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Role Models as a Motivator of College Students' Civic Engagement

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1. Background Information and Need for the Project

This project was inspired by a study of *character* role models, where my colleagues and I asked adolescents to describe the people they looked up to specifically as an example of how to be a good person (i.e., their character) and to explain why they chose that person (Hammond et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2016). The individuals that adolescents nominated were diverse and included presidential candidates, teachers, famous musicians, sports coaches, and best friends. The reasons youth reported choosing these character role models were similarly various and included qualities of the role models (e.g., being persistent) and how the role model treated other people (e.g., helping others).

In analyzing those responses, I noticed that many of the reasons adolescents gave for choosing their character role models had to do with civic engagement, even though the question related to character more generally. For example, many character role models were nominated for their participation in social movements or advocacy on behalf of members of marginalized groups. These responses inspired the idea of *civic* role models. A search for literature on this topic returned surprisingly little information.

On the one hand, there is research on role models generally and for specific behaviors. Most young people can identify at least one person they look up to (e.g., Bricheno & Thornton, 2007; Hurd et al., 2011; Yancey et al., 2011) for any number of reasons ranging from intelligence to athletic prowess to wealth. Specific types of role models may have a positive impact on related behaviors; for example, exposure to scientists from groups underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (e.g., women and people of color) can promote interest in STEM careers among students from those groups (e.g., Gladstone & Cimpian, 2021), and seeing women run for political office may encourage girls to think about doing the same (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2019). Little of that research, however, focused on civic engagement (which includes, but is much broader than, political engagement).

On the other hand, considerable literature documents the influence that certain categories of people have on youth's civic engagement. For example, young people whose parents engage in more political activities also tend to participate more often in those activities themselves (Quintelier, 2015), and in classrooms where teachers create a democratic classroom climate, students are more committed to civic values and actions (Lenzi et al., 2014). The extent to which these impacts are linked to these individuals serving as civic role models, however, has not been addressed.

Accordingly, there is a need for research on civic role models. To what extent can young people identify them, and where do they find them? What do they learn from their civic role models, and how do they apply what they've learned to their own civic engagement? I focused specifically on college students given that contributing to the development of informed and civically engaged students,

and later alumni, is a primary objective for many postsecondary institutions. Civic role models may be an important source of this development, and many such role models are likely available on campus (e.g., faculty, staff, peers), or encountered through coursework or extracurricular activities. However, there is little research to guide campus communities on how to maximize the contributions of civic role models.

Through this project, I began to explore college students' civic role models, including whether and how they might serve as a source of motivation for civic engagement. Specifically, I investigated: 1. How college students think about the idea of a civic role model; 2. Whom (if anyone) they nominate as their civic role model(s); 3. Why they choose these specific individuals (e.g., values, actions); and 4. What they report learning from their role models and how they applied that knowledge to their civic engagement.

2. Method

These results are based on initial analyses of data from interviews with 16 students at Tufts University, a highly selective private research university in Massachusetts.

Demographic information about participants is shown in Table 1. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years old; 15 were undergraduate students and one was a graduate student. 12 identified as women (11 cisgender women and one transgender woman), three identified as men (two cisgender men and one transgender man), and one as non-binary. Several racial-ethnic self-descriptions were represented; slightly less than half of participants identified as White. With respect to socioeconomic status, most self-identified as either middle or upper-middle class, but other identifications were also represented. Many majors were represented, including Undecided ($n = 2$), Anthropology ($n = 1$), Biology ($n = 1$), Child Study and Human Development ($n = 1$), Community Health/Spanish ($n = 1$), Computer Science and Math ($n = 1$), Economics/Education ($n = 1$), Engineering Psychology ($n = 1$), Human Factors Engineering ($n = 1$), International Literary and Visual Studies/Studio Art ($n = 1$), International Relations and Classical Studies ($n = 1$), International Relations and Civic Studies ($n = 1$), International Relations, Economics, and Film ($n = 1$), Quantitative Economics and International Relations ($n = 1$), and Political Science ($n = 1$). 14 of the participants were born in the United States, one in Bangladesh, and one in India.

Self-Descriptions

ID	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	SES
1	18	Woman	White	Upper-Middle Class
2	19	Female	White/Hispanic	Upper Class
3	19	Woman	White	Upper-Middle Class
4	19	Woman	White	Upper-Middle Class
5	19	Man (trans)	White	Upper Class
6	20	Male	South Asian (Bangladeshi)	Middle Class
7	20	Female	Hispanic/Latina	Lower Class
8	20	Cis woman	White	Upper-Middle Class
9	21	non-binary	White, Jewish, Middle Eastern	Upper-Middle Class
10	18	Female	White	Lower-Middle Class
11	18	Female	Hispanic/Latina	Lower-Middle Class
12	21	Female/ woman	Latina/Asian	Upper-Middle Class
13	18	Female (trans)	Chinese	Middle Class
14	19	Male	Asian American	Middle Class
15	19	Female	Black/Latina	Middle Class
16	25	Female	Asian (Indian)	Middle Class

All procedures were approved by the University's Social, Behavioral, and Educational Research Institutional Review Board. Data collection took place between February and April 2024. Participants were recruited through posted flyers around campus, in-person class presentations, and emails to sports teams, classes, and clubs. Interviews were conducted either by me or a trained doctoral student. During interviews, we followed the same semi-structured interview protocol but were free to inductively follow up on various aspects of participants' responses. The interview addressed students' ideas about role models in general and civic role models specifically; questions included their ideas about the concepts, who they would nominate as their own role models (if anyone), why they chose that person, and how they learned from them. Students gave informed consent and received a $40 gift card for their participation in the interviews, which lasted on average approximately an hour (with a range from 35 to 75 minutes). Interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

For the analyses reported here, we employed an abbreviated form of codebook thematic analysis (Braun & 2006, 2020) using an online qualitative analysis program called Dedoose (2021) to facilitate these processes. This form of qualitative thematic analysis recognizes the social constructionist nature of the data collection and analysis processes. Our results are therefore understood as situated within a sociocultural context that inherently influenced the way we conceptualized the research questions, collected the data, and conducted the analyses (Schwab & Syed, 2015).

3. Results

3.1 "Someone I Look Up To": The Concept of a Civic Role Model

We began the interviews with questions about students' conceptions of what a role model is. Many responses were like what was shared by Participant 14, a 19-year-old Asian American cisgender man:

> It's a person that I look up to or admire because I find qualities in them that I hope I will develop in myself. They provide good examples of someone to aspire to be like.

All participants mentioned either "look up to" or "admire" in their response, and many included both, which suggests that the most agreed-upon aspect of a role model is someone who has characteristics participants view as desirable or good. Moreover, these characteristics are ones that participants themselves want to have in some way. In other words, role models are aspirational figures. A few participants mentioned a role model as someone they wanted to directly copy (i.e., imitate), but most described someone whose characteristic(s) they want to *adapt* to their own lives (i.e., emulate). Regarding the relative age of role models, most responses were like that of Participant 2, a 19-year-old biracial (White and Hispanic) cisgender woman, who said, "*I typically like think of role models as adults, but I guess they don't need to be;*" a few participants emphasized that someone their age (or younger) could be a role model.

These descriptions of role models as aspirational figures to imitate or emulate were consistent with expectations given literature on this topic in social sciences and humanities (e.g., developmental and moral psychology, moral philosophy). However, there were other aspects of the participant's descriptions that we had not expected. Specifically, participants had different opinions about whether all (or nearly all) of the characteristics of a person had to be admirable for them to be considered a role model.

One group of participants said that for someone to be a role model, all (or nearly all) of that person's characteristics or qualities had to be good or worthy of admiration. Any undesirable qualities or behaviors would therefore disqualify a person from being a role model. The response of Participant 7, a 21-year-old Latina cisgendered woman, was representative of this type of view:

> When it comes to civic engagement …. I don't like looking up to one specific person. Just because there's always something that I don't know that they do, or something that— I don't know how to explain it. Like I just like don't think I would agree on everything that they think of. So I just kind of hold back on looking at like role models in that way….Just because in like five minutes I'm gonna find something else and be like, "Well actually he completely lied and he did— totally didn't do that."

Participant 2 expressed a similar idea:

> Just, like, who they are as a person, I think, is big for me, too, because it's very difficult for me to like— I don't know. I feel like you sometimes, like, meet people who you, like, think are really cool, and then you, like, figure something out about them and you're like, "Oh, like, that is a really bad trait," or like, "I just don't admire that in a person," or like, it's just almost, like, overpowering. And I can't really respect them the same way again.

In contrast, other participants described viewing people as role models for specific qualities but not for everything, such as Participant 6, a 20-year-old South Asian (Bangladeshi) cisgender man:

> I think there are a lot more other people who I look at for different segments of my work ... I think, yeah, like small pieces from a lot of people.

Participant 13, an 18-year-old Chinese transgender woman, expressed a similar idea:

> When I think of political figures I mainly think of their contributions towards politics. I guess in some sense, in some cases, yes, their life beyond politics would matter but mainly I'm just seeing their contributions towards politics and I'm just mainly taking that instead of everything else.

Some in this group acknowledged that people they view as role models might even have some undesirable qualities, such as Participant 4, a 19-year-old White cisgender woman:

> Some of my role models are role models in certain ways, but there are things that I would still heavily critique. There are some like friendships or relationships where I would look up to them in certain ways. But in other ways, I'd be like, "I would never want to be like you in that way."

Other participants seemed to be aware that some of their peers took a different approach and explicitly rejected it, as for Participant 8, a 20-year-old White cisgender woman:

> And a lot of my peers at that time were, you know, vehemently against Hillary Clinton. And you know, having grown up and gained some more political sensibilities, you know, I was able to think more critically about her as a person, and her actions, and still viewed her as a role model or whatnot.

Overall, participants' views of civic role models as individuals who were admirable, and whom they wanted to emulate or imitate, were consistent with prior theorizing and research. Unexpectedly, however, participants differed on whether every characteristic of a person needed to be admirable for them to be a role model.

3.2 "People within My Community Who are Really Going Above and Beyond.": The Individuals Nominated as Civic Role Models

We then asked participants if there was anyone they considered a civic role model. A few said that they did not have any civic role models; these participants were more likely to also say that all of a person's qualities had to be admirable in order to be a role model (such as Participant 7). Most participants, however, identified at least one civic role model.

The majority nominated a person they knew, including their mother [Participant 2], current professors [Participant 14], a leader of their church in high school [Participant 3], a current teammate on their university sports team [Participant 10], and a senior staff member at a camp where they had worked as a junior counselor [Participant 9]. Participant 2 also referred broadly to "people within my community who are really going above and beyond."

A smaller number identified someone as a role model who they did not know personally. For example, Participant 15, a 19-year-old biracial (Black and Latina) cisgender woman, chose climate activist Greta Thunberg, and Participant 16, a 25-year-old Asian (Indian) cisgender woman said she immediately thought of a "lot of actors" but specifically mentioned Johnny Depp. Participant 8, a 20-year-old White cisgender woman, discussed the daughter of Alexei Navalny.

Some participants said that famous people might be able to be civic role models, but in a different way than individuals who were known to them personally. For example, Participant 5, a 19-year-old White transgender man, said: "*Definitely there are [famous people]. Not at the same level because you don't know them.*" Similarly, Participant 9, a 21-year-old multiracial (White, Jewish, Middle Eastern non-binary person, stated:

> [PARTICIPANT]: There has to be that like really close contact for a certain amount of time. And then I can— like I don't think— at least for me, like obviously, I like have like-like, "Oh, I look up to Greta Thunberg," but I look up to, like, all of these like people, but I-I'm not like, "Oh, they're, like, a deep role model for me."
>
> [INTERVIEWER]: They're sort of different tiers, different levels of role models.
>
> [PARTICIPANT]: Yeah, definitely.

Other students expressed skepticism in considering famous individuals as role models. Participant 2, who had nominated her mother and individuals in her community, noted that she would be able to admire a famous person for a particular characteristic but that these individuals would never "rise" to the level of a role model.

> [Interviewer]: Is there anybody who you, like, know about who you would consider to be a role model but, like, you don't know them personally? Like, it could be somebody famous or somebody historical or—?
>
> [Participant]: I, like, never really had a specific person. I mean, I think there are people that I think are really cool and I think I, like, look up to with just, like, their influence, but I don't think it's, like, someone that I would necessarily be like, "Okay, yeah. That's my role model." You know what I mean? ..... It's hard for me to have a role model that I don't know.
>
> [Interviewer]: Why do you think that is?
>
> [Participant]: I just think, like, with famous people and stuff, I don't have any, like, connection with them.....Like, I can definitely admire them for the things that they do, but .... At the end, I don't know how they are really. And it's just— Yeah, it's hard to know how someone really is without knowing them.... I feel like you sometimes, like, see people who you, like, think are really cool, and then you, like, figure something out about them and you're like, "Oh, like, that is a really bad trait," or like, "I just don't admire that in a person," or like, it's just almost, like, overpowering. And I can't really respect them the same way again.

Participant 7, a 20-year-old Hispanic/Latina cisgender woman, responded similarly when asked whether there was anyone she did not know personally that she would consider a civic role model: "*That's hard. I don't know. I don't think so. I don't— I think with role models I think it's just very like familiar people*".

Overall, it was much more common for participants to choose someone known to them personally as a civic role model than to choose someone famous. Many participants were skeptical about whether famous people could really be civic role models, at least at the same level as individuals known to them personally.

3.3 "They are Actually Passionate about What They Believe In": Reasons for Choosing Civic Role Models

There were many reasons given for why specific individuals were chosen as civic role models, but a few types of characteristics came up frequently.

3.3.1 Caring about Other People and Social Issues

The most common reason given for choosing a civic role model was that the person cared – at a high level of intensity – about other people in a community or about social issues, as noted by Participant 2, a 19-year-old White cisgender woman:

> Being engaged in your community is a big component of it, and I think also just, like, generally, trying to do something for the general betterment of your community …. As well as someone who goes above and beyond. Not just someone who, like, does the bare minimum, you know what I mean?

This participant considered her mother to be her civic role model given the level of care she showed across their community:

> My mom, she's very kind and she's— she likes to get involved in a lot of things as well. But I wouldn't say more on, like, the advocacy side. I would say more on the community side. She would always volunteer at our schools and stuff like that. And I— she's a role model to me in the way that she is and the way that she raised us. But I really look up to how she was always involved in something that had to do kind of with our lives, but— as well as her own. Yeah.

Caring about a specific issue was also frequently noted as a reason for choosing civic role models. In these cases, the word "passion" was often used to describe the person's level of investment in a particular cause, as with Participant 15, a 19-year-old biracial (Black/Latina) cisgender woman:

> I have a friend from high school …. she goes here now. She is very much outspoken in how passionate she's about the issue, whether it's through reposting a lot on social media, reposting, and then also going to protests.

Participant 10, an 18-year-old White cisgender woman, chose a teammate on her sports team, and said that one of the reasons for that was her teammate's passion for environmental causes:

> She does volunteering at the New England Aquarium and just she's also in [environmental activism club]. I think in a sense, I haven't really told her about this, but she's definitely a role model in the sense that, "Find your niche. Find something that interests you and that you could potentially see yourself doing in the future and find a way to make it happen here or find a way to get involved here."

Participant 12, a 21-year-old biracial (Latina/Asian) cisgender woman, explained her reasons for choosing a family friend, an immigration lawyer, as her civic role model:

> He is really making a difference in the lives of the undocumented immigrants … especially when it comes to, like, medical insurance and also getting jobs.

Although caring for others and passion for addressing specific social issues were mentioned by nearly every participant who said they had a civic role model, most participants also noted that those characteristics were not *sufficient*. Other characteristics that occurred in tandem with caring about other people and social issues were intrinsic motivation; persistence, courage, and sacrifice; and common interests and identities.

3.3.2 Intrinsic Motivation

Participants emphasized that to consider someone a civic role model, they needed to understand the "why" of the person's civic engagement and not just the "what," as expressed by Participant 11, an 18-year-old Latina cisgender woman:

> I'd like to see that the person is actually passionate about what they believe in, but that they also, they themselves like are a good person as well….. and it's not really like the big goals that somebody's achieved, because it's about like what brought them to the goal. Like what-what is their background? Like, stuff like that. If I would wanna see them as a role model, I would wanna see like the background in their day-to-day, that brought up to them completing that goal.

Specifically, the "why" of the engagement needed to stem from an internal and values-based motivation, as stated by Participant 12, a 19-year-old biracial (Black/Latina) cisgender woman:

> Somebody whose actions demonstrate part of their core values. And you think that those values are admirable. And so not only is it see— like, agreeing with someone's values and thinking that they're beneficial to, I guess, society, but also seeing the way that they act and how that brings out those values. So a role model is someone who both has very good values and then also acts with them.

Participants described civic role models as people who not only had internal motivations for their engagement but also explicitly did not have external or extrinsic motives, as described by Participant 2, a biracial (White/Hispanic) cisgender woman:

> Being genuine about your, like, passion and like … need to whatever, do whatever you want, I think is important to me, too. It's not just about, like, doing a lot, if it's disingenuous… I think it's important that you actually care about this…. Do you know what I mean? … Like, I wouldn't look up to you as much if you were just doing all this stuff to, like, impress someone or, like, meet a certain amount of, like, service hours.

Participant 11, an 18-year-old Latina cisgender woman, chose her internship supervisor as her civic role model. Her explanation of that choice demonstrates the importance of intrinsic motivations alongside the explicit rejection of external ones (here, "attention"). This response also illustrates the expectation (described above in a previous section) that civic role models are individuals who invest an above-average amount of time or effort.

> Just how she gives all her time[1] to the community. She's always, like, on a Zoom or in a meeting or like applying for funding and stuff like that and that's really like an action that I look up to. **It shows that she really cares and she's not just doing it for the attention or stuff like that.**

Motivations that included wealth were specifically mentioned as being incompatible with what a civic role model would do. Indeed, many role models were described as people who were not "doing it for the money", such as the reasons given by Participant 12, a 21-year-old biracial (Latina/Asian) cisgender woman:

> The individual that comes to mind is a friend of my family. He was the first undocumented immigrant to pass the bar in Massachusetts. His whole firm is about providing immigration services to undocumented immigrants without cost. So they find a way to work it out so that he can stay afloat with his business and his business partners. But he— His passion is the rights of undocumented immigrants. **And obviously, it's not a source of a lot of money at all. Like, as a lawyer, he could make a lot of money, but no.**

[1] All underlining or bold text was added to emphasize certain phrases of the quotations from participants. Quotes have been lightly edited for clarity.

Participant 14, a 19-year-old Asian American cisgender man, described their civic role models similarly:

> I definitely think that the two professors in my [field] fellowship are very big role models for me, especially, like, the lead facilitator. He works at the [school] and he has a lab in [field]…. And he is very involved in civic engagement and he, I think, founded the [center] because he's very passionate about civic engagement. And I just think that it's really cool that somebody with so many credentials and so many degrees is still so passionate about civic engagement. **And obviously, it's not a field that I think necessarily might give you a lot of money either.** Like, you have to really fight for funding, and you have to really put in a lot of work and convince people that this is worth it. And he has so many other, like, lab research opportunities that I think would be a lot easier to secure money for – and a lot less time-consuming… maybe even a lot less stressful in that sense, but I think he believes in the cause so much that he is balancing both.

3.3.3 Persistence, Courage, and Sacrifice

Persistence in the face of obstacles, and personal sacrifices made in pursuit of goals, were often pointed to as reasons for choosing a civic role and as evidence for the intrinsic motivation of that role model. The types of obstacles role models faced and the sacrifices they made varied considerably.

Participant 9, a 21-year-old who identified as multiracial (White, Jewish, Middle Eastern) and non-binary, explained that they had chosen a senior counselor at the camp where they had worked because of the way this person had persisted in helping them and other campers understand specific social issues despite a lack of enthusiasm:

> Like in the moment I was very much so like— like angry with her, but then as I got older, I was like, "Whoa," like actually, like she was really someone that like pushed me in a way that I needed to be pushed and like, I respect her for that because it's so hard to put in effort when the people that you're interacting with are frustrating you. …. And it's like so hard to have a bunch of angry 16-year-olds [laughter] Like— like, not want to engage with you, and to push back against that and be like, "No, like we're gonna talk and we're going to listen to each other and stuff."

Participant 5, a 19-year-old White transgender man, pointed to the potential for sacrifice across the career of his civic role model, a person who had served in the military:

> I think that's a pretty good role model of, like, that the most you can do is, like, giving up your life or your livelihood to defend the lifestyle that we have.

In explaining why she chose a family friend who was the first undocumented immigrant to pass the bar exam in Massachusetts, Participant 12, a 21-year-old biracial (Latina/Asian) cisgender woman, described the obstacles the person had faced and sacrifices he had made in pursuit of his goals.

> He deals with a lot of adversity… and I don't think he's scared of dangerous situations. Taking the bar, he at least admitted that he was here undocumented, and he could have risked everything doing that, but he did it anyway.

Persistence and sacrifice were more strongly emphasized by participants who described someone they did not know personally as their civic role model. For example, Greta Thunberg was nominated by Participant 15, a 19-year-old biracial (Black/Latina) cisgender woman, for her persistence in the pursuit of changes in environmental policy:

> She has dedicated her whole life to the cause of environmentalism, which is something that she knows is going to impact my generation most and future generations…. she never really allows herself to be narrowed down by people who the issue won't affect ultimately, people who are in charge of these policies that are so harmful to the environment in so many different ways… there's always going to be someone trying to sway you in a certain way saying, "No, that's not really the way it is. This is the way it is and this is how it's always going to be." I appreciate the fact that she calls people on the BS and is like, "No, it's not how it should be."

With respect to sacrifice and overcoming obstacles, Participant 10, an 18-year-old White cisgender woman, described why she had chosen Malala Yousafzai as her civic role model:

> One of my interests is women's rights and women's equality and stuff. I did a lot of research on her and I love her, and I follow her on Instagram … Seeing someone who was so relentless and so strong and passionate and seeing that she literally went through hell and back and is still thriving and succeeding, I think that's something that's super inspiring to see.

Both sacrifice and obstacles were referenced in the reasons given by Participant 8, a 20-year-old White cisgender woman, for choosing Alexei Navalny as her civic role model:

> Courage has to be like at the top of the list… To be poisoned, and on the brink of death like that, I mean, you know, almost certain death waits for you back in Russia …. and so to keep running such high risks, and keep doing stuff, you know, even more audacious things, when you know that at least the immediate situation isn't looking that good. You really have to be wedded to your- to your beliefs to keep going with that. … If you're willing to stand up, and you know, even die for this sort of, you know, freedom and democratic systems, I mean, I think that would speak to his values, and the values of his family….

3.3.4 "It's Easier to Look Up to Someone Who Shares the Same Experiences and Stuff": Shared Identities and Interests

We also asked participants about what they perceived as commonalities between themselves and their role models, and how important those commonalities were. Participants described two types of similarities: one related to personal identifications or social identity categories, and a second related to common interests in specific civic-related topics or methods of civic engagement. The difference between these two areas of commonality was captured in a response from Participant 5, a 19-year-old White transgender man:

> I mean, I feel like there's almost two kinds of role models… There's people that you, like they could be, have absolutely nothing in common, but they emulate values that you want to get- or like lessons. Like that would be like historical figures, stuff like that. And there's also role models where it's like, oh, I see they're going through the exact same thing as me. That is how they're dealing with it and that seems like a good way of solving my problem, therefore I should emulate them.

Participant 12, a 21-year-old biracial (Latina/Asian) cisgender woman, explained the importance of similarities with respect to topics, which she referred to as a "shared passion":

> The type of work, too, I guess it would have to be work I'm also passionate about…. And I do know a lot of other individuals in civic engagement that are doing amazing projects that I don't relate to or don't necessarily see them as a role model 'cause it's different. So I think that the topic has to be also a shared passion

Participant 10, an 18-year-old White cisgender woman, also explained that the idea of a "shared passion" was important to her in a civic role model:

> I hear about amazing people in every sense and who are Nobel Peace Prize winners for everything. I just think that when it relates directly to something that I'm passionate about I'm more willing to look there for inspiration or to be a role model

This same participant, however, also discussed the potential importance of shared aspects of identity, beyond a "shared passion" related to the topic:

> I do think that there is a resonation that would come in seeing people who hold my own identity … I would say that there is an aspect that I would probably look for in my own identity and seeing the people around me because it's very easy to see … When you see somebody who actually is representing who you are and where you come from, it is that indicator of like, "Oh, man, I want to embody that."

Participant 2, a 19-year-old biracial (White and Hispanic) cisgender woman, explained that a shared aspect of identity was not a requirement for her in choosing civic role models but that it could be beneficial:

> I think, like, it makes it easier to look up to someone who would also share the same, like, experiences and stuff that I would. .. definitely do think, yeah, identity would factor into it. Like, I don't think that would necessarily be a requirement, though.

Overall, civic role models were chosen because of their above-average levels of care and effort toward promoting the well-being of others and society more generally. Although those characteristics seemed to form the baseline, many participants also noted that those behaviors needed to be driven by internal (rather than external) motivations. Moreover, many civic role models (especially famous people) were described as having overcome many obstacles and challenges, and in many cases had made considerable sacrifices while caring for others and/or addressing important social issues. Participants noted the value of shared aspects of identity and explained that they were more likely to choose as role models people who were devoted to similar issues.

3.4 "How to Impact the Matters That Mean the Most to You": The Influence of Civic Role Models

The final section of the interview focused on exploring the ways that participants believed that their role models influenced them. Most participants described these impacts in general terms related to expanding possibilities related to civic engagement. For example, Participant 2, a 19-year-old biracial (White and Hispanic) cisgender woman, said that her civic models (her mother and others in her community) had expanded her sense of how she could be civically involved:

> Yeah, like in terms of wanting to do more, kind of, you know what I mean, and just, like, immerse myself more and— I don't know, I think I realized, like, I could be doing so many other things with my time… just like how many better things I could be doing with my time.

Several participants also described looking to their civic role models for confirmation that civic change was indeed possible. Participant 5, a 19-year-old White transgender man, described "getting things done" as an important thing he had learned from both historical figures and people he had known personally:

> Like I've seen in my like scout troop, how the leaders actually enact change…. So it's like, oh, maybe if like, if I'm mad about something, like I'm really tired of some of the zoning laws in my town, I should probably do something about that. So, yeah, like learning that you have the power to actually do stuff…. I think a lot of the historical figures that I can think of, it's— yeah, like they got stuff done.

Other participants described looking to their civic role models as sources of inspiration when they were themselves grappling with obstacles to their civic engagement. This type of inspiration was evidenced in the response from Participant 8, a 20-year-old White cisgender woman, who had nominated the daughter of Alexei Navalny as one of her civic role models:

> If she can do all that, how can I, you know, show up better for like my own communities, or for the global community? So, sort of thinking more purposely about, you know, if she's got all these things stacked up against her, and all of these risks that she's running, that her family has run, if their dedication continues throughout all of that, you know, how can I— Like I can surely step it up!

4. Recommendations for Campus Communities

This exploratory research project was designed to gather initial information about how college students think about, and are potentially influenced by, civic role models. Based on an initial set of analyses of 16 interviews with students at Tufts University, there are several implications for campus communities to consider in order to help students identify and learn from civic role models.

4.1 Navigating the Complexity of Human Behavior

An unexpected observation from the interviews was the number of students who described a belief that, for someone to be a role model, all (or nearly all) of their qualities had to be good or admirable. As a developmental scientist by training (concerned with whether and how people change in systematic ways across the lifespan), I saw a connection between these descriptions and the developmental task of de-idealization of authority figures. As a part of a healthy process of growing up, we all must grapple with learning that our parents (or parental figures such as other family members, older siblings, or teachers) are imperfect people who make mistakes. It seems that some students may not have come to terms with that idea (at least when it comes to civic role models), which may inhibit their ability to identify and learn from individuals who could serve as civic role models for them.

Accordingly, I recommend that campus communities help students understand and navigate the complexity of human behavior, including giving them tools to make decisions about when an undesirable quality or mistake might be big enough to "disqualify" someone from being a role model and how to balance that with other redeeming qualities that the role model might have. These skills are likely to also be beneficial to students' relationships more generally (e.g., with friends and parents) and may already be offered as part of general student life programming on some campuses. In addition, it may be helpful for students to hear from authority figures about mistakes they made and what they learned from them, both within and beyond the realm of civic engagement.

4.2 Setting Realistic Expectations

A clear finding from the interviews is that the expectations for civic role models are extremely high: they must show an above-average level of caring about others and social issues, and this involvement must be motivated only by internal values rather than any type of material consideration such as finances. They must persist despite serious obstacles, and they are expected to make considerable sacrifices to sustain their involvement or attain their goals. Because these characteristics are forwarded as what "makes" a civic role model (someone to be looked up to for their civic engagement), they likely represent what participants consider as the "ideal" forms of civic engagement. However,

that set of characteristics is unlikely to be able to be maintained for longer lengths of time, and many participants may have unknowingly chosen people as their civic role models who were close to being burned out (or were burned out) but were not open about it.

Accordingly, I recommend that campus communities make efforts to present students with examples of individuals who are effectively civically engaged in ways that are sustainable for their mental, physical, relational, and financial well-being. These individuals may provide students with more variety in options for role models and can complement presentations or talks by people who have made extreme sacrifices or demonstrated extremely high levels of involvement.

Moreover, I recommend that campus communities encourage people on campus who might be civic role models (e.g., professors, invited speakers) to directly address issues of motivation, and particularly how to balance intrinsic motivation (e.g., values) with pragmatic human needs (e.g., paying rent or saving for retirement). The interviews clearly showed that the motivation for civic engagement is highly important to students, and messages from potential role models may not be as well received (and students may not learn as much) if that issue is not discussed.

Finally, I recommend that campus communities continue to focus on issues of representation with respect to identity categories (e.g., ensuring that invited speakers include members of both visible and invisible groups that have varying levels of power and privilege). Moreover, I encourage campus communities to invite speakers on a wide range of different social issues, given that many participants indicated that they wanted role models who cared about the same social issues that they did.

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