



My Messina Class!

"We wore the bracelets or tied our bracelets from the zippers on our bags, the sound of clinking plastic beads reminding us of our support system on campus."



Our Messina trip to the Christmas lights.

Literally What is Messina? *By Talia Banafato*

College may currently feel as though you're descending into an environment devoid of all familiarity. If these anxieties consume you, let me assure you—you are correct. Now. If you are upset with me for being honest with you, I would just assume that you are looking at the words "new," "unfamiliar," "change," or all those other words your teachers and parents have been using in the wrong way. Yes, dumb as it sounds to say, but all those worries that keep you up at night, wondering what could go wrong, simultaneously present opportunities for everything to go right! Although no one can predict all the specific opportunities you will be presented with when you get to college, I do know Messina will be one of them for sure.

But How Does it Work?

"Messina," a word you have probably never heard before serving as the name of a program you won't find anywhere else. At Loyola, all first-years get placed in a Messina class with a small group of other first-year students, your Messina academic advisor, your faculty mentor, and a member of the Evergreen program on campus. Evergreens are upper-class students who will be a big part of your welcome squad and freshmen orientation week. Your Messina's Evergreen will be there for you throughout your first year, assisting you with everything from directions to classes to recommendations of things to do off campus to advice on housing. But don't worry, they won't be the only person to answer all your questions. You will have two staff members, your advisor and mentor, who will also be at your disposal. Messina mentors assist with Messina events and are another staff connection you get to make. Your academic advisor helps with planning your schedule, declaring your major, and answering all your academic inquiries. They also teach a connected class that contains only your Messina group.

Your Messina advisor is also given money to take your group out on some sort of excursion during the semester. My group got to choose where we went out to dinner (on Loyola's card, I might add) and we then walked to see the Christmas light displays on one of the neighborhood streets in Baltimore. My advisors often bring snacks or fun activities that somewhat force you (in a natural sort of way, something the college experience is so good at) into conversation. Even the most begrudging first-year students will never turn down free food. At the end of the first semester, my Messina did a groupwide Yankee swap that ended with each of us being gifted an ornament from our professor and a beaded bracelet from one of the other students. We wore the bracelets or tied our bracelets from the zippers on our bags, the sound of clinking plastic beads reminding us of our support system on campus.

For this reason, I know that my Messina group will remain in touch in more ways than just the occasional wave in passing on campus, and it seems like I am not the only one who has had this experience. Kylie Maddalena is a current senior in the class of 2025 who reflects on the impact that Messina has had on her college experience: "Messina still helps me today in so many ways. I still have great relationships with both my Messina professors...Dr. Leary helped me to get my first internship and wrote my letter of recommendation to get into law school." My advisor has also effectively gotten all of us involved in volunteering at a local elementary school's after-hours program, a tradition that many of us plan to continue well beyond our first year here. Both experiences describe perfect examples of students allowing Messina to reach its full potential by engagement and allowing the program to extend opportunities

even beyond the Loyola campus. Through internships and service, the program reaches the greater Baltimore community.

Not only did a current student share how they have seen Messina groups thrive throughout their time in college, Andrea Hoffman, an administrator and Messina mentor at Loyola, made a similar statement when asked about Messina from her perspective: "I've seen relationships form within the class and people continue to stay friends throughout their time at Loyola. It can really help people find their community that may be struggling with the social adjustment to college." Their words comforted me in the fact that although Messina is a class dedicated to first-years, its impact extends much further than that.

Impacts Though?

However, the greatest impact Messina has had for me has not come in the form of campus directions or information from faculty. It has come from the cultivation of community among my peers. Being in a college classroom in which you actually know the names of everyone else in the room is very rare. The class sizes at Loyola are minuscule when compared to other universities, but that by no means is equivalent to actually knowing the person sitting in the desk right next to you. But in a Messina classroom not only do you know the names of the people, but you also share an experience with them. At the beginning, Messina started me off with a squad of people to say hi to while walking on campus. And to be honest, when the only people I recognized were based off their Instagram profile pictures, that felt pretty nice! Gradually, though, my Messina became much more than that to me, and I now feel a true sense of community within that group. What I am trying to tell you is that Messina presents you a plethora of opportunities for forming connections with people who you may have never met otherwise, so do everything you can to make the most of it!

But hey, don't just take my word for it, for all you know I could be the complete and polar opposite of you. However maybe Mia Cucuzzella, another freshman year at Loyola, is a better fit for you. When asked about her experiences with Messina as a first-year student she said, "it was so helpful to come into school with not only a group of friends but also with the guidance of an older Loyola student." She went on to note the impact of weekly check-ins with her advisor that have helped her stay on track academically throughout her stressful first semester of college, "Most other students in my Messina are business majors too, so we were able to get through our first accounting class together!" And since my argument expresses how amazingly helpful Messina is to *all* students, let's hear from the person who lives the furthest distance from the Loyola Maryland campus I have ever come across. Ava Blizzard is an international student from Brisbane Australia; she is a sophomore, and when asked to share her Messina experience, she said, "I found Messina to be really helpful for me when I first came to America because it created a group at Loyola where I could meet new people. Having a group like that made the transition to a new country easier. The friends I made in that class I am still friends with today!" Each person I talked to expressed in their own way how Messina has allowed them to grow at Loyola. Messina starts us off with the opportunity for success.

In reality, college is just a continuous flow of opportunities you get to make decisions about. But not every place sets you up with a smaller support system right off the bat. The Messina program at Loyola acknowledges that everyone needs to feel like they are part of a community that supports them. So yet again, for probably the millionth time in recent history, you get to make a decision that could affect your life for the next four years; however, I hope this one is pretty straightforward. Being open and allowing yourself to connect with Messina, and the people it brings close to you, transforms the program into a tool that only works to benefit you.



My Messina class with the matching group bracelets!

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My lovely Messina class during our first week on campus at orientation.