



Loyola Academy's Century-plus Partnership with Cognia

A TESTAMENT TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT



Photo courtesy of Loyola Academy

The importance of selecting an accreditation agency is well-understood by Catholic school leaders. The right agency can help their schools navigate the complexities of meeting the requirements of both government policies and Catholic school authorities. Additionally, accreditation enhances a school's credibility and reputation among prospective students and their families, signaling that school's commitment to providing quality education.

For more than a century, Loyola Academy, a Catholic, Jesuit college preparatory high school on the North Shore of Chicago, has chosen the same accreditation partner: Cognia, a nonprofit, non-governmental organization specializing in accrediting schools across the United States and around the world.

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A beacon for quality education

Loyola draws nearly 2,000 students from more than 90 postal codes. Almost half (45%) of those students commute from the city. Other students commute from as far away as the state's northern border, the lakefront on the east, or nearly 100 miles to the west. Some students travel for up to an hour and a half to reach Loyola.

“We've long been a beacon for students who are willing to travel long distances to come to us,” said Tim P. Devine, Loyola's principal since 2023. “They're willing to travel for the quality that they're getting here.”

A 1988 alumnus of Loyola, Devine returned to the school as a teacher in 2020 before taking on the role of principal. Previously, he served as principal of Walter Payton College Preparatory High School in Chicago for nine years and as social studies department chair of Northside College Prep for almost 12 years. Having been involved with multiple accreditation review teams at those two highly ranked schools, and as an adjunct review team member for other schools, Devine recognized that Cognia® brought a distinctive approach to the table.

“I've talked to other school leaders around the country who've worked with Cognia,” Devine said. “What I've found is that Cognia is particularly interested in schools' continuous improvement. I've seen so many accreditation programs that are just an opportunity for schools to list all their accolades and awards, growth in ACT and SAT scores, GPAs, and the number of kids taking Advanced Placement or honors classes. Those are some indicators of success, but I've never been interested in an accreditation process that's based on just touting achievements.”



Photo courtesy of Loyola Academy

Continuous growth through meaningful data analysis

“The experiences we’ve had with Cognia have helped our faculty understand that regular reflection on meaningful quantitative and qualitative data makes us better for our students,” said Devine.

He described Cognia’s accreditation process as being centered around two sets of essential questions. The first set prompts school teams to reflect on the following:

- What they excel at
- How they achieved that level of excellence
- How they plan to sustain that excellence

With the second set of questions, school teams think about the areas in which they are not doing as well. They also consider the strategies, practices, and policies they will employ to make progress toward their targets.

The nonprofit’s continuous process approach also includes a theory of action component. That component creates a roadmap for achieving educational objectives, outlining critical initiatives as well as the required resources, measures of success, and underlying assumptions for each initiative.

Devine compared Cognia’s approach very favorably to some practices he’s seen in the past. “Too many entities come into a school and lay out these really convoluted, overly complex models,” he said. “It’s not that educators can’t intellectually digest that, but being an educator is such a busy existence, and many don’t have the time it takes to digest those complicated models and change their practices.”

Devine has a special appreciation for Cognia’s theory of action methodology. “We’re asked to take action steps based on data analysis,” he explained. “And I love the simple but elegant structure of the ‘if-then’ model in Cognia’s approach. If we, the school community, do these two or three things, then these student outcomes will be enhanced.”

Devine found that the theory of action approach pushed his staff to think of themselves as causal change agents, to have forethought and reasons for the things they do, and to expect very specific outcomes. “It’s a smartly designed model that is helping our faculty think about those specific things they can do to move the dial for student achievement,” he said.



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A shift in classroom observations

In the summer of 2023, Loyola Academy expanded its evaluation teams, training almost three dozen people – including teacher leaders – on Cognia’s Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (elect®). The teacher leaders were a new addition to the evaluation teams, and Devine reported that having those staff members participate has helped them grow in their leadership capacity.

The elect tool provided Loyola’s evaluation teams with a common language and structure for assessing instruction, learning, and student-centered activities. Devine noted that the tool enhanced the objectivity and effectiveness of the evaluation process. “It allows us to compare and contrast more effectively, making the data cleaner and more usable,” he explained.

The new teams conducted classroom observations during the first five weeks of the fall 2023 semester, providing a comprehensive snapshot of student engagement in the classroom. The tool validated many aspects of Loyola’s teaching and administrative practices, for instance, teachers’ use of several different pedagogies.

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“We know from cognitive science that kids learn best when we help them develop skills and content acquisition through different modalities,” Devine said. “We have often said to ourselves that we have so many people engaging in so many different pedagogies in helpful ways, and the eleot data confirmed that our teachers have been doing a solid job of presenting students with those different opportunities.”

However, the eleot data also revealed areas for reflection and discussion. For example, the data indicated that teachers were using a narrower range of formative and summative assessments than expected.

After discussing the findings, Devine and his staffers concluded that the early observations had captured a specific phase in the school year when students and teachers were not yet involved in high-level cognitive activities. “Since we did the observations early in the year, teachers and students were not yet working on capstone projects and large, complicated portfolio assignments,” Devine explained.

A synergistic relationship and enduring tradition

Devine also expressed appreciation for the supportive rather than condemnatory approach that Cognia employs. “It’s been a partnership,” he said.

He praised the synergy between Cognia and Loyola’s culture, saying, “Cognia has been wonderful in promoting regular reflection on quantitative and qualitative data, which helps us become better for our students. I have not heard of one teacher on campus concerned about this or pushing back against it. It’s part of our culture, and Cognia aids and abets that culture for us.”

Devine’s understanding of the school’s culture and history stems not only from his work but also from being a multi-generational graduate of Loyola. “There are four generations of my family who have been educated at Loyola Academy. I’m the third of four generations,” he said. “I currently have nieces and nephews on campus and some who recently graduated, and more are still coming. It is beyond meaningful to be carrying their joy and their expectations with me.”

As a multi-generational Loyola graduate, Devine is determined to maintain the school’s commitment to adaptation and growth. “After 110 years, Loyola still actively focuses on the future,” he said. “But it’s hard to evolve well if you’re siloed within your own mind or within your own entity, and you’re never looking at other possibilities for continuing growth. We educators can have a lot of confirmation bias. Sometimes we need to welcome an external group like Cognia into our community and appreciate the feedback.”

Devine continued, “The Jesuits have this wonderful saying called ‘One foot raised.’ That means one foot is planted firmly on the ground, connected to the unchanging mission of the school. But one foot is forever raised.” He likened the raised foot to educators’ efforts to understand the new context of education in the United States, the needs and wants of today’s students, and what cognitive science has revealed about how modern students learn and process information.

“I love that imagery of the Jesuits,” Devine said. “One foot is planted on the ground, and one is forever changing. That parallels so nicely with what Cognia is about—continuing to evolve in measured, strategic, steady ways so that we’re all on the same page as to where we need to be going and how we’re going to get there.”

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About Cognia

Cognia® is a global, nonprofit improvement organization dedicated to helping institutions and other education providers grow learners, teachers, and leaders. Cognia offers accreditation and certification, assessment, and improvement services within a framework of continuous improvement. Serving 40,000 public and private institutions from early learning through high school in more than 90 countries, Cognia brings a global perspective to advancing teaching and learning.

Find out more at cognia.org.