



Finding a Community at Loyola

By Ethan Srivatjanapong

Before coming to Loyola, I was filled with anxiety. I worried that I might not fit in or find a group of people to call my friends. The root of my anxiety came from a piece of advice which really stuck with me: you need to find a home in Loyola. *But how?* The idea of calling another place my home seemed crazy.

To be honest, in the past two months I have been here, I am not ready to call Loyola my home just yet, which is normal. It takes time to adjust to a call a new place home. Many incoming freshmen have different perspectives before coming

to college. For some, the experience seems fun or exciting. However, for many, college is a scary environment. It's the thought of immediately being thrown into a place with no connections or guidance. These were definitely feelings I had before coming here. However, you should acknowledge the opportunities Loyola provides for first-years. Loyola provides lots of ways you can connect with the community or get accustomed to your environment. One major opportunity available at Loyola to help you integrate in the community are [pre-fall programs](#), which is a great decision I chose to take.

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I can vividly remember the summer months before I needed to come to Loyola. I was relaxing without a care in the world until my mom suddenly barged into my room and told me about the pre-fall programs that Loyola was offering. Now, I'm not going to deny that I was interested in the opportunity. I have always had issues making new connections at a new school. A pre-fall program sounded like a head start for college. Why wouldn't I take this opportunity? However, in my mind, I was faced with two drawbacks: time and fear. I learned that to participate in these pre-fall programs, I would have to leave my home one week early to go to Loyola. While the idea of having my summer break cut a little was depressing, I got over it pretty quickly. I saw it as a good way to get used to the environment before everybody else swarmed the University. The real challenge came from my fear. To give you some context, I tend to overthink a lot. So, when I started thinking about whether or not I should attend a program, I started asking myself a bazillion questions. *What if this program is not for me? What if I don't fit in? What if I find out college isn't for me?* My thoughts began to plague my head until I decided to stop thinking. In an instant, I signed up for the [MAP program](#) before another thought could pop into my head. It was the best decision I have made.

The moment had arrived. And feelings of excitement and fear simultaneously took control. I remember sitting through the introductory ceremony with my parents and a friend of mine from high school. I had recently found out that we were both a part of the program which brought me some relief. But the anxiety remained. The constant questions remained. I dreaded the inevitable time when my parents would leave me, stranded in uncharted territory. When that moment did come, I simply decided to turn off my brain and open myself up. Doing so allowed me to see another side of myself I had never seen before. I was becoming more social and therefore opening the doors of possibility, the doors of friendship. It felt good to make two friends off the bat, who I still am good friends with today. I liked this feeling, and I itched for more. Throughout the program, I took most of the opportunities to make connections (saying I took every opportunity would be unrealistic). I would force myself to approach people on bus rides, during meals, or just during activities. Every friend I made took me one step closer to becoming comfortable with my current environment. Although I wasn't able to get to know everybody in the program, like I wanted, I still finished the program with many friends before the first week of the semester began.



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Now, imagine starting at Loyola as a freshman without having taken this program. The idea of rushing to make friends right away when school starts seems unappealing to me. I'm so glad that I was able to have multiple friendships and a community at my disposal before school even started. Now, I'm not saying that I didn't make any friends when the semester started. If anything, the MAP program helped me to be more open and social than I ever was before. I had loosened up and become more used to making connections. Not only that but I was able to familiarize myself with the environment of college before everybody else. I had no extra stress piled on my back when classes started. I was introduced to the [Center for Intercultural Engagement](#), which served as a hub for those who participated in the MAP program.

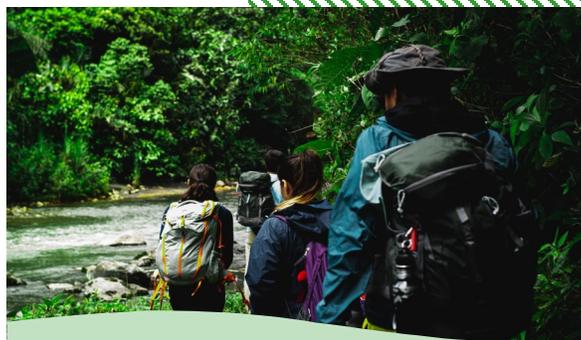
With that in mind, I believe the benefits of a pre-fall program will help you, as you find a community at Loyola. This is because I found it extremely helpful for combating common issues that many freshmen develop: loneliness and homesickness. These issues are no joke. So far during my time here at Loyola, I have experienced both of these frequently.

According to a survey conducted on about 1,100 college students, “nearly two-thirds (64.7 percent) of college students report they feel lonely, the majority (51.7 percent) of college students are concerned about their friends' mental health, and three in 10 (28.8 percent) college students report severe psychological distress” ([Ascione](#)). Many students, like me, would have trouble connecting with over thousands of strangers at Loyola after being thrown into a new environment. Another example is from a survey conducted by the college data website where “twenty-eight percent of students surveyed said they felt most unprepared for the new social scene at college” (Ascione). While college can be an overwhelming experience, adjusting to a new environment is easier when you have already made friends and found a community.



A picture of the CIE (Center for Intercultural engagement)

The other consistent issue is homesickness. While not as common as loneliness, it still has a great impact on many freshmen, including myself. Even though I participated in a pre-fall program, I still remember feeling homesick during the first few weeks of the semester. It's common for some freshmen to feel this way: "69% of first year college students experience homesickness" as they "transition to living away from home for the first time" ([Homesickness](#)). I can relate to feeling it occasionally, but I am almost certain that I would feel homesick much more often if I didn't have a community or friends to rely on because of the MAP program. You also don't have to take the MAP program if it doesn't interest you. Loyola offers two other pre-fall programs: the [F.I.R.S.T. program](#) and the [outdoor adventures program](#). Therefore, you are not limited by your options.



Another great pre-fall program is the outdoor adventures program, which includes hiking and kayaking.

Don't just take my word for it. I recently interviewed some of my freshman friends who participated in MAP about the impact it had during their first weeks of college. One particular response that encapsulates the benefits of the MAP program was from an interview with one of my friends, who said that joining the MAP program "gave me a social head start so before classes started, I already had plenty of friends." It's also worth noting that most of the friendships made throughout this program really persist as we will still "wave to all of them and say hi and catch up which has definitely given me a sense of belonging here at Loyola" (Mendez-Saxer). This just goes to show that you can make long-lasting friendships in these programs before college even begins. Another one of my friends had similar thoughts about how the MAP program gave him a sense of belonging here at Loyola. "I had friends...I got to know a lot of people, I got to experience a lot of things with those people, share memories and really develop a kind of community for myself because the program gave me enough space and time to do so even before the rush of classes" (Williams). I also interviewed my roommate who was in the program and he said that he joined the program because he's "not the best at making friends in the beginning" which is something I can relate to completely (Elmore). In addition to freshmen, I conducted an interview with one of the MAP navigators or student leaders in the program. She explained that she was able to "find her community" and "comfortability" through the MAP program. In addition to her experience, she is also able to see freshmen "getting more comfortable with each other and their surroundings" and show "growth" during her role as a navigator (Jones). All and all, being able to establish this strong sense of community before the semester begins will help to reduce feelings of loneliness or homesickness as you will have a group of friends looking out for you.

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An extension of the CIE, located on the 3rd floor of the Student Center

Now I am not saying that there aren't any drawbacks to pre-fall programs like MAP. But I do believe that the benefits they bring completely outweigh the costs. Some of the drawbacks are aspects that I mentioned earlier such as issues with time or reluctance. These issues can be overcome easily if you truly want to participate in the program and are looking to get the most out of it. One literal cost of attending a pre-fall program may be harder to deal with and that is the actual price of the program itself. The cost of Loyola's pre-fall programs ranges from 100 to 300 dollars, which may be considered too expensive for some families. In my case, the MAP program cost 100 dollars and while it does sound like a lot of money, I believe it was worth every penny.

Should you join a pre-fall program like MAP before attending Loyola? Of course you should! If you can move past the financial commitment, Loyola's pre-fall programs are a great way to get a head start on your college experience. You are guaranteed to make new friends or connections and that comes from someone who generally has a tough time making new friends. Having a community that already supports you before you enter the busy and stressful moments of college is game-changing and will certainly help you cope with problems you may encounter such as loneliness or homesickness. With that I will leave you with one piece of advice: just apply.

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