b>read ahead Action Step Highlights to Create Community Change</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal Year: 2009</li> <li>• Community : full service coalition</li> <li>• Structure: coalition of community engagement including all stakeholders, lifelong age span, all service providers and funding streams</li> <li>• Community Foundation Funds: \$418,750</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Created and refined the LCOC structure (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Created the year-1 budget for the coalition (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Recruited the managing partners (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Trained the Executive Director (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Facilitated the orientation of the ED to past and present literacy efforts (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Connected local efforts to ProLiteracy and other national partners (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Led the goal refinement process (drove the process to prioritize...that resulted in a unanimous vote to focus on early childhood) (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Negotiated the home, fiscal sponsorship, data clearinghouse and other partnerships essential to future goals. (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Lead ongoing weekly planning meetings(Action type: I) (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Lead managing partners meetings(Action type: I) (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Led efforts to contract specific work essential to future program and fund development (literacy survey, mapping project and funding analysis). (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Raised community awareness in and among all sectors (more recently faith community, government and business) (Action type: I)</li> <li>• Assisted in program development and granting efforts with a multitude of literacy providers, community base organizations, schools districts and others to fund and support direct service and system enhancements across Madison and Onondaga counties. (Action type: T )</li> </ul>

Background	read ahead Action Step Highlights to Create Community Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal Year: 2010</li> <li>• Community : full integration</li> <li>• Structure: community infusion model</li> <li>• Community Foundation Funds: \$260,638</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop Regional Literacy Plan (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Implement Regional Literacy Plan (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Launch community marketing action plan (Action type: C)</li> <li>• A Regional Literacy Plan facilitates a coalition's ability to increase resources, expand access, provide coordination, expand best practices, ensure accountability, engage leadership, and keep literacy visible. Future year's actions are to be defined by community governance team. (Action type: C)</li> <li>• Embed literacy indicators in planning and celebrating shared success (Action type: C)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal Year: 2011</li> <li>• Community Foundation Funds: \$255,000</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch the Imagination Library Program (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Public Outreach Campaign for Imagination Library (Action type: C)</li> <li>• Build Network for Referrals to Imagination Library (Action type: C)</li> <li>• Assist with Development of Adult provider referral network (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Partner with Say Yes to Education and Literacy Zone Staffs (Action type: C)</li> <li>• Help to convene community grant applications (Action type: C)</li> <li>• Participate as Founding member with Literacy Funder's Network (Action type: C)</li> <li>• Establish Community Literacy Fund (Action type: C)</li> <li>• Install infrastructure for measuring community impact of Imagination Library initiatives (Action type: T )</li> <li>• Issue RFP and Fund Literacy Champions program (Action type: C)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total Spent: \$3,070,496</li> </ul>	

The Foundation began by studying the depths of community need via a needs analysis or community scan (2003). During this time, it became apparent that community service providers were fragmented and working

in their own “silos.” The first task of the *read ahead* initiative was to begin to bridge the chasms between these service providers by increasing interactions among stakeholders within the field of literacy. This process started with the forging of individual partnerships between stakeholders collaborating on targeted activities (2004). The work of encouraging and building interactions among community stakeholders increased and intensified in 2005 as groups of organizations, still operating largely within their own silos, began to be supported by the Foundation through a single funding stream.

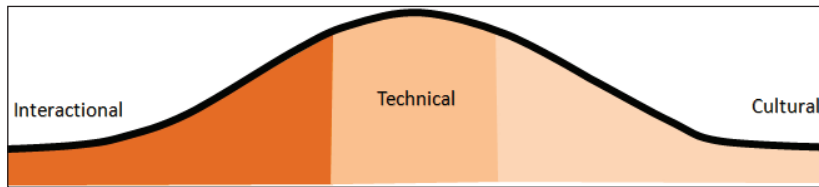


Figure 2

As interactions among service providers continued to grow, a loose coalition (or a network of literacy organizations) began to develop. In addition, a shared vision of what these stakeholders could collectively achieve began to evolve. One of the clearest aspects of this evolution was the emergence of the Literacy Coalition idea in 2007. This concept did not become a part of the initiative until staff members met Margaret Doughty and became acquainted with Literacy Powerline in 2007. As Kim Scott explains, meeting Margaret and learning of the literacy coalition model was an “aha” moment that offered a strategy to address the looming question of the literacy initiative’s long term sustainability:

What was clear from the community scan, the needs assessment, was that our current services nowhere near met the need. So we started doing capacity building along our three goals [to be discussed in more detail in the following section] and our activities were driven by those three goals. This [approach] did not present a clear exit strategy but the new path did; a coalition was a better path to a higher vision. (Scott)

After embracing the coalition concept (2007), the Foundation engaged the community in a series of five planning meetings to discern the *technical* aspects of this vision. These meetings involved addressing specific issues, applying problem-solving techniques, brainstorming innovations and determining specific recommendations. The series of planning meetings built upon a set of community-wide indicators developed by The Literacy

Impact Task Force in Spring 2007 and led to a decision to hire an executive director for what would be called the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County (LCOC). It was at the onset of these community meetings that John Eberle joined the Community Foundation as a program officer and then Vice President for Grants and Community Initiatives. He charged ahead, hiring Frank Ridzi as program officer for community initiatives, with the goal of fulfilling a vision of community ownership through coalition formation. It was John and a committee of community leaders who had been involved in the planning meetings that hired Virginia Carmody as the first Executive Director of the LCOC. In John's words:

I was initially reluctant about coalition building; it seemed too big and too daunting and we had never done it before. We didn't know how. But the term exit strategy drove me crazy. I couldn't see how we could walk away from our involvement in literacy. The coalition was the best way to do that. We needed community ownership and to do that we had to end *read ahead* and shift to a coalition. (Eberle)

This transition from encouraging interactions among those in the field of literacy to focusing on the technical aspects of institutionalizing literacy in the community for the long term represents a major shift in the phase of the literacy initiative—a shift from the Foundation-led *read ahead* initiative to the creation of a “literacy coalition” that is characterized by community ownership of literacy problems and solutions. In terms of the life cycle of institutional entrepreneurship, it represents a shift from the *interactional* to the *technical* phase. The chart below, based on the work of Perkmann and Spicer, presents a process theory of institutional entrepreneurship that is built on three successive phases – interactional, technical, and cultural (1101-1122).

Perkmann and Spicer discuss the interactional phase as involving institutional entrepreneurs in “coalition building, bargaining and incentivizing other actors to gather support for their project, thereby mobilizing and leveraging resources for their operations” (Dorado; Perkmann and Spicer). In essence, it is a phase of provoking interaction among actors and building capacity around a common goal where before there was no interaction—i.e. establishment of networks. Hence, Perkmann and Spicer define it as “the establishment of an association involving previously unconnected actors” (11106). They find in their research on institutional entrepreneurship that “interactional projects aimed at bringing actors together who were not previously connected.... were significant because they challenged existing institutionalized routines” (Perkmann and Spicer 1111).

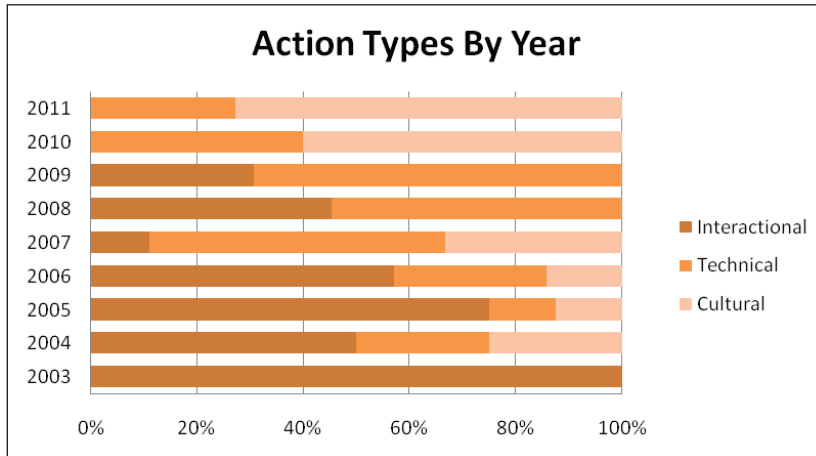


Figure 3

For the literacy initiative, *interactional* activities included conducting a needs analysis/community scan, convening existing actors/providers, infusing literacy into child care environments, researching kindergarten transition process and funding best practices (such as a kindergarten transition project with the city school district)<sup>4</sup>, fortifying existing and funding new family literacy programs, strengthening adult literacy programs, building provider networks<sup>5</sup>, upgrading the technology used by literacy providers, establishing a county-wide hotline for literacy assistance and using media, local artists and local statistics to raise awareness of the importance of literacy to the community. All these efforts to raise awareness, with the critical input by Gail Cowley, Cowley Associates, were conducted with a high degree of participant involvement, including the development of requests for proposals to be funded by the Community Foundation (K. Scott).

The second, *technical* phase in the process theory of institutional entrepreneurship involves a progressive shift in the nature of interactions between community actors, with these interactions becoming more formal. In this phase, Institutional entrepreneurs tend to “engage in ‘theorization’ by identifying ‘abstract categories and the formulation of patterned relationships such as chains of cause and effect’” (Strang and Meyer 492; Perkmann and Spicer 1103). As time progresses, simply interacting is not enough. A formal structure consisting of a governing body, rules and legal framework may be adopted. This phase may involve discerning between different organizational structures, publishing technical studies, and strategizing about “how resources should be accessed” (Perkmann and Spicer 1112). A budding institution may also choose to execute “technical



projects aimed at conceptualizing the way it [is] operated as an organization” (Perkmann and Spicer 1112) during this phase.

For Onondaga County, the technical phase has involved forming a coalition, funding that coalition, discerning to rely on the United Way as a fiscal sponsor rather than creating a new 501c3, hiring and orienting an executive director, convening a leadership team and managing partners (at first chaired by John Eberle from the Community Foundation and then transitioned to Joel Delmonico, Vice President and General Manager of Clear Channel Radio in Syracuse) and developing ways to measure community literacy indicators. As can be seen from the chart below (Figure 3), which categorizes each of the actions chronicled in Figure 1 according to its type, the chronological progression of literacy initiative since its inception in 2003 has seen a shift from predominantly interactional to increasingly technical and then (as we will see) cultural activities.

The final, cultural phase tends to “involve institutional entrepreneurs [in] framing institutions in ways that appeal to wider audience” (Perkmann and Spicer 1103). This may involve circulating reports, scheduling public speaking engagements, consulting, conducting workshops and presenting the case for the institution to politicians (Perkmann and Spicer 1112). Making connections between a new institution and “broader sets of values... creates [a link] between [the institution] and deeply embedded popular discourses” that facilitate the institution’s broader diffusion (Perkmann and Spicer 1106, 1103). Ultimately, the institution becomes firmly entrenched within popular culture such that it becomes a commonly assumed part of community values and norms (Perkmann and Spicer 1112). This is perhaps most clearly represented by the Foundation board’s approval of the creation of a Community Literacy Fund that will provide perpetual support for community literacy efforts. This is reflective of a new approach and normative expectation that the Foundation will “never leave the issue of literacy” and seeks to support a “community ownership” strategy, rather than the previously assumed “exit strategy” (Eberle).

Whereas the technical phase of the literacy initiative involved developing a plan for coordinating community literacy efforts long term, the cultural phase involves implementing that plan. In collaboration with a group of community partners, the Literacy Coalition has embarked on building a “cradle through career” pipeline of literacy support for community members. This pipeline begins with the *Imagination Library*, a partnership between the *Literacy Coalition* and the *Dollywood Foundation*, which targets children from birth to 5 years old. The program mails one free age appropriate book per month to children in targeted zip codes. Participating families are encouraged to read with their children by more than twenty community partners that refer them to the program and in many cases facilitate enrollment. The strong infrastructure of the coalition

is evident in the fact that, in less than seven months, this group of hospital, nonprofit, library, business and government partners has enrolled over 700 children. This number is well ahead of the 375 children that were projected to be enrolled by the end of the first year (based on the progress of other programs in other communities).

To supplement this community infrastructure for collaborative referrals, the Foundation has taken the symbolic and significant step of transitioning its literacy grant making over to the managing partners (similar to a board) of the literacy coalition. This representative group of nonprofits, literacy providers, schools, institutions of higher education, businesses, government and, in 2011, an adult learner, has become the democratic apparatus of the Foundation's literacy philanthropy. Through this new arrangement, the coalition was able to issue a request for proposals to support families using Imagination Library books. A host of organizations, including the library, the zoo, refugee assistance groups, adult literacy programs, the school district, the United Way and religious groups, will be reaching out to families as a result of this program, inspiring parents and children to read together and offering instruction on some effective ways to do so.

In May of 2010, the Imagination Library was launched by the LCOC as the centerpiece of a highly concentrated and collaborative strategy that is targeted and measurable. The *Imagination Library*, through the referrals of our community partners (such as St. Joseph's Hospital and Health Center, which currently refers over 55% of enrollees) makes first contact with local children and families while preparing them for and encouraging their participation in two other coalition partnership programs. One of these programs is the *Say Yes to Education* project (also partially funded by the Community Foundation), which offers in-school and after-school social, emotional, health and academic support to children from kindergarten through high school graduation. The culmination of this program is free four-year college tuition to all who gain admission to a select group of twenty-four private colleges and seventy-three state and community colleges. Though a distinct program, the connection with the Imagination Library is clear: "Say Yes will not succeed unless early childhood and kindergarten readiness are addressed" (Eberle). The second partnership, Literacy Zones, is an adult education reform initiative of the New York State Board of Regents and the New York State Education Department that is intended to provide a systemic focus on meeting the literacy needs of communities, from birth to adult, with an intensive case management approach. As its guiding coalition, the LCOC works in concert with the Syracuse City School District's Adult Education Department, which has developed welcome centers and provides services (including classes and distance learning opportunities) for those adults, including refugees and

new immigrants, who face barriers to literacy. Virginia Carmody explains how all of these programs fit together:

Our mission is to build and support such initiatives that increase literacy rates across the lifespan. Our early childhood strategy is focused in the City of Syracuse (which has the highest concentration of poverty in our County) and is the pipeline to Say Yes and the Syracuse City School District. Then, in partnership with the Syracuse Literacy Zones and ProLiteracy, an international adult education organization based in Syracuse, the LCOC supports adults from a family literacy perspective. (Carmody)

Though the literacy initiative is only a year into the cultural phase of institutional change, much progress has already been made toward instilling literacy as a part of the community's culture. The work of the literacy coalition has become a routine and key point of comment in State of the County and State of the City addresses delivered by elected public officials. In addition to this political legitimacy, the coalition has gained respect among service providers across the nonprofit community. Arts and Culture organizations have reached out to coordinate book and theatre events and there are nascent working groups forming among Health Care and Finance providers to address health and financial literacy. Perhaps most profoundly, the Human Services sector has embraced the literacy coalition as a full partner in solving many of its problems, giving literacy funded leadership roles and a place at the table in such anti-poverty community grant applications as the U. S. Department of Labor *Pathways out of Poverty*, the New York State Department of Education *Literacy Zones*, *Promise Neighborhoods*, congressionally directed funds and stimulus fund discussions.

While the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County has had an impressive trajectory that promises a bright future, the focus of this paper is on the details of its origin. Specifically, what did institutional entrepreneurs do and how did their role evolve over time? This is perhaps most helpful when it comes to learning from and replicating the coalition's successes. To understand these dynamics, it is necessary to return to the thought processes of local leaders as they grew from the onset of the literacy initiative.

### **Chronology of the "Read Ahead" Literacy Campaign**

The Community Foundation came to the decision that it was time to engage in a proactive grant-making endeavor in 2001. In the past, the Foundation had accomplished this goal by focusing on such multi-year issues as

neighborhood leadership, arts in education, and cuts in funding to human services agencies. However, the 2001 push toward proactive grant making was to be the first multi-year and multi-million dollar effort. The idea behind this approach was to attack a major community need and have a positive ripple effect through the community. It was also important that the challenge seem “doable in a reasonable amount of time.” In preparation for this effort, the Community Foundation Distribution Committee identified seven “key issues” facing the community. The Foundation staff then produced a brief synopsis outlining these issues. The staff then presented these reports for consideration to the Community Foundation board (K. Scott). Among these issues, literacy was selected as a point of action because it was seen as a root cause of poverty and an array of other social issues. Furthermore, literacy was considered “more measurable” than the other causes that the committee identified. This was the birth of the “read ahead” proactive grant making initiative, which officially began with a public information campaign following the Board’s approval in March 2003 (Spencer; Central New York Community Foundation).

Though the read ahead initiative would culminate in the creation of a Literacy Coalition in 2007-2008, the idea of a “coalition” was not foreseen at its inception. The foundation community at large had not yet adopted this idea as a workable solution. In 2001, the “coalition movement” “didn’t have legs” quite yet.<sup>6</sup> Whereas today a community that wants to begin a local literacy coalition has a plethora of resources to turn to (including consulting services, annual conferences and the examples of others such as Onondaga County), the read ahead initiative was for all intents and purposes breaking new ground (Spencer) in literacy-related philanthropy.

The read ahead initiative set out with a vision that Central New York would become “a community that values literacy and is known across the country for its commitment” (Central New York Community Foundation). Key features of this vision included outstanding early education that promotes successful learning from birth, highly literate children and engaged parents, families and caregivers, world-class literacy programs and literacy providers, and a regional culture characterized by continuous learning and literacy skills development. To pursue this vision, three goals were established to provide a focus for the Foundation’s grant making and public information campaign.

The first goal was to engage children as learners while reaching out to parents and caregivers as teachers. At the core of this approach is a philosophy that acknowledges, values and encourages myriad literacy behaviors, which parents and caregivers can use to engage children well before formal literacy and reading instruction begins in the school setting. This approach “emphasize[d] the creation of a coherent, high-quality learning continuum for children from birth to kindergarten [that would]

[e]nsure all children are provided a solid foundation to succeed in school and life” (Apter & O’Connor Associates 2). It was an approach based on the research of a series of national experts that emphasized “ready child care programs,” “ready parents,” “ready schools” and “ready children” (Apter & O’Connor Associates 2). The method for achieving these goals was the targeted engagement of parents, families, schools and caregivers in literacy activities with their children. Between March 2003 and March 2007, \$485,500 was allocated to training and mentoring childcare centers and family child care providers (61), with an estimated impact on 1,500 children in Onondaga County. In addition to this focus on child care, nine area school districts were provided funding and assistance to offer programming that would prepare families and children for the important next step of kindergarten transition. As a means for connecting the two realms of pre-school and school and establishing a baseline of current practices, a local consultant was hired to measure the status quo of kindergarten readiness. Collectively, this endeavor aimed at improving early literacy environments of children, aligning school district expectations and standards with early childhood environments, and promoting a successful transition process between the two (Apter & O’Connor Associates; see also Central New York Community Foundation). By 2005, “the schools surveyed estimated that 82% of entering kindergarten children [were] ‘ready’ to learn and succeed. Child care centers estimated that 93% of children graduating from their program [were] ‘ready’ to learn and succeed” (Liuzzi; see also Apter & O’Connor Associates 15). More importantly, however, a dialogue had begun about developing common language, expectations and definitions for school readiness and transition. These efforts would become the precursors to today’s Imagination Library collaborations.

The second goal involved cultivating world-class literacy programs with a focus on family literacy. The strategy for this was that investing in innovative, high-impact organizations would pay off by strengthening the community of literacy providers in Onondaga and Madison counties. This approach involved supporting the work of local literacy networks in both counties and seeking to strengthen and expand comprehensive family literacy services that support both children and adults (Central New York Community Foundation). In contrast to the first goal, the approach here was slightly more reactive and less directive. As such, Community Foundation staff members went to literacy providers and asked for their proposals on how best to focus on family literacy (Spencer), sparking a process that was largely driven by the community needs identified by experienced literacy service providers.

Perhaps most prominent in this effort was the formation and growth of the Family Literacy Alliance of Greater Syracuse (FLAGS). In May of 2004, a group of providers from such areas as early child care, learning

disabilities, “Success by 6,” BOCES and the Syracuse City School District began meeting on their own to apply collaboratively for state funding. Though this bid for funding was unsuccessful, the experience fostered cohesiveness among the group. The burgeoning collaborative then became aware of the Community Foundation’s “read ahead” effort. The group eventually proposed their idea for a more formal collaboration to the Foundation, and was funded as FLAGS. By March 31, 2007, FLAGS had grown from 42 to 71 member organizations, a 70% increase in its first 2 years of existence (Central New York Community Foundation). Since then, its members have worked both collectively and individually to identify the needs of literacy organizations and agencies and to support improved literacy services in the community (FLAGS). FLAGS maintained an active website, held numerous staff development opportunities and formed Action Teams according to literacy service areas (e.g. early childhood, adult education). In 2009, FLAGS formally merged into the Literacy Coalition, bringing with it the good will and social capital that it had cultivated among local service providers. Throughout its existence, FLAGS was an essential force in helping to develop the purpose and impact of a community collaborative approach to literacy among literacy providers (Byrnes).

As is evident in the robust growth of FLAGS, a great deal of effort was put into increasing the local focus on family literacy. Prior to read ahead, a Community Foundation staff member explained, “very few family literacy providers existed.” “We gave them grants to build or strengthen” in order to address what was seen as a pressing community need (Spencer). The Foundation’s efforts in this area were in part responsible for expanding the Even Start Family Literacy program to 24 new families in Onondaga County and expanding adult literacy services to four locations in Madison County. In total, the Foundation’s literacy support reached a magnitude of \$636,920 by March 31, 2007 (Central New York Community Foundation).

The third goal involves the advancement of Central New York literacy heritage. Two of the world’s foremost literacy organizations, Laubach Literacy International and Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA), were founded in Syracuse and merged in 2002 to form ProLiteracy Worldwide (The Literacy Capital of the World). David C. Harvey, ProLiteracy’s President and CEO, also brings an unprecedented level of energy and commitment to the table—ProLiteracy’s exciting redevelopment plans include relocation to downtown Syracuse and creation of a center for adult literacy excellence that will be conducting national research, evaluation and demonstration projects. Emboldened by this distinction, yet humbled by the challenge it presented, particularly in the face of historically low local literacy levels, the Foundation set out to build a highly engaged community that valued and supported the achievement of literacy skills. The read ahead initiative sought to create a pervasive community awareness of the value of

literacy<sup>7</sup> through convening a Literacy Impact Task Force and producing measurable community-level outcomes (key indicators of literacy). Furthermore, the initiative strove to increase the degree to which the community actively supported literacy efforts and facilitated ease of access to literacy services.

The last major component of the initiative's third goal was to execute a successful public information campaign that would supplement the convening of a task force and delineation of community indicators. A problem that presented itself in the first year of the initiative was "how will we market [the cause] and get the word out" (Spencer)? From the onset, the Community Foundation Board decided that it was best to have the tandem goal of raising the prominence of this issue in the community while at the same time using the read ahead initiative as a mechanism to raise the visibility of the Foundation and its work (Spencer). To address this desire, staff members asked four marketing agencies to work together to raise the profile of the Foundation's literacy funding. Three agencies agreed to bring their unique strengths to this endeavor. By November 2004, the read ahead initiative was ready for a "soft launch" consisting of a luncheon and a featured author. From then on, the momentum continued to build. In the fall of 2005, read ahead commissioned a series of local artists to portray literacy in art. These paintings were converted to large banners that were used to adorn highly visible buildings in the community. Additionally, a web site was created and a phone hotline was established in order to connect volunteers and those seeking help (Spencer). These efforts resulted in considerable media attention and recognition, including a New York State Adult Continuing and Community Education Agency of the Year Award (2004), a Telly Award (2005) for outstanding local, regional and cable TV commercials, and a Council on Foundations Gold Medal (2005) for the public information campaign. In addition, members of the initiative were featured presenters at the National Center for Family Literacy's 16th annual conference (March 4, 2007) and were invited with select literacy leaders from across the country to attend the National Institute for Literacy's Community Summit in Washington, D. C. on March 19, 2007. As a result of the largely successful execution of the three goals listed above, 153 community partners had actively participated in the read ahead initiative, as of the April 2007 Community Report, and the community as a whole was well on its way to transforming the way people thought about and acted toward literacy. But where, precisely, was it heading and what actually was being achieved?

This was a burning question in the minds of those heading up the charge. As one Community Foundation staff member explained, we originally "had no clear exit strategy; we figured [a strategy] would emerge" over time (Scott). Another explains, "we always intended to have an exit

strategy... but we didn't have an exit strategy until... we met Margaret Doughty in February of 2007" (Staff). Members of the read ahead initiative attended a National Center for Family Literacy Conference, the nationally recognized leader in promoting family literacy and an organization that had partnered with Literacy Powerline, where they met with seven coalition directors from across the nation – some affiliated with community foundations and others with organizations such as the United Way. The result of these encounters was like a proverbial light bulb turning on. "I saw it and I said, I've got it! Let's turn it over to the community in the form of a coalition – that makes sense!" (Scott). "I came back from the conference and it was so clear this was the exit strategy!" (Staff). The community was already poised in greater collaboration and improved literacy was being thought of as the solution rather than the problem. The time was right for community ownership.

### **Margaret Doughty, Literacy Powerline and the Creation of a Literacy Coalition**

The local origin of the term "coalition" is dual; it emerged in separate geographies before it coalesced into what is today known as the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County (LCOC). As one Community Foundation staff member recalls, the term emerged to describe the blossoming community collaboration that followed from read ahead: "we just called it a 'coalition' because that's just what it seemed like, a 'coalition.' We were unaware of the 'coalition movement' elsewhere" (Spencer). Another explains, "We had not heard of other community foundations doing any read ahead type things" (Scott). Even when the term did cross the path of local read ahead leaders, it was premature and the potential for a local coalition was not clear. "I had come across the concept [of a literacy coalition] earlier in the game and dismissed it.... [Later on] trying to explain it to others I didn't have an example to point to. I didn't realize there was a name for it, what I had been describing, and that was it, a coalition" (Scott). In May 2007, following the revelation that a coalition was the logical next step for the literacy initiative in Central New York, read ahead invited Margaret Doughty to present the idea to the board of the Community Foundation (Scott). The idea of a literacy coalition in Onondaga County, and another one in Madison, was received favorably by the Community Foundation board (Scott). With their approval, the read ahead initiative engaged Margaret and her company, Literacy Powerline, to facilitate a series of 5 planning meetings held at the OnCenter, a local civic venue. These planning meetings began in September of 2007 and focused on establishing the core goals of a coalition. With over 200 engaged community attendees, the read ahead leadership fostered consensus on the community's charge to (1) address specific literacy



issues; (2) apply problem solving techniques; (3) brainstorm innovations; and (4) determine specific recommendations which became the basis for the community's literacy plan, and the formation of Action Teams to tackle issues of early childhood literacy, health, and workforce development. The community also established the coalition's governance structure and named the managing partners.

Though unique in many ways to Central New York, the LCOC holds many similarities with literacy coalitions across the nation. This isomorphic quality is due in large part to the institutional entrepreneurship and guidance of Margaret Doughty who, in 2000, was awarded the Order of the British Empire by HRH Queen Elizabeth II for her contributions to the field of literacy. Born in England, and traveling to work in Africa with the British Peace Corps, and later to Iran and Abu Dhabi with her engineer husband, Margaret has taught English literacy skills to children and adults of assorted backgrounds and cultures. In short, "Literacy is her life" (Staff). The chapter of her life that pertains to literacy coalitions, however, began when she moved to Houston, Texas in 1990. At that time, the city of Houston was forming what would be called the "Houston Read Commission." This literacy coalition, one of America's first, was established in 1988 by Houston's Mayor Kathy Whitmire and the City Council to "address the literacy needs of Houston's adult population" (Houston Read Commission). As "a nonprofit urban literacy coalition, the Commission provides no-cost literacy services for adults and families" (Houston Read Commission). Doughty assumed the post of Executive Director of this coalition from 1990 until her "retirement" in 2000, bringing with her a wealth of experience in the field of literacy. Affiliated with America's Promise Alliance and drawing support from prominent sources such as General Colin Powell, Barbara Bush and Literacy USA, the Houston Reads coalition became "the premier coalition" in the nation (Staff) under Margaret's leadership.

Stemming from her work in Houston, Margaret has garnered a great deal of recognition for her successes in the field of literacy. Her ideas were noticed and her efforts brought both literacy and the concept of literacy coalitions "to the national scene" (Staff). She became "the lightning rod" for literacy and "the center of attention" when it came to forming coalitions (Staff). communities around the country began calling her one-by-one for assistance with various logistics. At first, she offered her assistance free of charge as a way to spread the knowledge she had gained. Out of necessity, though, she began to charge to cover the cost of her travel. Ultimately, the demand was great enough that a more formal structure was needed; "all of a sudden, she was in business – Literacy Powerline was born!" (Staff).

As a for-profit enterprise, Literacy Powerline exists as "the only consulting service dedicated specifically to supporting communities as they develop collaborative solutions for literacy issues" (Literacy Powerline).

The main work of Literacy Powerline, as stated on their website, is to assist communities in building the plans and structures that increase literacy across the lifespan, thereby promoting economic development and improved quality of life.

We develop and support community literacy coalitions so they have measurable positive impact on people's lives. We take great pride in networking with local and national partners including the National Center for Family Literacy, the National Institute for Literacy and ProLiteracy Worldwide. We offer services across the country to national organizations, foundations, state and local governments, state and local coalitions, business leaders and others. (Literacy Powerline)

Though "literacy coalitions" exist across the nation, dating back as many as 30 years (some due to federal funding that used the concept of a coalition), Literacy Powerline represents a social entrepreneurial effort targeted at re-envisioning and pioneering the future of what coalitions can and should be. It is an enterprise that seeks to make institutional change at the macro/national level by holding national conferences, distributing best practices and offering a wide array of consulting services to communities seeking to begin new coalitions as well as those aspiring to re-invent older coalitions in light of Literacy Powerline's emerging vision. To accomplish this goal, Margaret recruited a team from across the country (geographically diverse but connected via digital means and modern transportation) with unique expertise in evaluation, coalition organizing and advocacy. One key staff member was recruited from the CNY Community Foundation because of her role in laying the groundwork for the LCOC. Thus, while Literacy Powerline works to bring its vision to fruition on the macro, national level, the LCOC exists as a meso-level county effort at institutional entrepreneurship. Though still a work in progress, it is a pioneer in developing the model that Literacy Powerline hopes to produce in other communities across the nation, and remains the epitome of the firm's efforts at institutional change. The LCOC's first executive director sums up the community's progress to date:

The LCOC's evolution from idea into reality is inspired by the words of LVA's Founder and Presidential Medal of Freedom Recipient, Ruth J. Colvin: "So, the pebble dropped into the pond continues to make ripples..." The "pebble in the pond" approach puts learners at the center, surrounded by an expansive network of community partners. Working with a collaboration model allows our whole community to be

engaged together in the literacy effort. We believe, ultimately, that supporting a community literacy plan is the only sure way to achieve sustained economic growth in our region. From a sustainability standpoint, our intention is to build upon the support we've also received from other local foundations (such as the Allyn Foundation), private corporations (such as Syracuse Research Corporation), and broaden our support from individual donors as well. (Carmody)

## Conclusion

The preceding pages document the efforts made at instituting a culture of literacy through the development of a literacy coalition in Onondaga County New York. It is a project undertaken by the visionary leadership of Margaret "Peggy" Gillette Ogden that was amplified and refined by her successor as Foundation CEO, Peter Dunn. This work, however, is part of a broader national trend of building up a larger transnational institution of literacy. We see the building of a culture around literacy through three phases: (1) interaction, (2) technical discernment and (3) cultural development. Furthermore, we see the end goals of this work coming to fruition in sustained recognition of literacy's importance in county executive and mayoral speeches. We see this in literacy providers being welcomed to the table for federal and state grants in the areas of job development and poverty alleviation – without having to justify their right to be there. We also see this in the convening power of a literacy coalition that can repeatedly bring together stakeholders to consider long-term community goals in applying collectively for grants, many of which have brought in new funding sources from beyond the community.

The shift in phases from interactional to technical to cultural functions of the coalition has also paralleled the shift in the Foundation's role of funding for the coalition itself. Initial dollars, largely from the Central New York Community Foundation, were dedicated to raising awareness about the issue of literacy. It included a PR campaign and scholarships to small child care providers to infuse literacy in their daily work. With time, the evolution from interactional to technical engendered a shift to providing operating dollars for the coalition itself to establish its own working priorities and working infrastructure. With the final shift to the cultural phase, the funding also changed-- intent and focus of the Community Foundation's funding shifted to a format of community ownership. In this phase, a community literacy fund was established and funding was given annually to the Literacy Coalition itself to redistribute through vote of its governing body (the managing partners) among literacy programs in the community. This change effectively transferred ownership of the literacy initiative from the

Foundation to staff and to the members of the Coalition. These community partners took on a role of prioritizing community projects related to literacy and ensuring that the projects both directly addressed community needs and were likely to “move the needle” on the coalition’s community literacy indicators. At the same time, federal and state money as well as private philanthropy enabled the creation of Literacy Zones, Say Yes to Education Syracuse and other projects, such as congressionally directed funding for adult literacy provider referral and networking. The Coalition’s efforts of a website, a monthly newsletter, Action Team meetings, an Adult Education Director Roundtable and a seat at the table for numerous community efforts all demonstrate continued impact and growth.

These institutional entrepreneurial advances and the development of a new institution around literacy in Onondaga County paralleled national trends, which showed the number of literacy coalitions increased to well over 100 across the nation by 2010. At the same time, we saw the development of a Literacy Funder’s Network (LFN) as an affinity group of the National Council on Foundations. This affinity group, with charter members including the Central New York Community Foundation, began to chart a course for encouraging literacy and specifically literacy coalitions across the nation. At its first conference meeting, the first chair of the Literacy Funder’s Network commented on the nature of the LFN’s first two projects: “both of these are about field building.”

The LFN’s first project included plans to build a national literacy fund that would a) identify literacy coalitions across the nation who are particularly effective in moving community needles and b) allocate money nationally to the sustenance of these coalitions. That project very closely resembled the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) released by the federal government in the same year, 2010. The SIF was designed to award, on a competitive basis, monies for the expansion of proven programs. Also, like the SIF, the national literacy fund would require local philanthropy, in this case members of the LFN, to help by contributing matching funding.

The second project of the LFN in its inaugural year was to begin evaluating the impact of literacy coalitions across the nation. Similar to its emphasis with the national literacy fund on “rewarding what works,” this endeavor sought, with the support of FSG social impact advisors, to establish a national system that would provide a platform via the web for literacy coalitions across the country to measure and to chart their progress as well as compare themselves to coalitions across the nation.

Finally, the efforts of the LFN were complemented by the continuing work of the macro institutional entrepreneurs at Literacy Powerline. They began to more seriously collaborate with the goal of piloting an accreditation standard across the nation. In March of the same year, 2010, they released

their first draft and working copy, entitled “Coalition Accreditation Standards.”

Placing these efforts in the context of each other, we see a nested dynamic of institutional entrepreneurship, in which actors at the local level—such as in Onondaga County and at the federal and national level, such as with the LFN and Literacy Powerline—are thinking through and articulating visions for an improved future for literacy in relationship to one another. This nested quality of federal and local is something that we also see in other areas of institutional entrepreneurship internationally (Holm). This analysis on multiple scales reveals the importance of not only macro, but also meso and local institutional entrepreneurs. It includes macro social entrepreneurs such as Margaret Doughty of Literacy Powerline, meso institutional entrepreneurs such as the Central New York Community Foundation, and micro social entrepreneurs such as those operating and those participating in the individual programs that join and power the literacy coalitions themselves.

## Endnotes

1. The authors are grateful to Dave Kilpatrick and Stephen Parks for their editorial assistance in preparing this manuscript.

2. Most of the research that is cited in this section was brought to our attention by Rachael Silbar-Voorhees Senior Director, First Book National Book Bank and also appears on the First Book site “Literacy in the United States” <<http://www.firstbook.org/site/c.lwKYJ8NVJvF/b.2637397/>>. We are grateful to Rachael for her collaboration on this project and her work with the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County during her time studying at Syracuse University’s Maxwell School and serving as a Snow Fellow at the Central New York Community Foundation September 2008 — June 2009.

3. This mission was rooted in the following community values:

We believe that creating a strong literacy coalition and community literacy plan is the best strategy for activating community resources, unifying efforts and securing additional funding for literacy services.

We believe that literacy is foundational to full and rewarding participation in the social, economic and civic life in our community. This must include health literacy, financial literacy, computer literacy, etc.

We believe that an investment in literacy has a monumental return for individuals and communities, in earned income

potential, in positive civic engagement, and in reduced costs for social services and the justice system.

We believe that supporting a community's literacy plan is the only sure way to achieve sustained economic growth in our region.

We believe that literacy transforms individuals, families and communities.

We believe that literacy brings hope and opportunity, while creating an environment and culture of shared learning and contribution to a community.

We believe that literacy is a social justice issue that must be addressed in our time.

4. This occurred in both Onondaga and Madison Counties.

5. This occurred in both Onondaga and Madison Counties.

6. As will be discussed in following sections, the landscape has significantly changed as of 2009. Today the funding community, and particularly community foundations and the United Way, has embraced the concept of the "literacy coalition" and has been a major proponent. Today there are close to 80 literacy coalitions nationwide due in part to foundation efforts to spread the concept, and to the work of Literacy Powerline (which did not yet exist in 2003) and other national organizations. This shifting institutional paradigm of the literacy coalition has been so strong that even some older coalitions, with life spans as long as 20 years and consisting of various sizes and configurations, are re-inventing themselves in the vision of the new coalitions.

7. The initial 7 indicators developed were as follows. These will be discussed in more detail in the following pages.

- Increased number of incoming kindergartners prepared for school.
- Increased number of K-12 students meeting proficiency standards on NYS English and Language Arts assessment.
- Increased high school graduation rates.
- Increased number of adult learners, including those who speak English as a second language, meeting national proficiency standards.
- Increased number of children who read or are read to daily.
- Increased number of literacy and community programs using evidence-based practices to serve people with diverse learning needs and styles.

- Increased funding and community support for literacy-related programs and services.

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Note: this is a co-authored piece in collaboration with community partners.

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