



Where You Belong: The Power of Messina at Loyola By Hayden Smith

Finding Your Place on Campus

When students first arrive at Loyola University Maryland, one question lingers in the back of their minds: *Where do I belong?* College represents a new beginning filled with excitement, but it also comes with uncertainty, pressure, and the challenge of starting over in a completely new environment. That is exactly how I felt. However, Loyola's Messina program transforms that uncertainty into connection, offering students a community that helps guide them through their first year.

More Than a First-Year Program

Messina is more than a typical first-year seminar. Messina places you into a small group who takes two connected courses throughout the year, encouraging both academic and personal growth. While the structure of shared classes is important, what truly sets Messina apart is the way it creates relationships early on. Instead of navigating college alone, I was immediately placed into a support system where I could build connections with my new classmates, professors, and my Evergreen, Bri.

Connections That Shape the First Year

For many students, Messina becomes their first real sense of community on campus. Anna ('29), my friend and a first-year education major, explained how the program helped her form meaningful connections: "Being a part of Messina has really helped me because we're all education majors, we're all doing field experience together, and we are getting to know the campus, and having a bond with these people is so rewarding." She added that "it was nice to become friends with people in the same major as me," highlighting how Messina creates both academic and social support systems at the same time. Similarly, Lisette ('29), my roommate who is an incoming Evergreen and a part of the honors program, described how her honors Messina experience connected her with students across different majors, saying it was "cool to see what other classes people are taking and get to know people beyond my major." These shared experiences made it easier for me to form friendships because I was already connected through common goals and interests.



Even students who initially do not understand the program come to appreciate its value. Anna ('29) admitted, "I did not understand what Messina was, and even when I first came here, I still had no idea what it was." This uncertainty is something many incoming students experience. However, she explained that the Welcome Weekend Messina sessions "really just helped me learn," reflecting a broader truth: even when you don't fully understand Messina at first, it often becomes one of the most important parts of your transition from high school to your first year of college.

Guidance From Those Who've Been There

Messina is also shaped by the upperclass students who guide first-year students and mentors. Student leaders, or Evergreens, play a crucial role in helping us, not only by answering questions but also by creating a welcoming and supportive environment. Gabb, my Messina mentor, described her approach as "just getting to know them (students) on a personal level and learning where students come from," emphasizing connection as the foundation of her role. Bri ('27), my Evergreen, who is a junior at Loyola, similarly described her role as "a super rewarding experience... because I am able to know that I can help first-years acclimate to a new environment and adapt and be part of the journey." Lisette ('29) shared a related motivation, explaining, "I applied to be an Evergreen because I love watching the growth and change in people... from clueless freshmen to learning and finding your place of belonging here at Loyola." Altogether, their perspectives show how Messina is built on mutual support, where student leaders give back by helping students like you and me navigate the same challenges they once faced.



A key part of this support is simply being there for students. As Gabb (Messina Mentor) explained, mentors help by "just listening non-judgmentally... and having an open-door policy if anyone wants to come and talk." This kind of guidance makes it easier for students to adjust, knowing they have someone approachable who understands what they are going through. A key part of this growth is also learning to step outside of your comfort zone. College is often the first time students are fully responsible for their own social and academic choices, which can be intimidating. As Bri ('27) explained, "You won't ever find your place here unless you put yourself in situations that make you uncomfortable to become more comfortable." Messina provides a structured environment where students can take those risks while still feeling supported by a consistent group.

Support within Messina goes beyond academic or social events. It focuses on the "whole person," recognizing that students are not just learners but are adjusting emotionally, socially, and mentally to a new phase of life. Lisette ('29) described this idea as "looking at the little details of a person and understanding them completely... getting to know them beyond the surface." This approach creates stronger, more meaningful connections and allows us students to feel seen and supported during a time of major change.



Students also benefit from having an Evergreen as a consistent resource throughout the year. Anna ('29) described her experience by saying, "My evergreen is amazing, and she helps if you have any questions about core class selections, rooming situations, or just advice in general about how to get involved on campus." She added that your Evergreen is "just a nice person to have when you are experiencing this new transition for the first time." In addition, Lisette ('29) emphasized how Messina shaped her own experience, explaining that it introduced her to close friendships and "so many great resources on campus I wouldn't have known of before" while also encouraging her to pursue leadership opportunities early on. Around Valentine's Day, at our enrichment, Bri made us all valentines, which was so thoughtful, and that just shows how much she cares for us and is involved in our daily lives.

Beyond individual relationships, Messina helps students build a broader sense of belonging within Loyola. Instead of feeling like just another student on a large campus, students become part of a smaller, more personal community. Anna ('29) noted that the program is beneficial because "it really is just a way for you to meet new people and become friends with the people that are in the same major... a group

of people... is really nice to have." This sense of shared experience makes the transition to college less isolating and more collaborative.

In addition to building connections on campus, Messina can also encourage you to engage with the world beyond Loyola. Through events, discussions, and enrichment opportunities, students are introduced to experiences that push them to think differently and explore new environments. For many, this includes stepping outside the "Loyola bubble" and beginning to understand the Baltimore community.

Building a Lasting Sense of Belonging

Ultimately, Messina is not just a program; it is the foundation of the Loyola experience. It helps you navigate uncertainty, build relationships, and grow into a more confident individual. In a place that can initially feel unfamiliar, Messina provides something essential: a starting point for belonging. For me, it became the difference between simply attending college and truly feeling at home. Messina classes are my favorite part of the week!

