

Students Assemble: Acclimating to College using the Marvel Cinematic Universe

By CODY T. HAVARD, PH.D.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS

Welcome to college everyone! While college should be a time that is both fulfilling and formative in helping shape your life, it is also one that is filled with questions and situations that require thoughtful consideration and decision making. For most, this is the first time that you will be or are in charge of your daily schedule and time. In essence, you are for the first time in charge of making the decisions that shape your future - albeit in a controlled environment. So, this is an exciting time. I want to wish you all good luck and know that people at your institution want to support your education and matriculation.

The purpose of this essay is an attempt to offer help and assistance as you begin, or continue your path through college. Hopefully this essay also encourages you to take responsibility over your educational experience and work to make sure that you take full advantage of the possibilities and opportunities at your disposal. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) holds a very popular and important place in contemporary society¹, and this essay uses the universe and some of its characters to draw comparisons to contemporary college life. Specifically, we will look at various characters in the MCU to discuss how they can provide lessons to finding your *fit* in college and taking control of your educational experience. Areas this essay will not address are some off-campus or inappropriate behavior, instead, focusing on how to encourage positive interactions between you and your educational environment.

Marvel characters have been used throughout history to help people understand their surroundings, whether it be a teenager dealing with the problems facing youth (e.g., Peter Parker/Spider-Man and Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel), or the United States involvement in worldwide events such as World War II (e.g., Issue #1 of Captain America shows him punching Adolf Hitler), the Cuban Missile Crisis (e.g., Tony Stark/Iron Man), or the Cold War-era space race (e.g., Fantastic Four). Additionally, Marvel books and the MCU have been used to explain such topics as philosophy (White,

2012), politics (Spanakos, 2012), ethics (White, 2012), academic research (Harvard, Fuller, Ryan, & Grieve, 2019), storytelling (Yockey, 2017), and popular culture (Chambliss, Svitavsky, & Fandino, 2018).

I want to offer two important notes on this essay. First, while the information in this essay is meant to represent and reach as many readers as possible, there will undoubtedly be areas that do not receive the attention they deserve. As the characters discussed in this essay come from the MCU, it is important to note that Marvel continually updates their character offerings and introduces more superheroes to the universe. So, in addition to the characters included in this essay, I also call on you to identify your own characters which can provide you with inspiration. Second, even if you are not in currently in college (e.g., high school, middle school, grade school, or are not in school), it is the goal and hope that you can also find benefit in most if not all sections of this narrative. Because, just as responsibility tracked down Peter Parker/Spider-Man in *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019), every-day responsibilities do not subside for most, and we are left with the task of finding ways to adapt to our environment. The rest of this essay will discuss the similarities between the MCU's Avengers headquarters and college campuses, select characters and their lessons within the MCU, a note on inclusion, and a concluding statement on how the MCU story arc compares to all of us. So, with that, please come along with me, enjoy, and let's break some eggs (Thank you Tony Stark)!

Welcome to Avengers (and College) Campus

A university or institution of higher education is made up of facilities that are used to teach those attending classes about relevant information, while encouraging a shared experience and dissemination of knowledge. College campuses contain services meant to help students (e.g., food, shopping, health management). In that way, a college campus can become a place where students live, learn, and engage with others in an effort to find similarities, discuss

differences, and work to understand and help solve important issues facing communities and larger society.

Just as a college campus can provide all of this to a student, the Avengers Campus plays the same role for the characters of the MCU. When Tony Stark/Iron Man decided to move the Avengers headquarters to up-state New York from Manhattan, effort was made to construct a campus in which heroes could live, train, work, and engage with others. After all, the Avengers Campus is the primary place where Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch and Vision learn more about each other and grow their relationship - which is the theme of the Disney+ series *WandaVision* (2021)! Just like a college campus provides a place for students and faculty to hone their skills and study their craft, the Avengers Campus does the same for various MCU heroes. Also, just as visiting a college campus can inspire admiration - and sometimes intimidation or surprise - at the grounds, the same can be said of the Avengers Campus as experienced by Peter Parker (admiration) in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) or Scott Lang (intimidation, surprise) in *Ant-Man* (2015).

Another important role a college campus plays is providing a place of grounding for current and former students. The sense of being *at home* many people feel when they visit their college campuses occurs as a result of memories formed from relevant events and experiences. In the MCU, this is similar to Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow holding down the fort at the Avengers Campus in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019)².

MCU Heroes and Us

This section highlights various heroes and characters in the MCU in an effort to allow everyone to identify similarities and inspiration. As previously noted, the characters below have been featured in the MCU - rather in a primary or sometimes secondary role - and while careful attempt has been made to include as diverse a lineup of characters as possible, limitations imposed on the content material in turn limited such efforts. The goal of this section is that everyone can find one or more characters in

1. As evidence of the MCU's popularity, the franchise has placed three movies in the top ten best all-time box office sellers (*Avengers: Endgame*, 2019 at number one), and nine movies that have grossed over one billion dollars (Top Lifetime Grosses, 2020).

2. There is even a scene in the movie where Natasha asks Steve Rogers/Captain America if he has returned to do *laundry* as a way to exhibit the importance of *home* or *place*.

which they are similar, and thus can garner important lessons. Feel free to identify and draw inspiration from as many characters as needed.

Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel

Even as Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel has appeared only twice in the MCU - in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) and her own stand-alone movie *Captain Marvel* (2019) - it is apparent that she is a very important piece to the MCU who will shape the future of the universe in numerous ways. *Captain Marvel* (2019) picks up when Vers, not knowing her true identity as Carol Danvers, is training as part of a group charged with protecting the Kree empire. During a recovery mission, she is captured by Skrull soldiers and has her memories mined, which sets off the beginning of Carol remembering her former life. Upon escape, she finds herself on Earth (planet C-53 in her lexicon), where she meets a younger Nick Fury and the two set out to try and protect against the Skrulls. When she finds out the Skrull are not a threat, and rather the Kree are the true invaders, she comes to the realization of her powers and defeat the Kree in space and on Earth, while taking the name of Captain Marvel to honor a former mentor.

While we will undoubtedly get more details about Carol and her friends in subsequent stand-alone and team up movies, the important trait to discuss in this essay is her evolving understanding and control of her powers - both super and human innate. When she tells the Supreme Leader that she has been fighting with one hand tied behind her back, she is signaling that she has discovered her abilities and true self, and will not allow others or herself to hold her back anymore. This is a very important lesson for everyone in that some - or perhaps everyone to a certain extent - may feel that they have been held back by others or oneself. If this is something that speaks to you, it is now the time to accept your full abilities and display them for others to see. Don't go through college and life without using the powers and abilities you possess. Instead, learn from Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel, and strive to find and use your true potential.

Steve Rogers/Captain America

When we meet Steve Rogers/Captain America in the MCU, he is a young man with a dream of serving his country, but kept from doing so for physical and health reasons. He is so determined to serve his country during World War II that he breaks laws by trying to register in different counties

and precincts, only to be rejected each time³. Once he becomes Captain America, Steve longs to serve his country and protect his friends and fellow soldiers. He shows great selflessness by choosing to crash a plane loaded with explosives headed for New York City when he cannot safely land it.

Upon waking up after 70 years in a coma, Steve finds himself in an era that he does not understand being confronted with people he is unfamiliar with. However, the one thing that Steve understands is his duty to his mission and country. After defeating Loki with the Avengers (*The Avengers*, 2012) - where he initially sees cracks in the veneer surrounding the mission and purpose of Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division (S.H.I.E.L.D.) - we next see Steve experience an existential crisis. In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), Steve's fears of S.H.I.E.L.D. are confirmed, he becomes a fugitive of the law alongside Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow and Sam Wilson/Falcon, reunites with his childhood friend Bucky Barnes - who has been turned into the Winter Soldier - and battles Hydra.

When Steve is confronted with choosing to sign and abide by the Sokovia Accords (*Captain America: Civil War*, 2016), we observe Steve truly evolve from someone who views serving and protecting country of utmost importance to someone that sees freedom, friendship, and protecting friends as paramount. Throughout his actions in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), we repeatedly see Steve make the decision to follow his own personal moral compass, even when it runs contrary to pre-prescribed rules and expectations. This culminates when Steve travels back in time to return the Infinity Stones and decides to stay in the alternate timeline with this life-long love Peggy Carter (*Avengers: Endgame*, 2019).

Steve Rogers/Captain America is seen as someone whose story evolves a great deal as he discovers his talent in leading others and his own sense of morality. Throughout his story, Steve makes it well known that friendship and protecting the ones he loves along with those that cannot protect themselves is of utmost importance, which is not unlike another MCU hero Gamora. So, if you identify with Steve, do you see yourself as loyal to friends/family and your set of beliefs? Are you willing to help others in need when maybe it is not the popular thing to do (e.g., stand up for or help someone in their hour of need)? If so, then he may be a source of inspiration.

Shuri

Next, we have Shuri, someone that finds her true power when she is able to create and help others. When we meet Shuri, she is the tech genius younger sibling of T'Challa in *Black Panther* (2018). Appearing in three movies, we have yet to see the complete growth and arc of Shuri, but her place in the MCU is cemented by her willingness to help her brother thanks to her unsurpassed technological skills, all while having to deal with the loss of her father.

Shuri is also responsible for helping other heroes in their time of need. After all, she is the one who is placed in charge of caring for Bucky Barnes/Winter Soldier when he is transported to Wakanda during his self-imposed frozen isolation. Then, when he is needed to help defend against Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), Shuri is presumably the one who designs his new bionic arm. Additionally, Shuri is left with the responsibility of taking the Mind Stone out of Vision⁴. In the subsequent battle scene, before the outlanders enter her lab, we get a glimpse of Shuri making one final gesture on her display screen, which perhaps signals her role in future projects such as the Disney+ series *WandaVision* (2021).

Throughout Shuri's arc and time in the MCU, she has repeatedly been established as an invaluable member of the Avengers. From her first appearance in *Black Panther* (2018) to her standing as one of the strong female heroes of the MCU in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), it is undeniable that Shuri is extremely important to the present and future of the shared universe. We will see more of Shuri in *Black Panther 2* (expected 2022) and other projects. For example, it has long been rumored that she would take the mantle of Black Panther in the second installment - following a story line from the comics - even before the tragic loss of Chadwick Boseman. If you are someone who feels that your skills and expertise set you apart, you may identify with Shuri.

Finally, and most importantly, the popularity of the movie *Black Panther* (2018) is only surpassed by its importance and meaning in our society for people of color and underrepresented groups. Not only is Shuri a great character in the MCU, she signals the potential for underrepresented people, especially young women of color, to serve as true experts and inspirations in society. At a time when the United States has elected its first woman, and woman of color to the Vice Presidency, the lessons and inspiration from projects like the MCU is needed to help mold future generations of

3. When he meets Dr. Abraham Erskine, he states "I just don't like bullies" (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, 2011), before finally being given the opportunity to serve as a member of the Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR).

4. While also delivering a little jab at the work of Bruce Banner/Hulk and Tony Stark/Iron Man.

leaders.

T'Challa/Black Panther

Standing alongside Shuri and his mother at the end of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) is King T'Challa/Black Panther. First seen in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), T'Challa becomes king of Wakanda when his father T'Chaka is killed while attending the signing of the Sokovia Accords. He initially tries to avenge the death of his father by tracking down Bucky Barnes/Winter Soldier, then the real culprit and villain Baron Zemo. However, when given his chance for retribution, T'Challa decides not to kill Zemo, but rather let him face authorities.

We next pick up T'Challa's arc in the stand-alone movie *Black Panther* (2018), when he is officially taking the throne of Wakanda. Throughout the movie, we see T'Challa grow into his role as king and protector of Wakanda, and come to terms with the sins and of his father and subsequent fallout⁵. After having been defeated by Eric Killmonger (born N'Jadaka), T'Challa has to rely on a rival tribe and three strong women in his life (e.g., his mother Ramonda, ex-girlfriend Nakia, and sister Shuri). Upon returning to battle Killmonger for the throne, he relies on more strong female characters, the Dora Milaje and Okoye to reclaim the throne and stop the spread of Wakandan weapons around the world. After reclaiming the throne, T'Challa is inspired to open an outreach center in the United States and announce Wakanda's willingness to help around the world.

In *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), T'Challa plays a very important role in protecting the galaxy from Thanos⁶. Throughout his time on screen, T'Challa/Black Panther let his presence be known as someone who accepts ultimate responsibility for protecting his county and fellow citizens, while also providing the important lesson of relying on strong female characters for help. If you are someone that believes strongly in protecting friends and loved ones, then you may find similarities with T'Challa/Black Panther.

Even as T'Challa appeared in only four movies, his importance in the MCU is unquestionable. While the tragic passing of Chadwick Boseman cuts short his storyline in the MCU, the importance of the character and movie cannot be overstated. *Black Panther* (2018) was the first time that a large segment of underrepresented people saw a superhero on the big screen that resembled them. This feat is extremely important as our

society seeks to include more diverse voices, people, and ideas. This is one reason why the legacy of T'Challa/Black Panther, and Chadwick Boseman, will live on forever.

Thor

Next, we have Thor Odinson, the God of Thunder. When we first see Thor, he is set to take over rule of Asgard (*Thor*, 2011) as a vane and hard-headed person. As a matter of fact, his vanity and unwillingness to listen and problem solve with others in a responsible way by battling the Frost Giants on Jotunheim, is what leads to him being banished to Midgard (i.e., Earth) without his powers or hammer Mjolnir. Only after Thor learns the importance of listening and empathy – he sacrifices himself to save his friends – is he able to use Mjolnir and his power again.

Throughout his story arc, Thor learns what true responsibility, leadership, and friendship mean, like when he has to defend Asgard from Malekith and Jane Foster from the Aether/Reality Stone, all while coping with the loss of his mother (*Thor: The Dark World*, 2013). Later, when he has been stranded on the planet Sakaar, Thor teams up with Valkyrie, Hulk, and Loki (sort of) to find a way back to save the people of Asgard and settle a new homeland on Earth in modern-day Norway (*Thor: Ragnarok*, 2017).

His travels and struggles in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) highlight the human nature in Thor. After, as some have argued (e.g. Sean Gerber from MCU Fanshow), his vanity strikes again and he does not properly defeat Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018)⁷. Thor seemingly learns his lesson when he finishes off Thanos early in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). However, he falls into a depression – seemingly from the guilt of not being able to stop Thanos' snap, and his, as some would say, over-reaction to slaying Thanos at the beginning of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) – thus revealing one of his original problems from his first adventure in the MCU. His need for friendship is also highlighted in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), as his fellow Avengers help him throughout his guilt realize that he can still help. Remember, when prompted by Rocket Raccoon (albeit in an ornery way) and his mother, Thor realizes he is still worthy of Mjolnir despite his depression, and can help defeat a time-traveling Thanos to bring back those lost in the snap. When we leave Thor, he has seemingly accepted his fate to strike out on his own adventure of self-discovery rather

than serve as King of New Asgard—an honor and responsibility he passes to Valkyrie.

Thor's story arc, while couched in humor and various mis-adventures, is one of the more striking when one considers applicable lessons. He begins as a vain individual who is unwilling to listen to the advice of others. Along the way, he learns humility, what friendship and companionship mean, and while he does slip up and reveal his vanity again in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), he learns to trust others and do what he believes is best for friends, loved ones, and humanity. Additionally, his mistake in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) reveals that while we may strive to improve and help others, we do still make mistakes.

Thor's depression in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) – while portrayed in a somewhat comic relief fashion – also provides an important lesson. Even as we may feel sad and depressed at times – or for a prolonged period of time – we still have value and can help others and ourselves. Remember the excitement Thor displays when he is reunited with Mjolnir and realizes he is still worthy? Thor's story offers several important lessons, and his character offers many with a path toward self-improvement and service to others.

Loki

On the flip side of the Asgardian coin, we are presented with Loki, the God of Mischief. And while it can be argued – and has been many times – whether he is a hero or villain, Loki illustrates that everyone has the capacity to do right when they are compelled to do so while also behaving out of pettiness or jealousy at times. It is apparent from the first time we see Loki that he is in a constant struggle for the admiration of his father and competition with his brother, something most, if not all siblings can identify with. While most (or no one) tries to (nor should) capture Manhattan and take over the world (*The Avengers*, 2012), they can make sense of Loki's sometimes childish behavior when looked at through the lenses of familial ties and sibling rivalry. After all, rivalry is something that is established and grows over time when faced with competition, and can lead people to celebrate others failures (Cikara, Botvinnik, & Fiske, 2012; Havard, 2014; Havard, Gray, Gould, Sharp, & Schaffer, 2013; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). The narrative of family ties and relationships will undoubtedly be told through the future feature film *Fantastic Four* (TBA).

Most people can also identify with Loki's

5. His father leaving a young Eric Killmonger behind in America, and Wakanda's role in modern society.

6. First, the battle of Wakanda is the setting for *the snap*, and upon the Avengers reversing the snap in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), T'Challa is the first to walk through the portal to fight with Captain America, flanked by Shuri and Okoye, and followed by Wakandan warriors.

7. Thor goes for the body rather than the head of Thanos because he wants to see the fruits of his labor and have Thanos know he was responsible for his demise.

seemingly selfless behavior in the final battle of *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) after his mother has been killed. Loki feels guilt for playing a role in the tragic events, and thus feels compelled to avenge (maybe he is an Avenger after all) his mother's fate and help defeat Malekith. Even his events at the end of the movie - altering himself to become an illusion of Odon so that he may rule Asgard - is something that people can learn from. Other than possibly the truly selfless among us, most people can understand doing good and bad things as a means to an end.

Throughout *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), we see Loki using his cunning to win favor with the Sakaar Grandmaster - even trying to trick Thor once again for his own personal benefit. It takes Thor turning the tables on Loki, and Meek finding him, to set Loki on a path meant to help the people of Asgard. We even see his self-imposed triumphant return to Asgard when he lands, announcing his role as the true savior to his subjects. This again is something most people can understand, as personal motives often combine - and sometimes override - the motive to help others. Rather than those behaviors making someone a bad person, it highlights the juxtaposition of human nature - balancing selfish with selfless behavior at times. This is perhaps one reason why Loki is such a popular character in the MCU. He represents the struggle that many experience from time-to-time. Similar things can be said of Yondu and Nebula through their narratives in the MCU (e.g., both - *Guardians of the Galaxy*, 2014 and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, 2017; Nebula - *Avengers: Infinity War*, 2018, *Avengers: Endgame*, 2019).

When we leave Loki in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2019), he has made the ultimate sacrifice, and thus his (current) story arc seems to show him going from good to bad. Instead, Loki is a true representation of the human condition as he balances good and bad, and struggles with selfish, vain, and childish behavior while at times trying to help others. However, throughout Loki's arc, when forced with the decision to help others, he more times than not makes the appropriate and socially acceptable decision - possibly a dichotomy that will be further explored in the Disney+ series *Loki* (expected 2021). So, perhaps you identify with Loki because you feel your actions do not always convey your intended message. Everyone makes mistakes and does things that hurt others, often for selfish reasons. However, when push comes to shove, someone like Loki makes the correct decision, which is not unlike many of us.

Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow

Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow is introduced to the MCU in *Iron Man 2* (2010), as an apparent consultant for Stark Industries. After getting small glimpses of her abilities⁸, we learn her true identity as a S.H.I.E.L.D. special agent sent to monitor, protect, and assist Tony Stark/Iron Man, and her full range of skills as the lethal Black Widow. In *The Avengers* (2012), Natasha is sent to retrieve Bruce Banner/Hulk, with whom she forms a strong bond, and is the one able to trick Loki into sharing part of his plans of attack. She also shows compassion by saving Clint Barton/Hawkeye from Loki's mind control, and leadership by closing the portal over Stark Tower to end the Chitauri invasion.

In every story Natasha appears, she plays a vital role in the success of the Avengers. In *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014), she helps Steve Rogers stay under S.H.I.E.L.D.'s radar so they - joined by Sam Wilson/Falcon - can thwart Hydra's attempt to take over the world. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), we see her bond with Bruce Banner grow as she asserts herself as the one Avenger who can calm him when he becomes the Hulk⁹.

Aside from her skills in espionage and battle, Natasha also serves as the emotional leader of the Avengers. For example, in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), we see her ability to relate and sympathize with others - first T'Challa/Black Panther at the passing of his father and then Steve Rogers/Captain America when Peggy Carter passes away. She also shows support for her teammates during *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) by joining Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch and Okoye in battle to defeat Proxima Midnight. We see her true leadership, and others acknowledging as much, in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) when she acts as monitor of galactic events and directs other Avengers on missions following the snap. Additionally, she shows her leadership by making the ultimate sacrifice on Vormir in order to retrieve the Soul Stone - much to the chagrin and sorrow of Clint Barton/Hawkeye and her fellow teammates.

Introduced as a strong female supporting character, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow quickly became a fan-favorite as her story arc progressed, thereby paving the way for other female characters and title films such as *Captain Marvel* (2019). In that, she represents the individuals that are sometimes overlooked until they no longer can be. Her leadership and compassion, combined with her expertise in being a spy and warrior, make

her character one that many people, and women in particular, can aspire to. She was introduced in the background, but through determination and persistence, found her way into a leadership role. Additionally, she was the first female superhero to be included in the MCU (Pepper Potts was not revealed as Rescue until *Avengers: Endgame*, 2019), making her character and placement in the MCU very important for women and other people used to seeing almost exclusively caucasian men in such roles. It will be exciting to see her story continue in *Black Widow* (expected 2021), and she is a testament to anyone that feels their skills and capabilities have been overlooked at any time.

Tony Stark/Iron Man

When we meet Tony Stark in *Iron Man* (2008), he is an arrogant and selfish individual. By design, he is not someone that is easy to like. He primarily looks out for himself and his company's profits - made from manufacturing and selling weapons used for war - and engages in a very self-serving lifestyle. When Tony is kidnapped by a terrorist cell and imprisoned in Afghanistan, he meets Dr. Ho Yinsen and together they produce a working suit of armor in order to escape their captors. When Tony finds his escape but Yinsen cannot, we see the first transformation in his outlook on his life and how he has made his fortune. Upon his escape, he sees weapons made by his company and what they are capable of, which causes Tony to divest from all military weapons manufacturing and begin to focus on renewable energy instead.

After Tony is forced to battle his business partner in order to protect his loved ones and others, his iconic line, "I am Iron Man" (*Iron Man*, 2008), signifies his willingness to take on the responsibilities of serving others. Throughout his story arc, we see Tony forced to navigate his mortality (*Iron Man 2*, 2010) and depression (*Iron Man 3*, 2013), but he continually makes moves to protect his friends, loved ones, and others (*The Avengers*, 2012). All through his brash and egotistical behavior, we are able to see another aspect of his personality in which he deeply cares about others - even taking on a mentor role in *Iron Man 3* (2013), and *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), and posthumously in *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019). In the end, Tony sacrifices himself to save others while delivering his iconic line once again (*Avengers: Endgame*, 2019).

Tony's story arc is one of redemption and making adjustments in order to keep those around him safe. Throughout his relationship

8. She defeats Happy Hogan in a training match without any trouble.

9. A video recording of her also calms Bruce after two years of being Gladiator Hulk in *Thor: Ragnarok*, 2017.

with Pepper Potts/Rescue, Tony switches between acting selfishly and responsibly. Along from being a technological genius, like Bruce Banner/Hulk and Shuri, Tony shows fortitude in his journey. While trying to keep the Avengers together by signing the Sokovia Accords, Tony makes decisions he believes will protect others (*Captain America: Civil War*, 2016). Tony also shows a lot of folly, with many of his best-intentioned ideas and plans rubbing others the wrong way. From building Ultron (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015), to imprisoning Wanda Maximoff/Scarlett Witch (*Captain America: Civil War*, 2016), not all of Tony's decisions are taken kindly by his teammates and loved ones.

Tony is also a story of someone trying to do right, and sometimes hurting loved ones along the way-when he travels to space in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), Pepper Potts is left not knowing of his whereabouts or his safety. So, much like Loki, Tony's story is one that resonates with fans. Having to deal with personal struggles while trying to protect others is something that many people can relate to - the same may be said about Rocket Raccoon. The inappropriate behavior aside nor condoned, Tony shows us a human who makes the transition from selfish to selfless behavior, much the same as Dr. Stephen Strange (*Doctor Strange*, 2016). For anyone that struggles with doing right by others and the personal feelings of selfish and self-righteousness, Tony Stark/Iron Man is a character in which they may relate.

Nick Fury

We save Nick Fury for the last character discussion intentionally. Even though he has not been featured in his own feature movie - he will be star in a Disney+ project *Secret Invasion* (TBA) - Nick Fury plays an invaluable role in the MCU. From the first time we see Nick Fury appear in the end-credit scene in *Iron Man* (2008) to discuss *The Avenger Initiative*, it became apparent that he was instrumental to the success of the MCU, both through his leadership of S.H.I.E.L.D. and hard-nosed determination to protect others - even if he has to use unauthorized means at times.

His guidance in sending Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow to help and monitor Tony Stark in *Iron Man 2* (2010) asserts his leadership over the Avengers team. In *The Avengers* (2012), Nick Fury is responsible for bringing together, manipulating, and manufacturing inspiration to the Avengers leading up to the battle with Loki in Manhattan. His clandestine plans being uncovered in *Captain America: The Winter*

Soldier (2013), Nick Fury's motives are once again questioned among the superheroes under his leadership. However, he shows his resolve when, before he is taken in the snap, he sends a crypted message to Captain Marvel in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). Instrumental in helping Carol Danvers in *Captain Marvel* (2019), and after being brought back from the snap (*Avengers: Endgame*, 2019), Fury uses whatever means necessary in *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019) to coerce Peter Parker to battle the Elementals and Mysterio - sort of¹⁰.

Nick Fury represents a strategically-minded leader who is willing to stick to his vision regardless of popularity. Often choosing to work behind the scenes rather than out in public, he uses his cunning wit and determination to take charge of positions and carry out missions. He is also someone that possesses the foresight to predict and plan for events well in advance, while also relying on the strong female character Maria Hill. Anyone who believes they possess skills in strategy and prediction, along with strong leadership, could look to Nick Fury for inspiration.

A Note on Inclusion

As previously stated, even with the recent emphasis on underrepresented characters receiving feature films (e.g., *Black Panther*, 2018; *Captain Marvel*, 2019), the MCU to this point has relied heavily on Caucasian male leads to tell the stories in the shared universe. As such, even as much care was taken in this essay to include as diverse array of characters as possible, the content material did not allow as much diversity as desired. It is worth noting that confirmed and rumored upcoming projects will introduce a more diverse set of heroes and characters into the MCU - both in terms of racial and ethnic makeup (e.g., *Eternals*, expected 2021; *Shang Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, expected 2021; *Ms. Marvel*, expected 2021; *Blade*, TBA; *She Hulk*, TBA; *Iron Heart*, TBA; *Miles Morales*) and abilities (e.g., *Moon Knight*, TBA - Marc Spector/Moon Knight struggles with multiple personality disorder).

It is also worth noting that the MCU itself is an evolving universe, and efforts are continuous in including more diversity in both storytelling and characters in order to attract a wide range of viewers and fans. The efforts made by the MCU are admirable, and the popularity of its movies and projects provides an emphasis for some to watch stories involving diverse characters that may not have otherwise chosen to do so. Perhaps in the future we will see more developed

roles for characters like Luis in *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* (TBA), Valkyrie in *Thor: Love and Thunder* (expected 2022), Mary Jane in *Spider-Man 3* (expected 2021), and Maria and/or Monica Rambeau in *Captain Marvel 2* (expected 2022) - Monica Rambeau, Maria's daughter, is slated to appear in the Disney+ series *WandaVision* (2021). As more projects are developed and characters introduced, the MCU will become more inclusive to an even greater number of fans. In the time being, however, it is the hope that the effort made in this essay will engage as many readers as possible from diverse backgrounds and makeup.

A Note on Story Arc

This essay focused on the application of the MCU in helping students find *fit* within their institutions and take ownership of their educational experience. To do so, we discussed the similarities between college and the Avengers headquarters, comparison, inspiration, and lessons from various MCU characters, and the need for increased and continued inclusion. To conclude, we will briefly discuss the story arc and what it means to all of us.

A story arc is the overall narrative told about a character over the various movies and projects in which they are involved. A great example of using a story arc to tell a character's narrative lies with Bruce Banner/Hulk. Due to contract stipulations - the character's distribution rights for stand-alone movies belong to Comcast/Universal, which is why *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) is his only title role within the MCU - his story has been told through projects in which he appears with other Avengers (Havard, 2020). For instance, his story arc of accepting the importance of Hulk is told through *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). The same - minus the contract stipulations - can be said about War Machine, whose inspiring story is told through ten MCU projects. We will learn more about Colonel James Rhodes/War Machine in the Disney+ series *Armor Wars* (TBA).

Just as characters in the MCU follow a story arc, so too does everyone reading - and writing - this narrative. Further, just as each character's story arc in the MCU has evolved, the same can be said about each of us. For characters like Doctor Strange, we are just seeing the beginning of their arc - *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* is expected in 2022. For others, like the Guardians of the Galaxy, we are currently approaching their full development - if you

10. An end-credit scene revealed he was taking a vacation while Talos tried to handle his responsibilities.

believe rumors that *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* (expected 2023) will be the last project for the current team. And, if you see yourself as a supporting character in the MCU like Sam Wilson/Falcon, Bucky Barnes/Winter Soldier, Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch, Vision, or Clint Barton/Hawkeye, rest assured that we will soon learn more about their characters and story arcs in various Disney+ series (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, expected 2021; *WandaVision*, 2021; *Hawkeye*, expected 2021).

An individual's story arc is one that changes and alters as they encounter relevant events. At each turn - or fork in the road, if you prefer the metaphor - an individual is in charge of their decisions and story narrative, although it may not feel that way all the time. This is where a popular refrain *it's not what is handed to you, but how you handle it* (paraphrased) comes into play. Each of us has the ability to take control of our story arc and make the most of our situations and environments - whether in school, college, work, or life. It is up to us to shape the present and future that we want for ourselves - and to do our best to react to fortunate and unfortunate situations for our overall benefit, health, and safety. The characters and situations discussed in this narrative each chose a destiny or path - or at least their writers did - and that is something we all can apply to our lives. Choose what you want, and strive to reach that goal while trying to improve as a person each and every day. Finally, hopefully reading about popular MCU characters and their personalities can help you learn more about yourself and find *fit* in your current environment, whether you identify with one or several characters. Remember, with great power comes great responsibility. Now go forth and break some eggs.

Thank you for coming along on the adventure with me,

Cody T. Havard, Ph.D.
The University of Memphis

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