



MESSINA: A FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE PROGRAM

By Anna Toohey

College has many firsts. One of the firsts includes making new friends which can be difficult for most incoming freshmen. However, everyone is in the same boat. Aspiring freshmen want to live the college dream of making as many

friends as possible but, in reality, everyone struggles in their own way with creating connections with others. In the beginning of freshman year, people try to become their own person and find their group. So, they will make many connections with people in the beginning of their college career and in most cases, many of those will not have a long timeline, which is completely normal. Everyone goes through many “friendships” before finding their people. However, in order to ease some of the pressure of starting college for the first time, Loyola University Maryland has a program called Messina, a supportive first-year program guided “through an experience grounded in reflection, discernment, and the Jesuit value of *cura personalis* – care for the whole person” ([Loyola](#)). Loyola strives to make sure their first-year students adapt well to college life, and form strong connections with their peers through the Messina program.

What is Messina?

To be honest, when I first came to Loyola, I had no idea what Messina entailed. Therefore, when I first started my Messina journey, I did not know what to expect. Messina consists of enrichment once a week with an assigned Evergreen, mentor (administrator or staff member), and a faculty member, and two seminar classes—one in the fall and one in the spring. An Evergreen is an upper-class student at Loyola who takes on the peer-supportive role to help guide us with our new adventure. The weekly enrichment hour includes advice and on-going support from the assigned faculty, mentor, and your Evergreen; some of the topics discussed include mental health, feelings, and open communication. For example, we do Perspective trainings, which allow us to talk about our feelings and how to go about hard topics in a conversation. My close friend Ava, who I met through Messina, defined Messina as “just a



My Messina group having Chick-fil-A during enrichment!

great space to talk with people and have a new community at the school right away when you move in." Within the new community you build, your Evergreen will hold separate activities outside of enrichment as well. For example, in my Messina, we have done a movie night with pizza, an outing to Belvedere Square, and Top Golf. In these excursions, everyone is given money, so you don't have to spend a dime of yours – what's better than free food!? These different Messina outings show incoming freshmen Messina does not rely on just a weekly enrichment class but also about supporting students socially and giving them activities to do off campus as well!

Community Built Within:

Messina from the Lens of an Evergreen, Advisor, and Mentor

As I mentioned earlier, every Messina consists of an Evergreen, mentor, and an assigned faculty member/advisor. These people will join you in every enrichment you have to answer questions or give advice. My advisor, Jessica, and mentor, Gabb, are very helpful people who have guided me towards a successful academic career by telling me what classes I should take since I want to go abroad. My Evergreen, Bri, a junior here at Loyola, is an amazing person to talk to when I need someone to babble or complain with; she is up for anything. While in enrichment, Bri sometimes talks about her experience with past Messinas and her own, and she still has a close bond with the people she has met—"I still talk to all my old first-years. I have dinner with them sometimes, and I still am best friends with my first ever friend here who was in my Messina." The people you meet in your Messina could be your friends for the rest of your life. Evergreens, mentors, and advisors all remember their past Messinas, and they never have anything bad to say.



As for my advisor, Jessica, she has guided me throughout my first year at Loyola. As a member of the Messina advisory board, she has witnessed the positive outcomes from the Messina program: "The Messina program went through an external review...the external reviewer found a lot of benefits to the program—and I see them as well." Jessica has witnessed first-hand how Messina has impacted students through new-found friendships and an instant community built within first-years. Gabb was also a great mentor in my Messina program because she was very open and chill person to be around. In enrichment, she knew some activities were annoying for us to go over, but she always thanked us for coming and did her best to keep everyone engaged. Both Jessica and Gabb were stable parts in my Messina, and I am forever grateful for the long-lasting connections we have made. Every college should have a first-year program like Messina, but that is what makes Loyola stand out!

My Personal Story



If I'm being honest, I did not see the purpose of Messina when I first came to Loyola. When I realized we would have enrichment once a week, I immediately thought the meetings would be a nuisance, but, nonetheless, I went to every single one—I am glad I did. Going to every enrichment helped me become closer to people with the same major as me and gain new friendships outside of my friend group. In my case, becoming close with people with the same major as you can lead to a very beneficial dynamic because these groups can become friends you see every day for the next four years, which may sound intimidating, but a familiar face never hurts. While talking to a friend outside of my Messina group, Jess (a

future Evergreen) she reminisced on her experience with her Messina group: "We've all gotten pretty close outside of Messina. We'll say hello to each other and occasionally hangout outside of enrichment." Having some common faces around campus is comforting and makes the transition to college easier. Messina guides first-years to have a supportive environment in a new place and leads to many possibilities to form new and possible life-long bonds.

