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## Why Are You Here? NFDA Survey Finds Most Mortuary Students Felt “Calling”

By Deana Gillespie and Edward J. Defort

Invariably, every funeral director is asked, “Why did you choose this occupation?”

Similarly, NFDA’s “2019 Mortuary Science Student Expectation Study” asked students why they enrolled in mortuary college, with the following results:

- Nearly a third of respondents (32.3%) said funeral service was “a calling” or “they always wanted to do this,” compared to 30.7% in 2016 (NFDA’s most recent prior survey).
- “Honor/care for the deceased” was cited by 11.9% of respondents, compared to 10.5% in 2016.
- “Wanting to help people” was cited by 11.3% (slightly lower than 2016’s 12.2%).
- Eight percent of respondents cited that a “personal experience at a funeral home” steered them to the profession, up from 7.6% in 2016.



- “Want to own a funeral home someday” was cited by 6.9%, down from 7.9% in 2016.

Based on the survey results, funeral service seems to be trending away from the multigenerational business it once was. Of note, “having family members” in the business was cited by just 5.9% of respondents, a significant drop from 10.3% in 2016.

The most recent statistics from the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) further support NFDA’s results: In 2018, ABFSE reported that 13% of all new enrollees in mortuary science programs were carrying on, or getting into, the family business – down from nearly 18% of all new

enrollees in 2017, and from 14.3% in 2016.

ABFSE also reported that, of all new enrollees in 2018, 7.97% had a parent in the profession, 0.81% had a spouse, 0.93% a sibling, 1.36% an in-law, and 2.92% responded “other” relative.

**Nearly 58% of students expect to have a job when they graduate – a notable increase.**

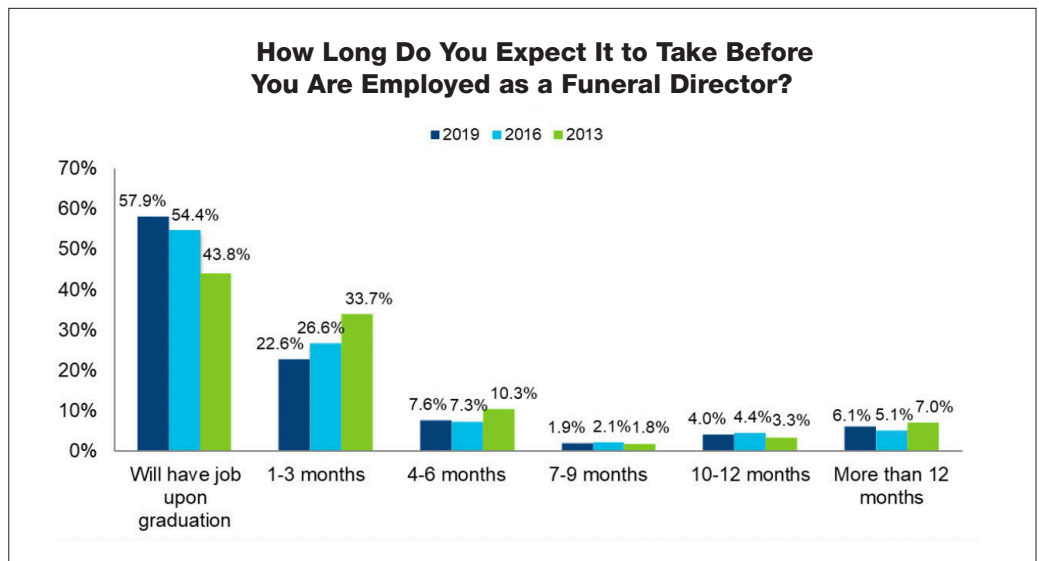
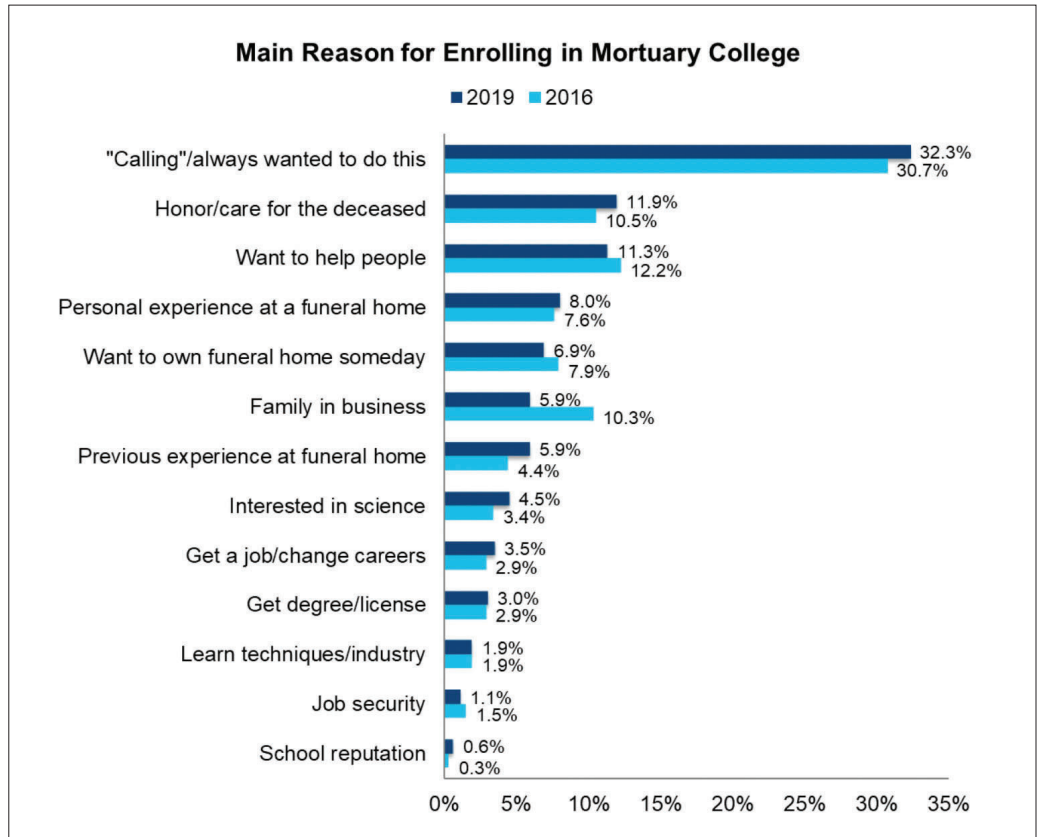
**Expected New-Hire Conditions**

The most and least expected job responsibilities students anticipate holding once hired at a funeral home remain essentially the same as previous rounds of NFDA’s survey. At the top of the list, current students expect to embalm (88.7%), arrange (86.3%), direct (86%) and perform removals (81.9%). At the bottom of the list are own a funeral home (17.4%), handle information technology (22.4%) and perform fleet maintenance (22.6%).

In general, student expectations about their future job benefits have risen somewhat from 2016. The top benefits students expect to receive once employed include medical insurance, 69.1% (up from 66.8% in 2016); sick time, 67.8% (up from 60.7%); annual salary increase, 67.5% (an increase from 63.4%); paid vacation, 62.7% (up from 56.9%); and license renewal, 62.5% (up from 59.1%).

Similar to prior survey waves, fewer than 10% of responding students expect to receive living quarters, loan services and/or paid military leave.

Based on results from the last three NFDA-conducted surveys (2019, 2016 and 2013), the number of students who expect to have a job upon graduation has noticeably increased. According to the latest survey, nearly 58% expect to have a job when they graduate – up from 54.4% in 2016 and 43.8%

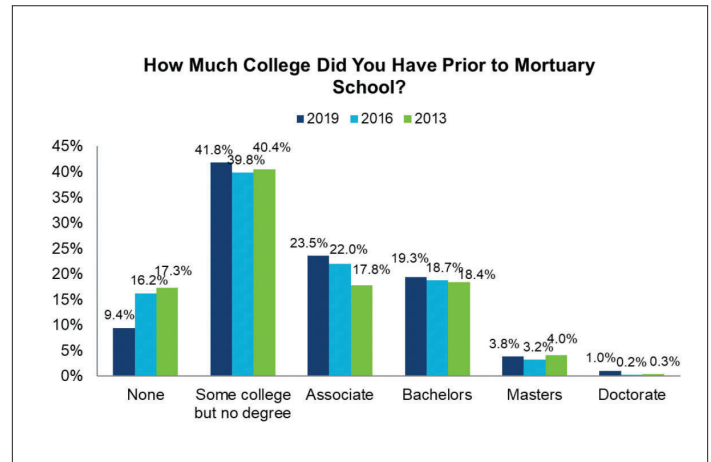
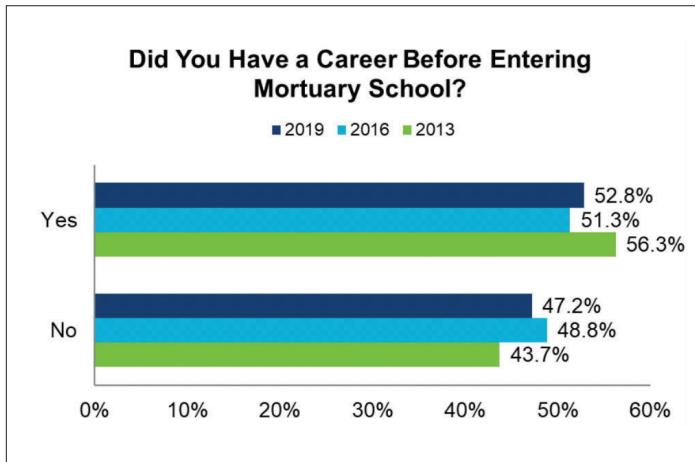


in 2013. In addition, 22.6% expect to have a job within one to three months after graduation, based on the latest results.

In terms of compensation, survey respondents set the median annual salary they expect at \$45,000, following two consecutive surveys at \$40,000.

Similar to results from NFDA’s prior surveys, students expect to work 45 hours per week (or more, as needed), a figure that has held steady since 2010.

Another result proving consistent since 2010 is that almost every student expects to be on call as part of his or her job; only 4.1% do not expect to be on call.

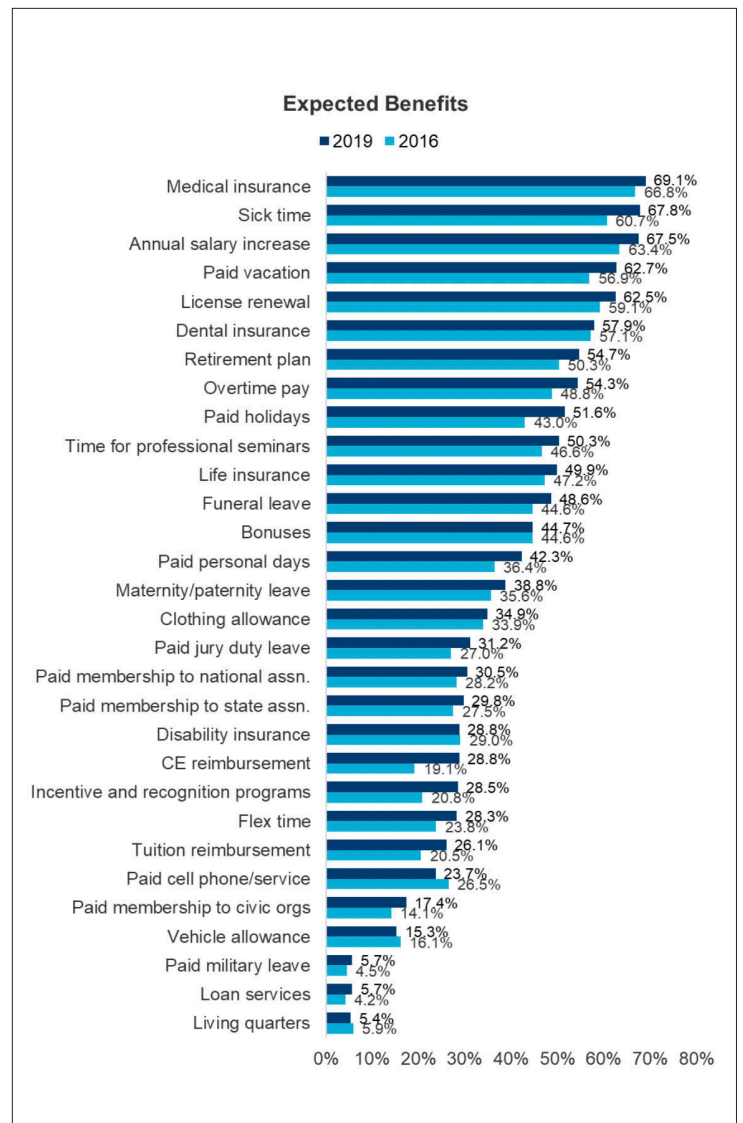
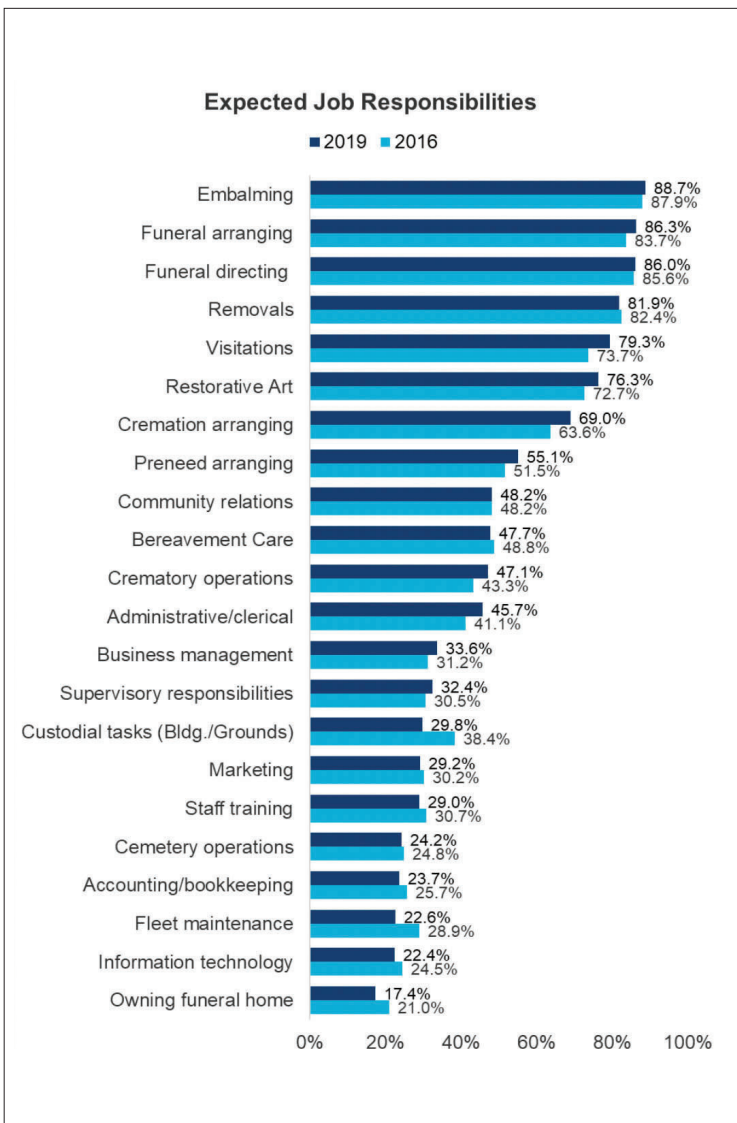


### Perceived Challenges

Similar to prior survey numbers, students perceived the two greatest challenges facing funeral service as “changing trends/fewer traditional funerals” (cited by 26%, which is a shade lower than 2016’s 26.6%) and “rising cremation rates” (21.7%, which is up sharply from 13.4% in 2016).

Today’s mortuary science students were least likely to perceive goods sold online or by other retailers (0.4%) and diseases/health hazards (0.4%) as major challenges facing funeral service.

Students also no longer see a poor economy as a major challenge.



According to NFDA’s 2019 survey, 5.1% of students felt there was a shortage of funeral directors to fill open positions, an increase of 1% from 2016.

### Student Demographics

As noted earlier, only 5.9% of respondents cited a family member in the profession as their main reason for enrolling in a mortuary science program. Not surprisingly, therefore, most students surveyed (90.2%) will become first-generation funeral directors, an increase from 82.3% in 2016.

Of those students from multigenerational funeral service families, 46.9% had one family member who was a funeral director; 26.5% had two family members. Of these students, 56.9% plan to work in their family’s funeral home.

More than half of responding students (52.8%) held a career prior to enrolling in mortuary school.

In terms of education, just 9.4% had no college experience prior to enrolling, 41.8% had completed some college coursework but did not earn a degree, and 23.5% held an associate degree.

Forty percent of respondents to NFDA’s 2019 survey were 25 years old or younger, 37.1% were between 26 and 39; and close to 23% were 40 years old or older.

Just under half of respondents were in their first year of a mortuary science program.

Most students surveyed were white (79.6%), followed by African American (14.9%) and Hispanic (3.5%).

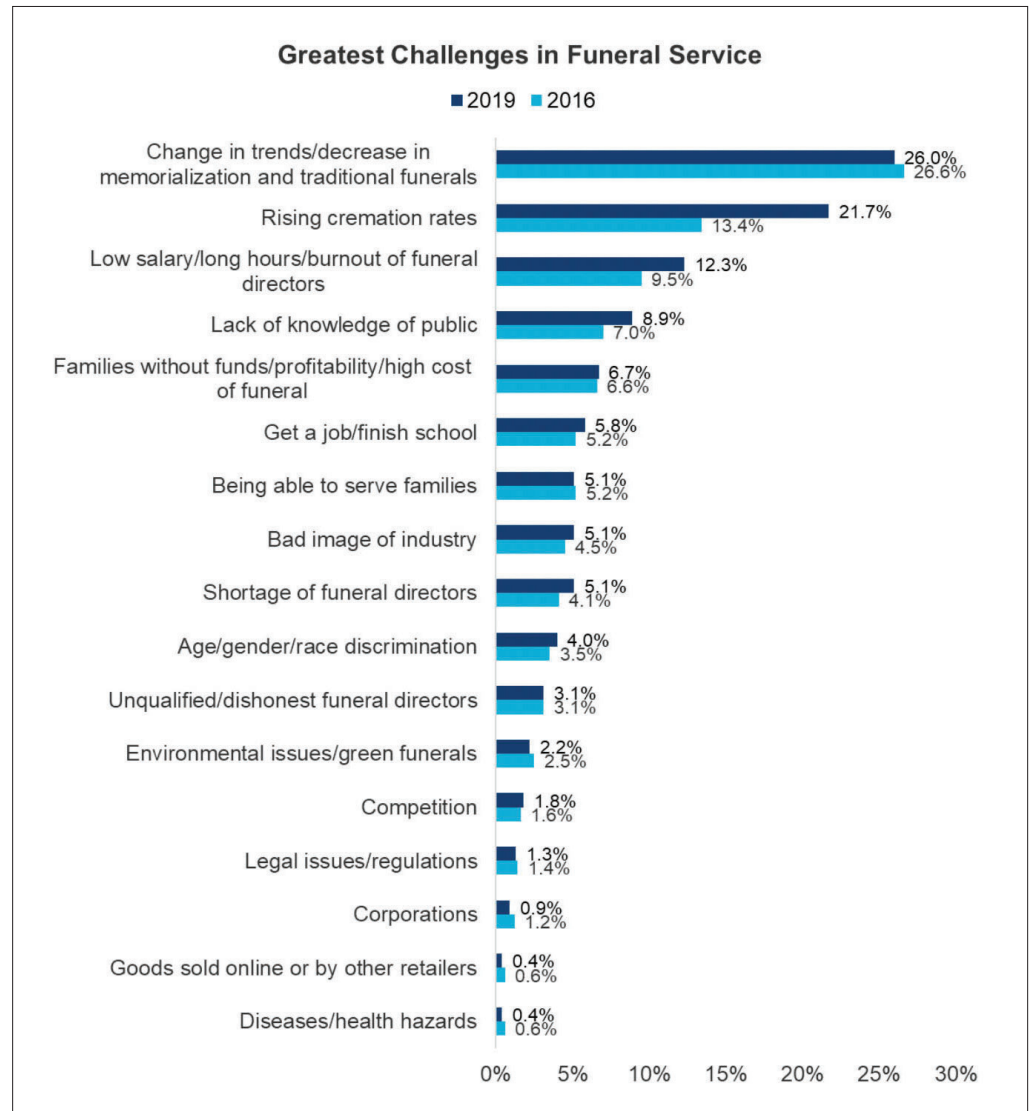
Almost three-quarters of respondents were female (71.9%), and more than one-third were male (28.1%).

**90.2% of students will become first-generation funeral directors.**

### About NFDA’s Survey

The purpose of NFDA’s “2019 Mortuary Science Student Expectation Study” was to survey mortuary science students to determine and measure their expectations upon graduation, including salary, hours, job responsibilities

and benefits. This was a follow-up survey to previous studies, and NFDA compared these results to the expectations of fu-



neral home owners in a separate study conducted in late 2019. (See next article in this issue.)

In 2010, this survey was redesigned to prove more comprehensive while still maintaining the longitudinal integrity of previous surveys, which were conducted in 1990, 1995, 2007, 2010, 2013 and 2016. Where applicable, the results presented track student expectations during the past three decades.

ABFSE provided NFDA with a complete list of mortuary science schools in the country, and all were invited to participate. NFDA sent school administrators a survey link to post on the school’s website or to email directly to students. NFDA also sent a reminder email to administrators encouraging them to send out reminders to students to encourage student participation. In addition, survey invitations were emailed directly to students who were also NFDA members.

A total of 527 students completed NFDA’s “2019 Mortuary Science Student Expectation Study,” representing 45 accredited mortuary science programs.

*Deana Gillespie is NFDA research manager. Ed Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*

# Hiring Good Help Tops Profitability as Owners' Greatest Challenge

By Deana Gillespie and Edward J. Defort



Finding qualified funeral directors to fill open positions surpassed decreasing profit margins as the greatest challenge facing funeral service, according to NFDA's "2020 Funeral Directors' Expectations Study." More than two-thirds of employers surveyed (68.8%) reported difficulty in finding skilled employees, which is up considerably versus the two most recent surveys (2016 and 2013) – 55% and 51.6%, respectively.

This survey comes on the heels of a joint study of mortuary science students conducted by NFDA and the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) to measure student expectations regarding starting salaries, job benefits, responsibilities, etc. (See *previous article in this issue.*)

NFDA's follow-up survey measures the workplace expectations of funeral home owners and managers regarding newly graduated mortuary science students. Comparing the results of the studies helps the association better understand whether job-seeker and potential-employer expectations are congruent, realistic and achievable, or when they might not be, as well as how to bridge the gaps in expectations. Where applicable, the results are linked to the 2016 and 2013 studies NFDA conducted.

## Top-Five Challenges

This year, 73.9% of respondents cited the availability of qualified personnel as the greatest challenge facing funeral service,

a significant increase from 58.2% in 2016. Next, a decreasing profit margin was chosen by 58.7% of respondents, down from 68.3% in 2016.

The rest of the top-five challenges were more or less in line with previous surveys. Increasing cremation was cited by 52.5% of respondents in 2019 (52.9% in 2016); changing consumer preferences by 49.0% (51.9% in 2016); and the increase in direct disposition by 43.5% (up from 38.0% in 2016). (For

the sake of comparison, the top five challenges in NFDA's latest student survey were a decrease in memorialization; increasing cremation rates; low salary/long hours/burn-out; lack of public knowledge; and families without funds to pay for funerals.)

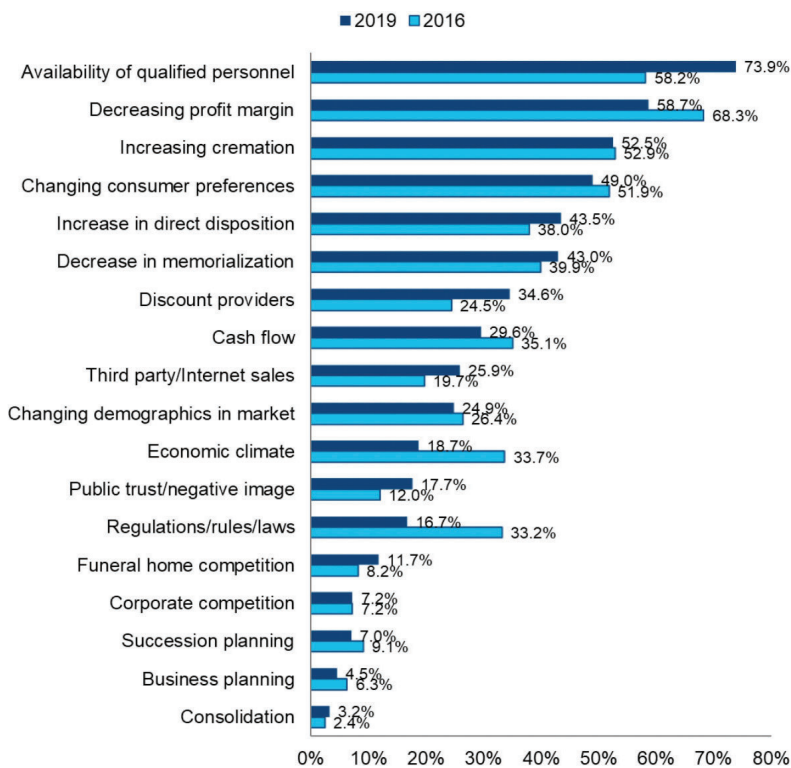
David Nixon, president of Nixon Consulting, said he was not surprised by the results of the employer survey: "I have been hearing for years how difficult it has been for some firms to find qualified people," alluding to the fact that some states have been harder hit in terms of the shortage of applicants. "There is a shortage, [which is compounded] by the aging boomer generation

that is retiring. Combine the [increasing number of] retirees with the lack of top-tier candidates coming up, and it is a problem."

The employer survey found that respondents were far more concerned about discount providers this year than they were three years ago (34.6% vs. 24.5%, respectively).



### Greatest Challenges Facing Funeral Service



And even with the anticipated Funeral Rule review (for which the Federal Trade Commission has begun taking comments), only 16.7% of respondents were concerned that regulations, rules and laws were the greatest challenge – way down from 33.2% in 2016.

#### Employer Expectations

Similar to previous surveys, approximately half of responding employers (54.8%) have hired at least one new graduate in the past five years, which compares with 50.2% in 2016, and 53.7% in 2013.

Most of these new positions were for the dual role of funeral director/embalmer (86.6%). Again, these results were in line

with the 2016 and 2013 surveys, in which 86.8% and 90.1% of employers, respectively, hired someone to fill the dual role.

According to NFDA’s latest survey, 23.9% of respondents hired a funeral director, and 15.9% hired an embalmer – similar numbers to previous survey results.

Employers are almost evenly split as to which type of employee they prefer to hire – experienced individuals versus new graduates – with 53.2% opting to hire new graduates, which is slightly lower than 56.4% in 2016.

The main reasons 53.2% of employers prefer to hire new graduates are because they can teach or mold them, and they haven’t yet developed any bad habits. Conversely, the main reasons 46.8% of employers prefer to hire experienced individuals are because they are already trained, and they understand the industry/job.

New hires and employers seem to be on the same page when it comes to the main funeral service duties expected to be performed: removals, embalming, visitations, funeral directing and funeral arranging topped both lists.

When it comes to overall duties, however, students expect to perform more funeral-related tasks than employers intend to assign them. The greatest gaps in expectations occurred as funeral directors

said they were significantly more likely to expect new hires to perform tasks related to information technology, custodial duties and fleet maintenance. On the other hand, new hires were significantly more likely to expect to perform tasks related to bereavement care, crematory

In general, employers offer more benefits than students expect to receive.

operations, business management, staff training and supervisory responsibilities.

In general, employers offer more benefits than students

Students' Top Concerns
Decrease in memorialization
Increasing cremation rates
Low salary/long hours/burnout
Lack of public knowledge
Families without funds to pay for funeral

Has your firm hired one or more new graduates in the past 5 years?			
	2019	2016	2013
New graduates	53.2%	56.4%	51.1%
Experienced individuals	46.8%	43.7%	48.9%

Percentage of employers that hired at least one new graduate for each position in the past 5 years			
Funeral Director	23.9%	21.3%	7.5%
Embalmer	15.9%	17.6%	3.1%
Funeral Director/Embalmer	86.6%	86.8%	90.1%
Other	7.6%	13.2%	6.2%

**Students expect to earn more than employers intend to pay.**

expect to receive. NFDA’s latest survey found that the benefits employers are most likely to offer new hires include license renewal, paid vacation, time for

professional seminars, continuing education reimbursement, and sick time. The benefits students are most likely to expect include medical insurance, sick time, an annual salary increase, paid vacation, and license renewal.

When it comes to anticipated annual salary, students expect to make 25% more than employers intend to pay – \$45,000 vs. \$36,000.

Additionally, students expect to work slightly longer work weeks than employers expect them to work. Employers expect students to work an average of 40 hours per week, but students expect to work an average of 45 hours per week.

Almost all students and employers expect newly licensed employees to be on call.

### Finding That Competitive Edge

It all comes back to dollars and cents, Nixon believes, suggesting that split licenses might help ease the difficulty in finding quality applicants. “I have said this many times: We are trying to attract good people, but not everyone wants to be an embalmer. You want those ‘people skills’ and, in some states, we are excluding them.” For the applicant, however, being versed in both disciplines would allow quality embalmers to write their own ticket.

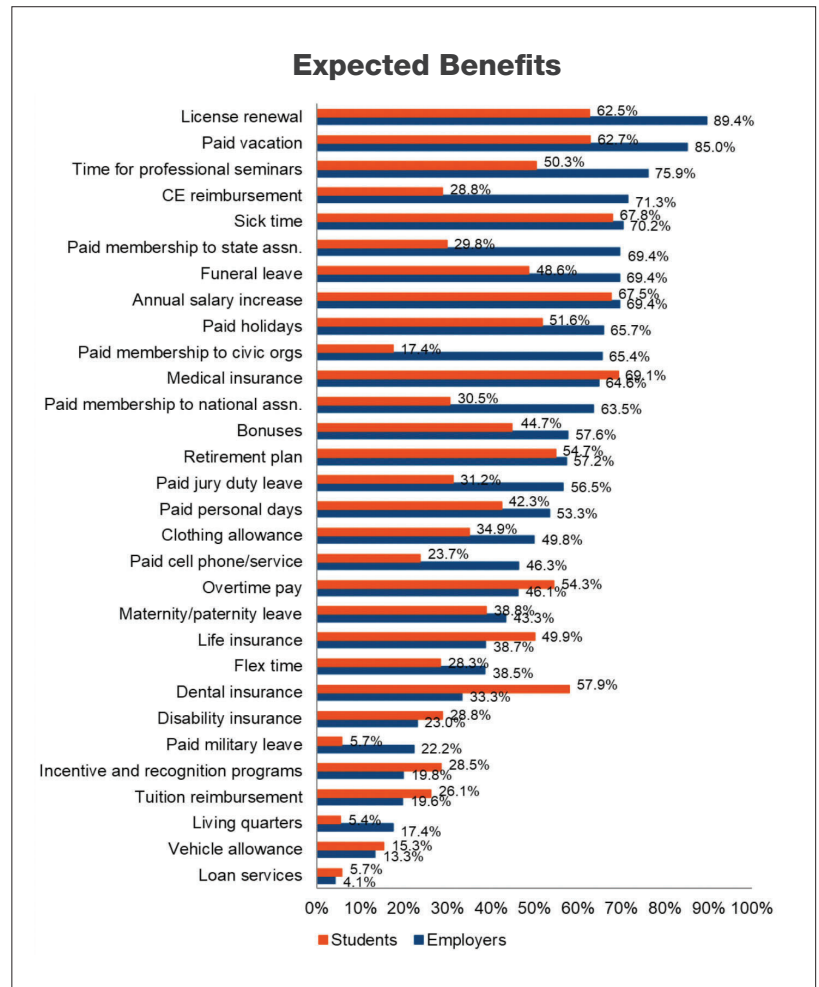
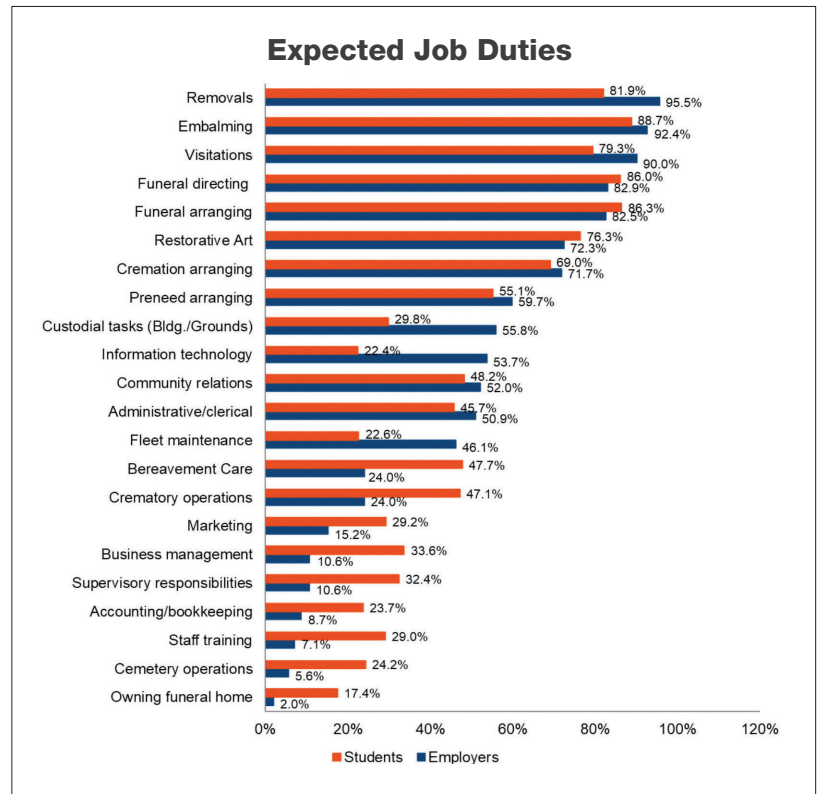
Nixon added that when it comes to supply and demand, the question is, will the firm pay?

When hiring new graduates, sought-after qualities include ethics, honesty and trustworthiness; having a strong work ethic; maintaining a professional appearance/demeanor; and the ability to work collaboratively as a team member. The list has not changed much since 2016.

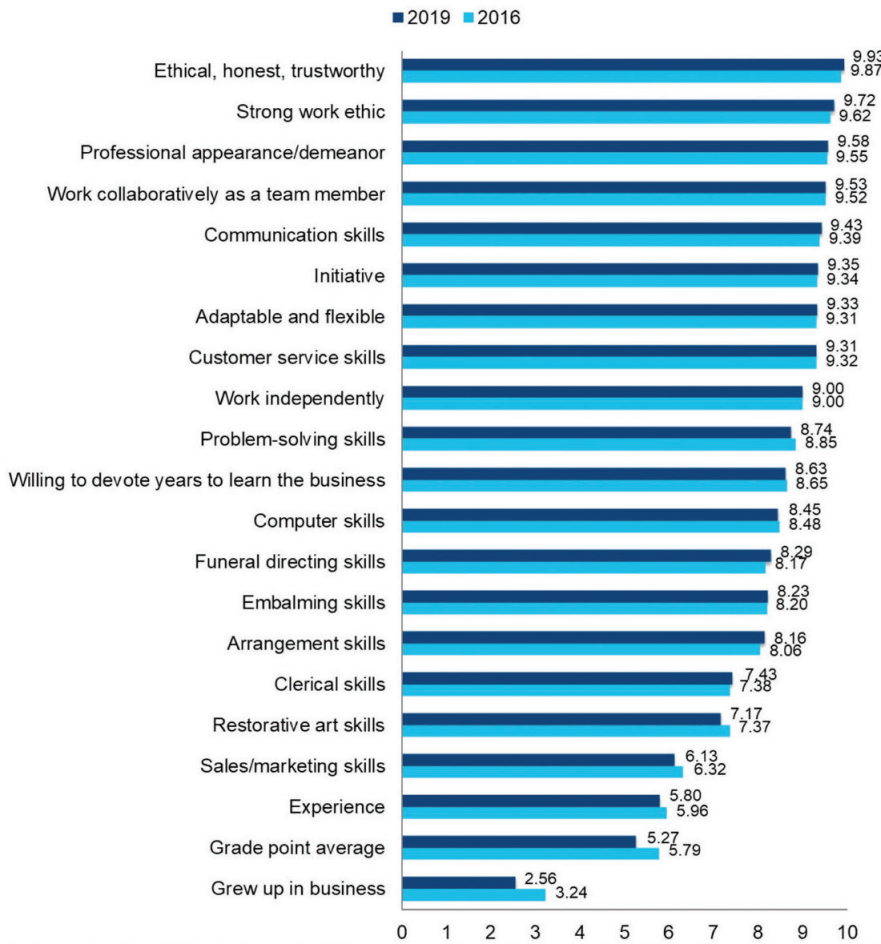
The top qualities/skills employers felt new graduates lack include a willingness to work irregular hours; attention to detail; willingness to perform non-funeral work; and a strong commitment/dedication/work ethic.

More than two-thirds of those surveyed believe it would be either valuable or very valuable for new graduates to have had arranger training. In addition, 47.2% thought it would be valuable to be a certified preplanning consultant, and 44.1% felt it would be valuable to be certified as a crematory operator.

In terms of being prepared to enter the profession, NFDA’s survey found that approximately 40%



### Most Important Job Skills/Qualities (Average Score Using 10-point Scale)



of employers either somewhat disagree (30.6%) or strongly disagree (9.6%) that students are well-prepared for their first funeral home position.

Toward that end, employers were asked what changes they would recommend to mortuary science course requirements. The top suggested changes include teaching topics on common sense/work ethic; customer service/people skills; appearance/demeanor; communications skills; and/or arrangement/directing skills.

The survey found that 37.4% of employers have hired a new graduate who is no longer with their firm. Of those, 36.2% quit to pursue another career outside of funeral service; 29.0% quit to work at another firm; and 20.4% of employees were terminated.

Of the employees who quit, 35.6% left due to the hours, and 30.8% did not find the work enjoyable.

When asked how they advertise for a new position, most employers find new employees via word of mouth (66.8%), through a mortuary school career center (51.5%), via networking (36.7%), and/or on association websites (26.8%).

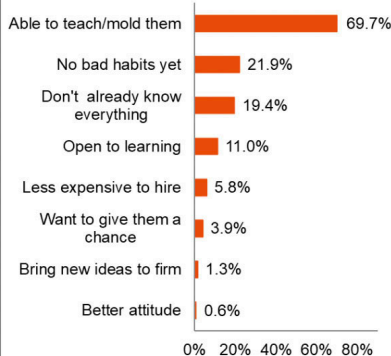
According to NFDA's survey, employers said the top characteristics that make a candidate stand out in a job interview are good communication skills (91%), which edged out the previous survey's top choice of professional appearance/demeanor (89.3%). This was followed by a good personality/friendly (78.8%); being honest and trustworthy (78.6%); a willingness to learn (75.1%); a strong work ethic (74.6%); and strong ethics and morals (73.1%).

of employers either somewhat disagree (30.6%) or strongly disagree (9.6%) that students are well-prepared for their first funeral home position.

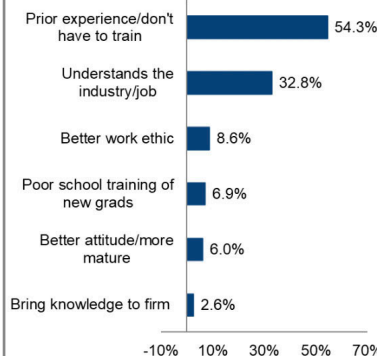
### Do you prefer hiring new graduates or experienced individuals?

	2019	2016	2013
New graduates	53.2%	56.4%	51.1%
Experienced individuals	46.8%	43.7%	48.9%

#### Reasons for Wanting to Hire New Graduates



#### Reasons for Wanting to Hire Experienced Individuals



### Funeral Employer Demographics

In the past 24 months, most respondent firms experienced an increase in total overhead costs (70.5%) and employee salaries (59.8%). Interestingly, 24.1% of firms increased the number of their licensed staff members, while 19.8% decreased the number of licensed staffers.

In the next 12 months, 64.1% of employers expect their total overhead costs to increase, and 55.2% anticipate being able to increase employee salaries. Also, 30.7% plan to increase the number of licensed staff members at their firms, while 3.3% plan to decrease the number of licensed staff.

Slightly more than two-thirds (68%) of responding firms have offered an apprenticeship in the past five years. Of those firms, 79.9% hired the apprentice.

Just over a third of the responding firms (35.0%) reported a caseload of 151 to 350; 31.2% reported a caseload of 76 to 150; and 2.7% reported a caseload of fewer than 76.

More than two-thirds of respondents (68.1%) were firm owners,

**Top characteristic that makes a candidate stand out in a job interview: good communication skills.**

principals or partners, and 13.4% were managers. Most respondents were between the ages of 40 and 54 (38.2%) or between 55 and 64 (30.4%).

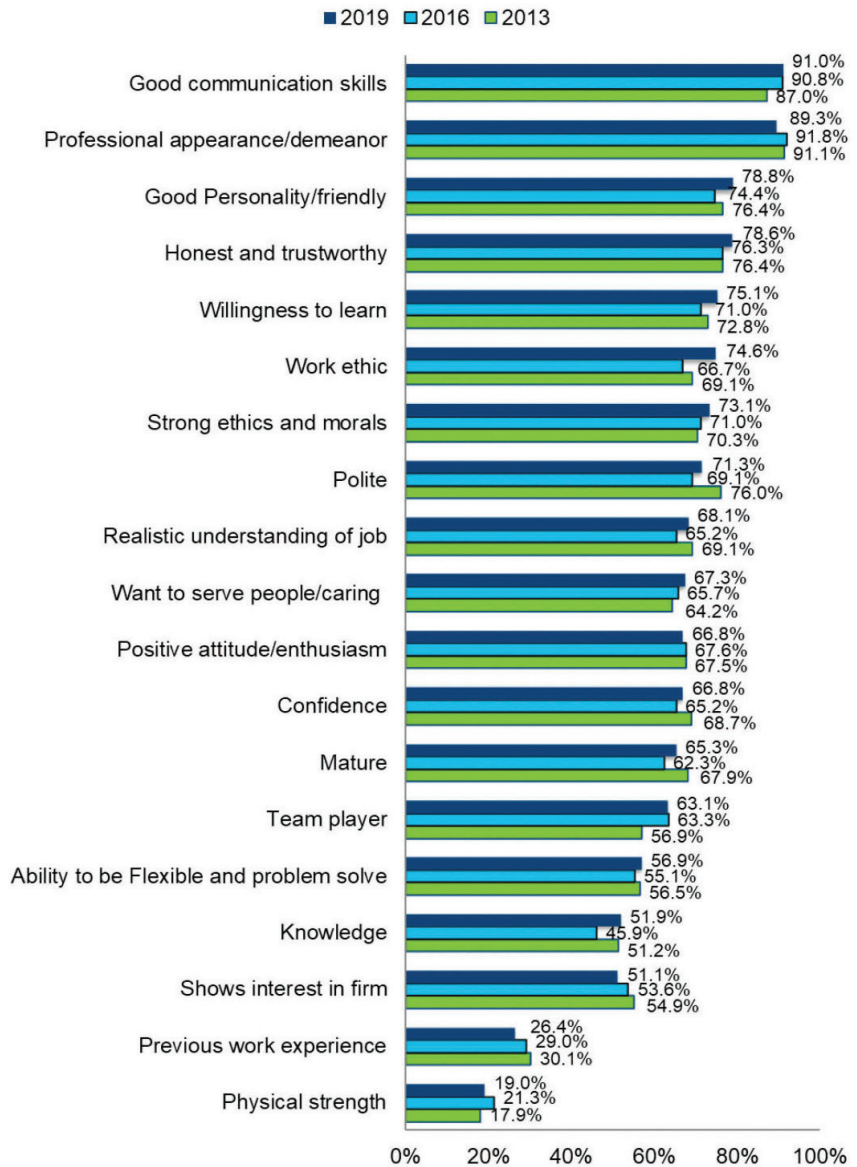
While most responding employers were male (80.9%), most responding students were female (71.9%). Most respondents in both studies were white, but a significantly larger portion of student-survey respondents were African-American (14.9%) or Hispanic (3.5%).

**About NFDA's Survey**

NFDA members listed as “main contacts” with a valid email address received an email invitation to complete the online survey. (Please note that all NFDA members are licensed funeral directors.) NFDA sent a reminder email to potential respondents one week after the initial invitation. As an incentive, respondents had the opportunity to enter a random drawing to win one of 10 gift cards upon completion of the survey.

Why did they leave your firm?	2019	2016	2013
Employee quit to pursue another career outside of funeral service	36.2%	25.0%	23.1%
Employee quit to work at another firm	29.0%	32.1%	34.6%
Employee was terminated	20.4%	28.6%	25.6%
Other	9.9%	14.3%	14.1%
Employee was laid off due to staff cuts	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%
Don't know	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%

**Characteristics That Make Candidates Stand Out in an Interview**



Of 4,530 potential respondents with a valid email address, a total of 401 NFDA members completed the survey (a 9% response rate). Results for all respondents are projectable within a range of ±4.7% (with 95% confidence).

*Deana Gillespie is NFDA research manager. Ed Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*

If employee quit, why did they quit?	2019	2016	2013
Other	46.2%	45.2%	42.2%
Hours	35.6%	25.8%	17.8%
Did not find work enjoyable	30.8%	16.1%	22.2%
Compensation issue	11.5%	6.5%	6.7%
Personality conflict with management	8.7%	6.5%	6.7%
Don't know	1.9%	0.0%	4.4%
Lack of recognition	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

## DEAR NEW GRAD: Pragmatic Advice For Those Entering The Profession

By Daniel M. Isard



Living up to an employer's trust and expectations is all about *their* expectations, not yours. These expectations should be contained in a written job description and employee manual.

The challenge should not be about your age, personal beliefs or fashion – it's about communication! When making service arrangements, for example, you'll want family members sitting across the table from you to "hear" you and know that you understand them. If you keep this in mind, you will be able to communicate well.

That said, we communicate with both words and body language. Part of the latter includes how we stand and are dressed when meeting with a family. In other words, dressing properly is a critical part of communication.

Imagine that your driving passion, for instance, is to make the world a better place by making hamburgers, and a company notable for its logo's yellow arches hires you. What might your first day on the job be like if you show up in a tie-dyed shirt and clogs only to hear your new boss tell you that you're not dressed appropriately because they use uniforms?

Well, funeral service requires uniforms, too. Maybe these are designed by a conventional haberdashery, but they are still uniforms. Therefore, you must understand the three purposes of a uniform:

1. *Consistent appearance* All employees present themselves in a fashion the owner wants to portray.
2. *Functionality* Clogs around grease and oil? A uniform focuses on safety over fashion.
3. *Meets expectations* Consumer cannot hear you if they are distracted. A dress code helps eliminate one potential negative distraction.

That said, the very concept of a modern-day uniform in funeral service continues to evolve. Once a blue suit, white shirt and black shoes for men and comparable attire for women, the 20th century's fashion rules have disappeared. So, what should you do?

First, I recommend that you dress for work as if you actually lived in the 20th century. Remember, you should dress for the people with whom you meet, and the ones making the decisions are generally not millennials.

When in doubt, dress up as opposed to appearing more ca-

sual. Dressing up does not necessarily mean dressing fashionably. For example, wearing a black suit with a black shirt and a silver tie might seem fashionable for going out, but it's not fashionable when meeting with a grieving family. You are allowed to have a work wardrobe and a personal wardrobe – just don't try to blend them.

Another key point of communication involves language. When speaking English, for example, there is "youth" English, "street" English and "business" English. Just as you wouldn't wear your personal fashion statements to work, keep both the tone of your voice and the choice of words you use with a grieving family on a more formal level. Remember, it's your job to help them feel at ease.

If you face the (enviable) need to choose between potential employers, remember that while they have to decide to hire you, you also get to hire them! Therefore, walk through the business location. Interview existing staff. Read the job description for the job they want you to perform. If you have two choices and one offers a written job description and the other doesn't, vote in favor of the company with the job description if all other things are equal.

Moreover, think about your motivation for entering the profession. If your wish is to join for the money, then please leave now. I have rarely seen an overpaid funeral director, and those who are highly compensated are paid more because of their responsibilities and/or ability to direct patronage. Ultimately, being able to drive consumers to a business because of your personal goodwill is the highest compliment and will generally earn you the highest compensation.

Finally, always remember your motivation for entering this business, but please don't leave the profession because of a negative employer experience. You will meet many people; some will teach you what to do, but most will teach you what not to do. If you're passionate about this calling, stay focused on your drive and do not feel discouraged.

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# Agents of Change

By Joseph Marsaglia

From the start of your profession as a funeral director to the time you retire, you will face many changes – generally for the good. Although most individuals resist change, you must embrace it.

The demographic of today's mortuary student cannot compare to those in the past. For example, the new millennial is well educated and has specific needs and wants. Millennial learners want to continue to learn and are more comfortable using technology and social media, something unheard of in past generations.

Millennials have specific educational needs that require changes in the approach to teaching. Years ago, teaching and learning was literally by the book; today's learners demand practical ways of learning. Years ago, students sat at a desk and were given what they had to learn and master. Today's millennials are more practical and want to apply their knowledge in a real-world setting.

For educators, this requires changing teaching approaches. The days of standing behind a lectern and lecturing have been replaced by interacting with students, providing group exercises, utilizing technology and allowing students to express their talents.

To meet these demands, mortuary schools are now required to provide a practicum program in which students are required to affiliate with a funeral home and complete specific requirements as part of the curriculum. Requirements

include “practical” training, such as attending services, making removals, sitting in on funeral arrangements, etc. The funeral service practicum is a win-win for students and faculty members.

Adapting to these changes in teaching methodology has been easier for students to accept than teachers. Students are accustomed to and prepared for a more practical experience. For veteran teachers, however, it's a bit more challenging because course plans and syllabi need to reflect a more interactive learning experience, such as using PowerPoint presentations, group exercises and references to real-life scenarios.

It is said there are two things that are certain in life – death and taxes. I would add a third certainty: change. As we grow older, it becomes ever easier to list the countless changes that have taken place during our lifetime, whether personally, professionally or in society at large. As I look back, for example, I see that change has literally affected everything – the way we live, the way we dress, the way we eat, the way we think and even the way we care for our dead.

We are all agents of change.

If you have not already experienced it, I assure you that there will be times in your life when you will look back and wish you would have done something or that whatever you did, you had done it better. For example, you will only have once chance to make it right for the families you will serve. Will you go above and beyond to meet their needs or will you feel like your efforts were just “good enough”?

Regardless of which generation you represent, the public deserves funeral service practitioners who are caring, dedicated and well educated. Consumers also expect that you will stay up to date by continuing your education in order to best serve yourself, families, your community and society.

Never forget this line by American philosopher and scholar John Dewey: “The goal of education is to enable individuals to continue their education.”

*Dr. Joseph A. Marsaglia, CFSP,  
is dean emeritus of Pittsburgh  
Institute of Mortuary Science.*

It is said there are two things that are certain in life – death and taxes. I would add a third certainty: change. We are all agents of change.





## The Need to Reconnect With Communities

By Lauren M. Budrow

One of the most rewarding aspects of teaching is seeing students evolve into funeral service practitioners. I am incredibly fortunate to be part of this transition as they earn their funeral director and embalmer licenses, and I am regularly inspired by students' insights as they complete their journeys.

Presently, fewer students enroll in mortuary school who are already employed at a funeral home. Many gain service employment soon after starting their academics because it's quickly apparent how that real-world interaction complements their education.

Because I was hearing similar comments from licensees and students, I decided to ask both if they felt there was a disconnect between funeral directors and the communities they serve. This was an informal inquiry, but student observations seemed to echo what current licensees say about this issue.

Beyond the closed-ended question of whether or not a disconnect exists (most believe it does), I am more interested in why and how we got to this conclusion. Here, I've taken the feedback and incorporated it with my own thoughts on this topic.

Historically, in small towns, everyone knew the merchants and service providers by name. The consumer and the business owner had regular contact in the town, at church or in the marketplace. There was also less competition between those businesses than what we have today. If you asked a person in a small town for the local undertaker, you'd likely get a person's name rather than the name of a business. In larger towns, the local undertaker might not have been known by name, but rather by the firm's reputation.

Today, given our more mobile society, the first profession-

als we seek when we move are a physician, an eye doctor, a dentist and possibly a veterinarian. You would probably be hard-pressed to get an answer from a newcomer for a funeral home recommendation, let alone a funeral director's name. Urban sprawl also limits the possible number of interactions we can have with these professionals. We see them only when we need them, unless they happen to be a neighbor or a fellow organization member.

Now that fraternal memberships and church attendance are declining, that opportunity for interaction is also limited. Funeral homes attempt to address this by establishing community activities within their facilities or by sponsoring events to draw awareness to their firm. Unfortunately, many firms don't take additional steps to maintain contact with individuals unless it's for preneed purposes.

What's missing appears to be the human connection between individual funeral directors and their community members – not just the community at large. Some funeral directors don't live in the same community in which their employing firm is located. Instead, they drive long distances to work and interact only with the families that walk through the door.

Many firms, for financial or personal interests, have also removed themselves from those one-to-one interactions with family members. A funeral director might not perform the removal or follow through on a funeral after being the one to arrange the service. Increasingly, the opportunities for last-

ing personal connections are getting lost as our profession creates "trenches of task isolation" (removal technicians, funeral arrangers, embalmers, preneed salespeople) to increase operational efficiencies.

Funeral directors used to have more control over how the public perceived them. They dressed well, attended social events, joined organizations and sponsored activities. Now, marketing firms are hired to create brochures and

information packets on preneed and disposition options; corporate contracts between vendors and firms take the purchasing decisions out of the hands of licensees; and the annual sponsorship of events, such as Little League Baseball teams, is dwindling. Today, the profession sends out a more homogeneous message that comes across to consumers as "salesy." Social media further perpetuates this image by reinforcing consumer perceptions that funeral directors are vultures in a time of sorrow.

Directors are simply not doing a good enough job advocating for themselves or for the value of their license. Convenience has seeped into the profession. In addition to wanting to do more singular activities to promote regularity (a tacit

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compromise between business owners and licensees), funeral directors have stopped educating the public on the vital role the profession plays in society and have taken the stance that everyone already knows what a funeral director is or does. Spoiler alert: No, they don't.

I know funeral directors who will fully admit to giving up some of this control of their professional image for the sake of having a “normal job” schedule. When did funeral service become a j-o-b rather than a c-a-l-l-i-n-g? When I ask about someone's decision to become a funeral director, no one says anything about the schedule being an issue; instead, everyone says they want to help people in their time of need.

But if that's the case, why does our profession feel the need to outsource specific aspects of funeral directing that have traditionally formed the building blocks of community trust and familiarity? When a physician is on call, he or she doesn't phone a third-party surgeon to take his or her place on an emergency appendectomy at 3 a.m.

This familiarity goes beyond the funeral director and extends to the staff of the funeral home. This is why, historically, funeral home owners have employed retirees who were well-connected within their communities as part-time staffers to assist with visitations and funerals. Those folks have probably been the saving grace for many firms as the licensees distanced themselves from the communities they served, leaving that role for the part-time staff to fill.

At some point, however, those retirees will decide they aren't interested in working anymore, or they may become unable to work and will eventually end up as one of the client families. Who is going to take that person's place at the funeral home if the manager or owner doesn't know anyone in the community who would be a good fit? Even those essential pipelines are slowly drying up. And now there's more than a community disconnect – there's a staffing shortage. Can you see the domino effect yet?

The generation of new licensees is not an exact replacement for these part-timers, but they do bring valuable talents that might be beneficial to funeral homes, particularly their observations on interactions within the community. These behaviors might extend outside of an employers' traditional expectations. For example, professional attire has changed significantly from the historical perspective. New funeral service professionals want to appear approachable, as well as respectful, and that doesn't necessarily mean wearing a suit at all times.

They also use social media as an integral part in making the community aware of events and activities at the funeral home. Funeral streaming services, which many students are trained to use, make it possible for older or distant relatives and friends to still be present for funerals. Storytelling events are increasingly popular for community gatherings, and isn't funeral service about telling the stories of extraordinary lives?

While it might seem like an unconventional approach, we need to embrace those activities that support the mission of funeral service for providers in their communities. Unfortunately, those new to funeral service often end up feeling like their talents don't get realized to the fullest extent.

So, instead of trying to mold students and new graduates into the traditional funeral director, we should let them bring their ideas to the table about how to re-establish connections between funeral directors and members of the community.

That might not take the form of joining a fraternal order, but it doesn't mean anyone is ruling that out either. We must remain open-minded and avoid reinforcing the perception of being in this business strictly for sales. Remember, everyone says they want to be a funeral director so they can help people.

Ultimately, an individual's desire to perform this emotionally and physically challenging work will drive future connections within the community. Students often remark on how they never realized all that we do at the funeral home. I didn't know either when I went to mortuary school. Why is that?

Therein lies the true disconnect. Let's start informing the public about exactly what we do. Funeral service is a beautiful, multi-faceted

gem of a career. When funeral directors truly engage with families and take the extra time to get to know them, follow through on services and make the effort to know the nearby barista at the coffee shop, bonds develop.

Tell people you're a funeral director, how it matters and why you love it. Tell a story about funeral directing that your community can relate to, and they will ultimately be able to relate to you.

*Lauren M. Budrow, CFSP, is an assistant professor at Wayne State University in Detroit and a licensed funeral director since 2003.*



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# Rise of the “Nones”

By Matthew Miles

As professionals in the deathcare industry, we commit ourselves to serving families that entrust their loved ones to us. Traditionally, these services included a viewing, a ceremony of some fashion and possibly a repast. Funeral homes had a set system – families tended to want similar service amenities, and the same church was used for the majority of services. I’m willing to bet these were predominantly Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Jewish or Muslim services.

But there’s an issue with this given today’s world: While tradition caters to and suits the older generations well, it allows no flexibility for the younger ones. This is fine, for now.

But if you spend any significant amount of time on social media, you have probably noticed that the current generation is notably less religious than prior generations. In fact, polls conducted by Pew Research Center in 2018 and 2019 found that 4% of American adults identify as atheists, which is up 2% from 2009. The same poll found that 5% of American adults identify as agnostics, which is also a 2% increase from 2009.

A 2018 study conducted by students in the psychology department at the University of Kentucky found that the percentage of American adults who identified as atheists was closer to a whopping 26%. They reached this determination by including people who not only self-identified as atheists but who also stated explicitly that they did not believe in any god/gods.

As a member of the millennial generation, I’m inclined to think that the number is likely closer to 26% than 4%. In fact, in 2019, Pope Francis himself acknowledged the decline of Christianity’s influence in the world, saying: “Today, we are no longer the only ones that produce culture, no longer the first nor the most listened to. The faith in Europe and in much of the West is no longer an obvious presumption but is often denied, derided, marginalized and ridiculed.”

At this point, you might wonder what this has to do with funeral service. The rise of atheism in the United States was explored to posit the case that the decline in the number of religious people will inevitably give way to a decline in traditional funeral services. The younger generation is attracted to more natural alternatives to embalming and traditional burial and, as difficult as it might be, we must be willing to adapt to the changes.

This means not only preparing to offer more natural alternatives and humanistic services but also learning about lesser known religions that are gaining popularity. One such example is the Church of Satan, an atheistic religious organization utilizing diabolical imagery and symbolism to represent its opposition to theistic religion.



Young generations of mortuary science students receive a fair amount of inspiration and information from funeral director and YouTube personality Caitlin Doughty. While some in our business consider her a somewhat controversial character, she is frequently referenced as a person who inspired a future funeral director to enter mortuary school.

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To put the point bluntly, traditional theistic religion is declining, and with that will come a decline in traditional services. There will always be those who want traditional services (including embalming), just like there are people who still prefer to use a typewriter. It’s perfectly okay to want to offer the traditional work, but there must be a willingness to adapt to change in the business.

The next generation of funeral directors are a different breed. In addition to a changing culture in terms of religion, there will also be a change in the acceptance of tattoos, colored hair and styles of dress (polo shirts for removals versus suits and ties, for instance).

It’s time to start thinking ahead about how our business practices will be required to change to keep up with not only a new breed of funeral director but an increasing atheistic clientele as well.

*Matthew Miles is a mortuary science student at American McAllister Institute of Funeral Service in New York City; he will graduate this year and seek licensure in Texas.*

## From the Editor's Desk...



## Expectations

One of my favorite television programs of all time is *The West Wing*. *Tiger King*, on the other hand, has not stood the test of time, but I'm not sure if I really liked that show or if I was just bored from self-quarantining.

Anyway, I've cited *The West Wing* often, quoted from it and expressed my admiration for its creator, Aaron Sorkin, on many occasions. To wit, this is another of those occasions.

One episode centered around the president's State of the Union address. Following the speech, staffers holed up in a call center to await polling data on how the speech had been received. An inconvenient plot twist had the electricity in the vicinity of the call center knocked out as polling was underway, which made for a stressful night for the White House staffer overseeing the call center, as he frequently ranted, "I want the numbers!"

The protagonist in this episode was seeking the data in order to find out from the public what worked for them, what didn't and what the administration needed to do to move forward.

This brings me to the two studies featured in this issue – NFDA's "2019 Mortuary Science Student Expectation Study" and the association's "2020 Funeral Directors' Expectations Study." As we all know, expectations don't always meet reality. I certainly didn't expect to be spending spring in the house, but life deals us some wild cards from time to time.

Whenever these surveys are rolled out, I find it interesting to mix and match the respective expectations, and it seems those of students and funeral home owners are really not all that different. That probably has a lot to do with students researching this career path and getting a realistic idea of what to expect before they even enter the classroom.

Also, funeral directors are seeing the value in what the new generation of funeral directors can bring to the table, not only in regard to technology and social media interaction but also with the new perspective each generation presents.

And now we find ourselves in circumstances no one anticipated, and funeral directors (everybody, really) have been forced to adjust on the fly. But it's exactly this kind of flexibility and innovation that will reinvigorate funeral service once a "new normal" is established, because getting back to normal isn't an option.

So, when considering your expectations, realize that they are just the starting point, not the destination. It's where you go from there.

Edward J. Defort  
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