

1 “TO HELP PEOPLE” CITED AS THE TOP REASON STUDENTS ENROLLED IN FUNERAL SERVICE SCHOOL

- 4 ABFSE Reports Record Enrollment in 2021
- 9 Taking Your NBE? Prepare to Succeed
- 11 The Last Big Move
- 12 The Importance of Balance
- 14 The Profession of Funeral Service, Part 2
- 18 From the Editor’s Desk: Framing a Picture



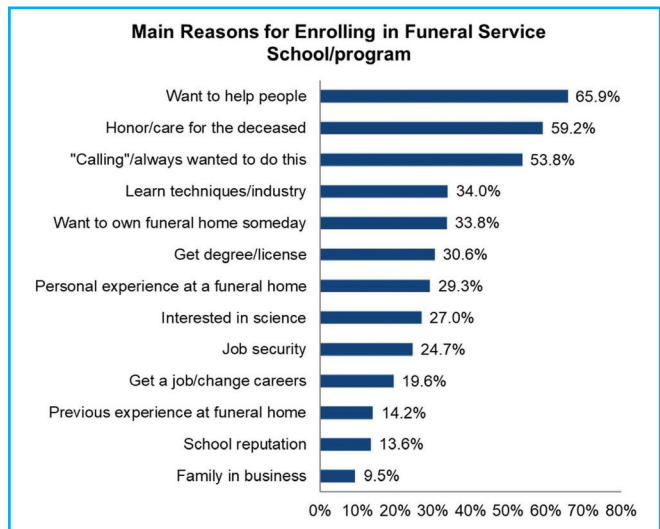
“To Help People”

Cited as Top Reason Students Enrolled In Funeral Service School

By Deana Gillespie and Edward J. Defort

Every director is inevitably asked why he or she wanted to become a funeral director. According to the 841 students participating in this year’s NFDA “Funeral Service Student Expectations Study,” the main reason cited by two-thirds of respondents was they “want to help people.” Placing second was to “honor/care for the deceased” (59.2%), and funeral service was a “calling” or “they’d always wanted to do this” (53.8%). These three reasons form a consistent thread through past NFDA surveys as the top reasons students decided to enter funeral service programs. Other reasons cited in the 2022 study were:

- Learn techniques/industry: 34%
- Want to own a funeral home someday: 33.8%
- Get a license/degree: 30.6%
- Personal experience at a funeral home: 29.3%
- Interested in science: 27%
- Job security: 24.7%
- Get a job/change career: 19.6%
- Previous experience at funeral home: 14.2%
- School reputation: 13.6%



OTHER KEY STUDY FINDINGS

Funeral service seems to be trending away from the multi-generational business it once was. Of note: Having a family



ing students expect to receive living quarters, loan services and/or paid military leave.

Sixty percent of the student respondents plan to take the national board exam (NBE) because their schools require it to graduate; an additional 38.1% plan to take it even though their schools do not require it. Furthermore, 84% of students plan to take the NBE

member in the business was cited by just 9.5% of study respondents.

Further supporting this trend are the most recent statistics from the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE), which found that in 2021, only 9.4% of new enrollees had a parent in the business; 1.1% had a spouse; 0.8% a sibling; 0.7% an in-law; and 2.5% said “other” relative. ABFSE data identify this as a consistent trend. In 2018, 13% of all new enrollees were carrying on or entering the family business; the figure was nearly 18% in 2017.

The most- and least-expected job responsibilities students anticipate having at a funeral home have remained essentially the same during the past three NFDA survey waves. Once hired, they expect to embalm (89.2%); arrange funerals (86.8%); direct funerals (85.4%); and perform removals (80.4%).

At the bottom of the list were owning a funeral home (17.4%); fleet maintenance (18.7%); and information technology (22.4%).

In general, student expectations regarding job benefits have increased somewhat from 2019. The top benefits students expect to receive once employed include an annual salary increase (71.5%, an increase from 67.5%); medical insurance (71.2%, up from 69.1%); paid sick time (71%, up from 67.8%); paid vacation (63.4%, up from 62.7%), dental insurance (63%, up from 57.9%); and employer-paid license renewal (61.5%, down from 62.5%).

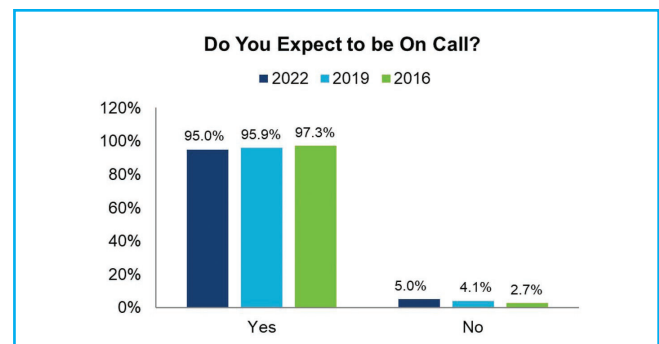
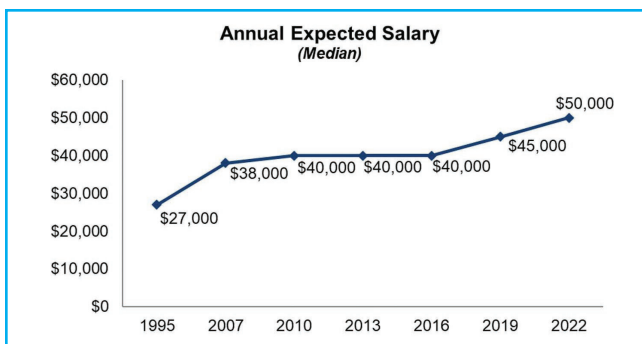
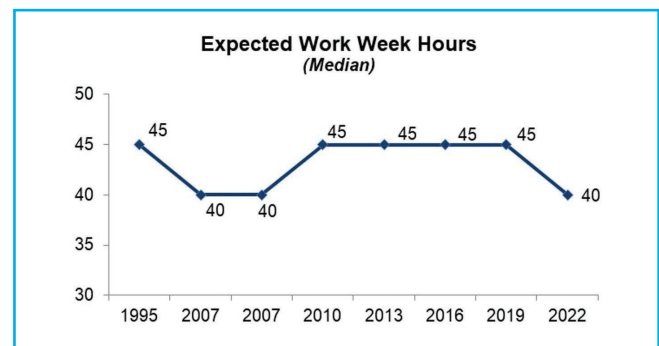
Similar to prior survey waves, fewer than 10% of respond-

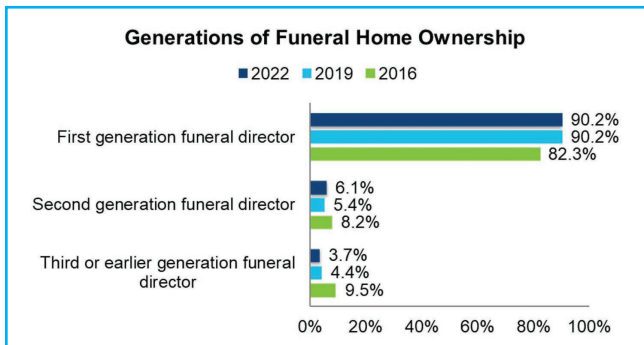
within one to three months of graduation.

During the past three NFDA survey waves (2022, 2019 and 2016), there has been a noticeable increase in the number of funeral service students who expect to have jobs secured upon graduation. This year, nearly 60% of respondents said they expect to have a job when they graduate (up from 57.9% in 2019, and 54.4% in 2016); and 25.6% expect to have a job within one to three months post-graduation, which is up from 22.6% in 2019.

Survey respondents put the median expected annual salary at \$50,000 in 2022. This is up from \$45,000 in 2019, and \$40,000 in 2016. The mean/average expected salary is \$59,968.

Similar to past survey waves, students expect to work 40 hours per week (or more as needed), which is less than the 45-hour figure that has held steady since 2010. The mean/average number of hours students expect to work is 46.





Another NFDA study result has remained consistent since 2010 as well: Almost all students surveyed expect to be on call as part of their job. Only 5% don't expect to be on call according to this year's survey.

Most students surveyed will be first-generation funeral directors (90.2%). Of the 9.8% of students who are second-generation or longer directors, 46.2% had one family member who was a funeral director, and 25.6% had two family members who were directors.

If second or third generation, do you expect to work in your family's firm?

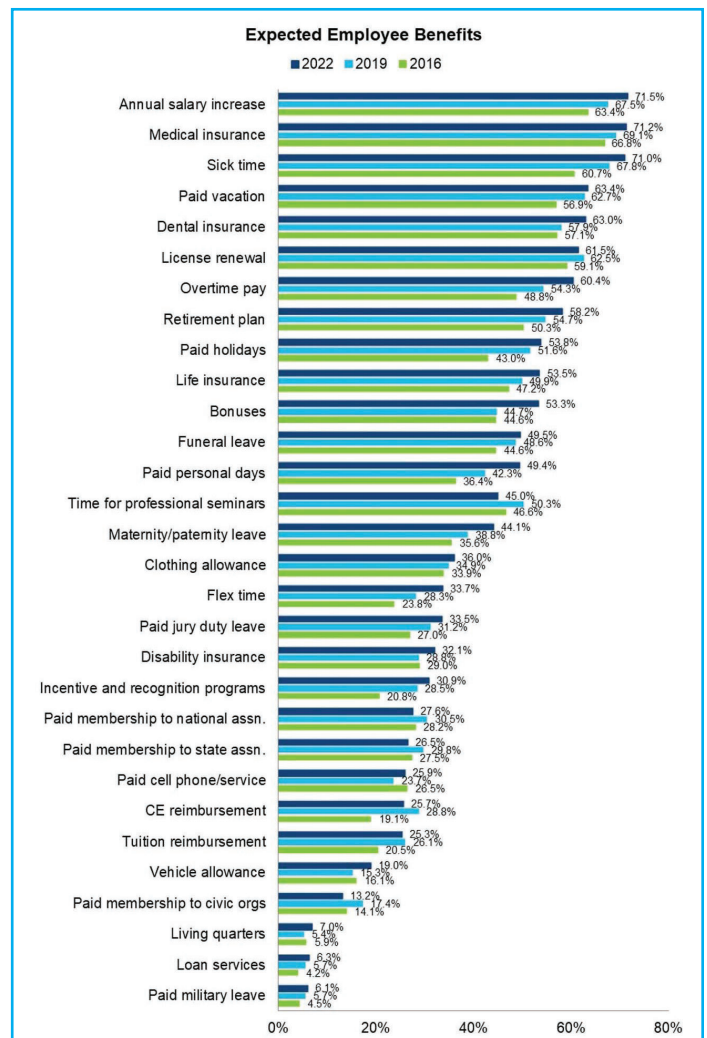
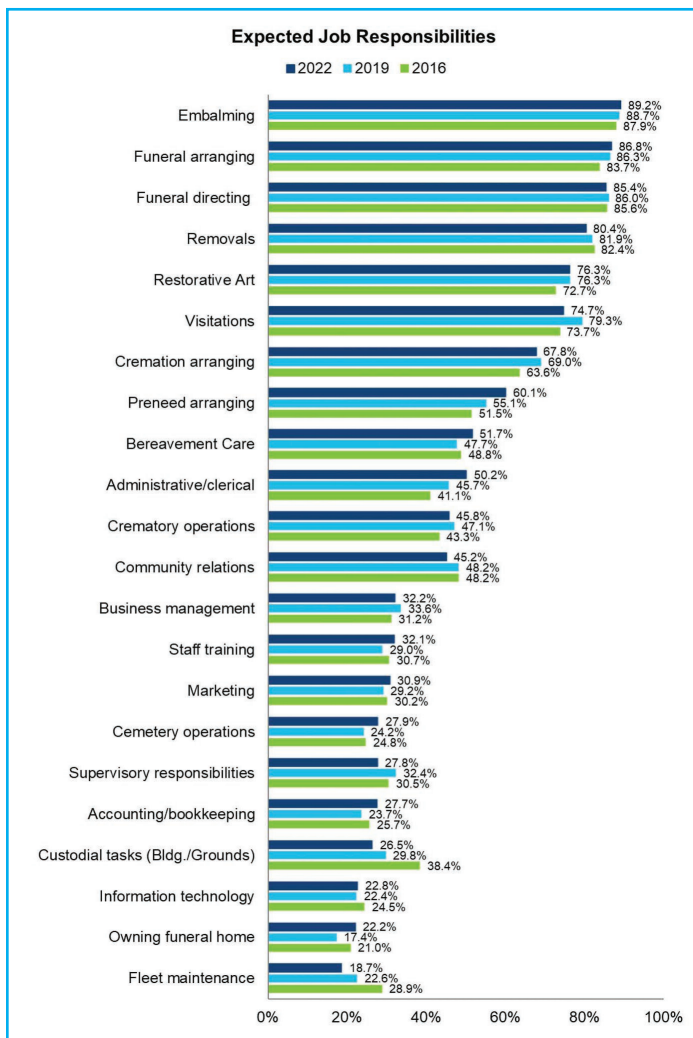
	2019	2022
Yes	56.9%	61.2%
No	29.4%	12.9%
Family does not own funeral home	13.7%	25.9%

Of the students who are second generation or longer, 61.2% plan to work in the family funeral home.

Sixty-two percent of students had a career prior to enrolling in a funeral service school/program, up from 51.3% in 2016. Only 16.4% of respondents did not have any college experience prior to enrolling in funeral service school. Almost 45% stated they had completed some college course work prior to enrolling but did not earn a degree, and 15.7% held an associate degree or higher.

DEMOGRAPHICS

In 2022, 32.8% of student respondents were 25 years old or younger, and 46.2% were between ages 26 and 39. Approximately 21.1% were 40 years old or older.



Just under half of respondents were in their first year of the funeral service program.

Most student respondents were white (63.8%), followed by African-American (19.9%) and Hispanic (11.7%). Almost 80% of student respondents were female (78.8%); 21.1% were male.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The purpose of the NFDA “Funeral Service Student Expectations Study” is to survey funeral service students in order to determine their expectations upon graduation. Among the expectations measured are salary, hours, job responsibilities and benefits. In the future, these results will be compared to the expectations of funeral home owners, who participated in a separate study conducted in spring 2022.

This study is a follow-up to previous NFDA “Funeral Service Student Expectations” studies. In 2010, the survey was redesigned to be more comprehensive but still maintain the longitudinal integrity of previous surveys that had been

conducted, beginning in 1990. Where applicable, the results presented track student expectations across the past three decades.

The American Board of Funeral Service Education provided NFDA with a complete list of U.S. funeral service schools, and all schools were invited to participate. School administrators were sent a survey link to post on the school’s website or email directly to students. Later, a reminder email was sent to these administrators encouraging them to send out reminders to students to encourage their participation. In addition, survey invitations were emailed directly to students who are also NFDA members.

The surveys were administered March 21-April 18, 2022. A total of 841 students completed the survey, representing 48 different schools.

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



ABFSE Reports Record Enrollment in 2021

By Edward J. Defort

New-student enrollment in U.S. funeral service education programs set a new record in 2021, with the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) reporting 3,395 new enrollees. This represents a staggering 31% increase versus the 2020 enrollment, and 5.6% higher than the previous record of 3,213 enrollees in 1996.

Last year’s enrollment numbers prompted another record, with funeral service education programs also setting a new high in total enrollment (new, pre-graduate and graduate students) in the 56 accredited programs. That high was 6,590 students, which is 10.8% higher than the 5,947 enrolled in 2020, and 17% higher than total enrollment in 2019.

There were 1,544 total graduates in 2021 – 10.2% below 2020’s 1,720, which was the highest number of graduates since 2000.

Robb Smith, ABFSE executive director, suggested several factors that contributed to the largest total

Student Enrollment / Graduation

Year	New Students	Graduates
1975	2,475	1,852
1980	2,155	1,397
1985	2,222	1,509
1990	2,213	1,622
1995	3,022	2,221
2000	2,368	1,745
2005	2,691	1,483
2010	2,824	1,374
2011	2,917	1,494
2012	2,885	1,589
2013	2,755	1,548
2014	2,567	1,449
2015	2,639	1,713
2016	2,511	1,638
2017	2,411	1,646
2018	2,359	1,501
2019	2,588	1,597
2020	2,560	1,720
2021	3,395	1,546

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

Attrition Program Year 2021

Reason for Withdrawal	Number	Percentage
Remained in funeral service-related major but transferred to another institution	46	4.68
Changed major but remained in higher education	58	5.91
Left for academic reasons	380	38.70
Left for financial reasons	83	8.45
Left for personal reasons	367	37.37
Left for other reasons	48	4.89
TOTALS	982	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

enrollment experienced by the combined ABFSE-accredited programs. During the past several years, more students have been stretching out the completion of their funeral service education. Smith said that when students have the option to complete funeral coursework in one year, they often take two or more, and a growing number of those completing an associate degree take three years to complete it, versus two.

In 2021, Smith noted, 19 programs experienced an increase in the number of new enrollees, 12 experienced a decrease, and 27 stayed the same. “Remember, this is an overall educational environment where enrollment is generally taking a nosedive,” he said.

So, why the increase? Smith surmised that some new enrollees likely postponed the decision to go to school during the height of the pandemic and reentered the educational marketplace in 2021, even though COVID-19 was still an issue.

“Since COVID-19 forced every institution to pivot to remote learning, a growing number of students is recognizing distance-learning as a viable option,” Smith said.

“I can’t speak for media coverage across the United States, but in my geographic area, most of the coverage of funeral-related topics during COVID-19 were positive, or at least neutral,” he added. “There was significant emphasis on people not having the option to ‘say goodbye’ in the manner they desired. I firmly believe that this unfortunate situation has fortified the value of funerals and encouraged people to seek a career in funeral service when they might not have otherwise considered it.”

INSIDE THE NUMBERS

What’s even more impressive about this year’s new-student enrollment figures is that the previous high of 3,213 in 1996 was, at the time, considered an aberration since that was the year the associate degree was implemented as the minimum ABFSE standard, shifting the educational standard from one year to two. Many students then flocked to ABFSE certificate and diploma programs to complete their funeral service education before the requirement took effect.

Historically, between 2011 and 2018, new-student enrollment showed a gradual dip – from 2,917 students in 2011 to 2,359 in 2018 (a 19.1% decline). 2019 and 2020 numbers show the strongest year-over-year growth since 2014-15, which set the stage for the new record enrollment.

As the enrollment number increased in 2021, so, too,

**New Enrollees By Age
Program Year 2021**

Age	# of Students	Percentage
20 or under	464	13.67
21-25	1,006	29.63
26-30	714	21.03
31-35	459	13.52
36-40	306	9.01
41-45	183	5.39
46-50	105	3.09
51-55	89	2.62
56-60	38	1.12
61-65	15	0.44
66-70	7	0.21
71 and over	2	0.06
Unknown	7	0.21
TOTALS	3,395	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

**New Enrollees
By Prior Education
Program Year 2021**

Level Completed	# of Students	Percentage
GED	182	5.36
High school graduate	3,201	94.29
Other	12	0.35
TOTALS	3,395	100%
High school or equivalent	1,311	38.62
1 year of college	574	16.91
2 years of college	597	17.58
3 years of college	302	8.90
Bachelor’s degree	453	13.34
Master’s degree	100	2.95
Other	58	1.71
TOTALS	3,395	100%
Previously attended a funeral service program	137	

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

**New Enrollees By Ethnic Origin and Gender
Program Year 2021**

Ethnic Origin	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
White	559	58.97	1,496	61.14	2,055	60.53
African American	283	29.85	506	20.68	789	23.24
Hispanic	53	5.59	263	10.75	316	9.31
Native American	5	0.53	25	1.02	30	0.88
Asian-Pacific Islander	3	0.32	30	1.23	33	0.97
Other	45	4.75	127	5.19	172	5.07
TOTALS	948	100%	2,447	100%	3,395	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

did the number of students who left accredited funeral service education programs. In 2021, 982 students left, which is 29.9% more than the 756 students who left in 2020, and 36.6% more than the 719 students who exited in 2019.

This year, reasons cited for leaving included academic (38.7% vs. 33.5% in 2020); personal (37.4% vs. 44.3%); financial (8.5% vs. 11.8%); changed major but remained in higher education (5.9% vs. 5.3%); and “other” reasons (4.9% vs. 4.1%). In 2021, 4.68% remained in a funeral service education-related major but transferred to another institution (1.1% in 2020).

The increasing popularity of distance-learning might have contributed to these numbers as well. “We know that distance-education [commonly referred to as online education] is not for everyone,” said Smith. “With all of the life pressures during the COVID-19 pandemic, it would not come as a surprise for students to embark on distance-education only to find they cannot keep the pace.”

While ABFSE does not track the reason for a change of education venue, Smith noted that it should be expected that students might change schools in order to participate in a dedicated distance-learning environment or vice versa. “... To go to a traditional-based program after realizing that distance-learning does not work for them,” he said. (Of note, the U.S. Department of Education gave every educational

institution the option to offer online learning during the pandemic without gaining specific approval. Under normal circumstances, offering distance-education requires accreditor approval.)

There has been much chatter for years about the enrollment decline in funeral service schools, possibly creating an environment in which there is a shortage of qualified professionals. 2021's enrollment figures certainly offer reasons for optimism.

Still, this is a two-pronged problem. While it's true that the schools do see attrition, it's the post-graduate exodus that most concerns funeral directors and owners. According to a 2020 study charged by ABFSE, graduates who left funeral service cited compensation as the most frequent cause of their departure. That was followed by hours and burnout; domestic and/or family issues; a toxic environment; the expectations of the career; and no opportunity for advancement.

NEW ENROLLEE PROFILES

Based on the ABFSE statistics, the most likely person enrolling in a funeral service program in 2021 was a white female, 21 to 25 years of age, and a high-school graduate with at least one or two years of college.

Despite the increase in enrollment, the numbers do not point to a dramatic increase in any specific age category. In terms of age, just 12.9% of 2021 new-student enrollees was over age 40 – similar to the 12.3% in 2020 – while slightly more than half fell between the ages of 21-30 (the same as in 2020).

The data also reveal that students entering funeral service

education programs continue to have more prior education than previous enrollees. From 1971-2004, the number of students with one or more years of college under their belts ranged between 51% and 62%. In 2009, that figure jumped to 69%. In 2021, it landed at 61.4%, down from 74.2% in 2020, and 71.5% in 2019. However, 38.6% of this year's enrollees have a high school or equivalent education, which is up significantly versus 25.9% last year.

Furthermore, in 2021, the number of enrollees with a bachelor's or graduate degree was 16.3%, down from 19.3% in 2020, and 16.7% in 2019.

Continuing a 21st-century trend, significantly more women than men are enrolling in funeral service programs. The tipping point came in 2000, when female enrollees surpassed males 51% to 49%, respectively. Today, the number of women entering funeral service programs is more than two-and-a-half times the number of men: 72.1% to 27.9%. This compares with 2020's 72.8% female to 27.2% male ratio, and 2019's 70.1% female and 29.9% male ratio.

Broken down by ethnicity, the largest percentage gain was traced to African-American enrollees at 23.2% in 2021, up from 19.3% in 2020, and 18.3% in 2019.

In 2021, ABFSE reported that 60.5% of all new students were white, compared with 62.4% in 2020, and 64.6% in 2019. Hispanics accounted for 9.3% of new enrollees in 2021, up from 13.2% in 2020, and 12.3% in 2019. From a much smaller base, the number of Asian/Pacific Islander new enrollees was 0.97% in 2021, up from 0.78% in 2020 but down from 1.2% in 2019. The number of new Native American students was

0.88%, up from 0.78% in 2020 but down from 1.2% in 2019. The number of new students of "other" ethnic backgrounds was 5.1%, up from 3.6% in 2020, and 2.4% in 2019.

2021 ABFSE stats show that 59% of male new enrollees, and 61.1% of female new enrollees, were white. This compares with 65.8% of male new enrollees, and 61.2% of female new enrollees, in 2020; and 67.4% of male new enrollees, and 63.4% of female new enrollees, in 2019.

The number of African-American new enrollees in 2021 was up: 30% of male enrollees and 20.7% of female enrollees. This compares with 20.7% of male enrollees, and 18.7% of female enrollees, in 2020; and 19.4% of male new enrollees, and 17.9% of female new enrollees, in 2019.

In 2021, 5.6% of new male enrollees, and 10.7% of new female enrollees, were Hispanic. This compares to 10.1% and 14.3%, respectively, in 2020, and 9.6% and 13.4%, respectively, in 2019.

New Enrollees By Prior Funeral Service Employment Program Year 2021

Employed	# of Students	Percentage of Total Students New Enrollees (3,395)
Less than 6 months	504	14.85
6 months to 1 year	324	9.54
More than 1 year	502	14.79
TOTALS	1,330	39.18%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

New Enrollees By Family in Funeral Service Program Year 2021

	# of Students	Percentage of Total Students New Enrollees (3,395)
Parent	320	9.43
Spouse	37	1.09
Sibling	27	0.80
In-law	23	0.68
Other	85	2.50
TOTALS	492	14.49%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

Graduates By Ethnic Origin and Gender Program Year 2021

Ethnic Origin	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
White	314	68.26	716	65.93	1,030	66.62
African American	77	16.74	179	16.48	256	16.56
Hispanic	33	7.17	134	12.34	167	10.80
Native American	3	0.65	9	0.83	12	0.78
Asian/Pacific Islander	11	2.39	12	1.10	23	1.49
Other/Did Not Indicate	22	4.78	36	3.31	58	3.75
TOTALS	460	100%	1,086	100%	1,546	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

Asian/Pacific Islanders accounted for 0.3% of new male enrollees, and 1.2% of new female enrollees, in 2021. This compares with 0.9% of new male enrollees, and 0.7% of new female enrollees, in 2020, and 1.4% of new male enrollees, and 1.2% of new female enrollees, in 2019.

Native Americans made up 0.5% of new male enrollees, and 1% of new female enrollees, in 2021. This compares with 0.6% and 0.9%, respectively, in 2020, and 0.8% and 1.3%, respectively, in 2019.

Of those who checked “other” in 2021, ABFSE reported 4.7% of all new male enrollees, and 5.2% of new female enrollees, versus 2% of all new male enrollees, and 4.2% of new female enrollees, in 2020, and 1.4% and 2.8%, respectively, in 2019.

In 2021, 14.5% of all new enrollees were carrying on, or getting into, the family business, up from 13.2% in 2020, and 12.8% in 2019.

Of all new enrollees, 9.4% had a parent in the business, 1.1% had a spouse, 0.8% a sibling, 0.7% an in-law, and 2.5% said “other” relative.

Enrollees who had prior funeral service-related employment logged in at 39.2% in 2021, down from 40.1% in 2020.

GRADUATE PROFILES

As mentioned earlier, there were 1,544 graduates from the 56 ABFSE-accredited programs in 2021. This was down 11.4% from 1,720 graduates in 2020, and down 3.3% from 1,597 graduates in 2019.

According to ABFSE, last year’s graduates represented 47 states and the District of Columbia; four graduates hailed from other countries. (Hawaii, South Dakota and Wyoming had no graduates.) Texas led all states with 187 grads, followed by Illinois with 112, New York with 97, Pennsylvania with 76, Florida with 66, and Georgia with 64.

As noted previously, 2000 was the year in which the scales tipped toward women on the enrollment side, but it wasn’t until 2005 that there were more women than men graduating from funeral service education programs. Of the 1,483 graduates that year, 52.2% were women. Overall in 2021, 70% of the 1,544 graduates were women. In 2020, two-thirds (67%) of the 1,720 graduates were women, and in 2019, 65.2% of the 1,597 graduates were women.

In terms of age, only 14.2% of 2021 graduates were over age 40, while 55.2% fell in the 21-30 age bracket. This compares with 15.2% and 56.2%, respectively, of 2020 graduates.

**Graduates By Age
Program Year 2021**

Age	# of Students	Percentage
20 or under	114	7.37
21-25	505	32.66
26-30	349	22.57
31-35	200	12.94
36-40	159	10.28
41-45	94	6.08
46-50	63	4.08
51-55	32	2.07
56-60	20	1.29
61-65	6	0.39
66-70	4	0.26
71 and over	0	0.00
Unknown	0	0.00
TOTALS	1,546	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

**Graduates By Prior Education
Program Year 2021**

Level Completed	# of Students	Percentage
GED	64	4.14
High school grad	1,477	95.54
Other	5	0.32
TOTALS	1,546	100%
High school or equivalent	477	30.85
1 year of college	230	14.88
2 years of college	376	24.32
3 years of college	132	8.54
Bachelor’s degree	250	16.17
Master’s degree	50	3.23
Other	31	2.01
TOTALS	1,546	100%
Previously attended a funeral service program	83	

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

**Graduates Who
Worked While in School
Program Year 2021**

Employment	Number	Percentage of Total Number Grads (1,546)
In funeral-related services	1,052	68.05
Other non-funeral service employment	346	22.38
TOTALS	1,398	90.43%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

**Graduates By Family
in Funeral Service
Program Year 2021**

Employment	Number	Percentage of Total Number Grads (1,546)
Parent	161	10.41
Spouse	17	1.10
Sibling	13	0.84
In-law	18	1.16
Other	42	2.72
TOTALS	251	16.24%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

The 2021 data also show that the number of graduates with a bachelor’s or master’s degree was 19.4%, down from 21.7% in 2020 but up from 18.6% in 2019.

According to ABFSE, 66.6% of all graduates were white, compared with 68.8% in 2020, and 69.1% in 2019. The percentage of African-American graduates was 16.6% in 2021, compared with 18.2% in both 2020 and 2019. The percentage of Hispanic graduates in 2021 was 10.8%, up from 8.8% in 2020, and 9.6% in 2019.

From a smaller base, the percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander graduates was 1.5% in 2021, up from 1% in 2020, and 0.8% in 2019. The percentage of Native American graduates last year was 0.8%, down a tick from 0.9% in 2020 and 2019. Graduates with “other/did not indicate” responses was 3.7% in 2021, up from 2.1% in 2020, and 1.2% in 2019.

Broken down by gender, 68.2% of male graduates, and 65.9% of female graduates, in 2021 were white, which compares with 71.8% of male graduates, and 67.4% of female graduates, in 2020, and 74.9% and 66.1%, respectively, in 2019. Last year, 16.7% of male graduates and 16.5% of female graduates were African-American, compared with 19.5% of male graduates, and 17.5% of female graduates, in 2020, and 16.8% and 19%, respectively, in 2019. Among Hispanic graduates, 7.2% were male and 12.3% were female, compared with 5.5% male and 10.5% female in 2020, and 5.4%



and 11.9%, respectively, in 2019.

Native Americans accounted for 0.6% of male graduates, and 0.8% of female graduates, in 2021. This compares with 0.5% of male graduates, and 1.1% of female graduates, in 2020, and 0.7% and 1.1%, respectively, in 2019.

In 2021, 2.3% of all male graduates, and 1.1% of female graduates, were Asian/Pacific Islander, compared with 0.9% of all male graduates, and 1.1% of female graduates, in 2020, and 0.9% of male graduates, and 0.8% of female graduates, in 2019.

ABFSE reported that 4.8% of all male graduates, and 3.3% of all female graduates, in 2021 classified themselves as “other/did not indicate,” compared with 1.8% of all male graduates, and 2.3% of all female graduates, in 2020, and 1.4% of all male graduates, and 1.1% of all female graduates, in 2019.

In 2021, 16.2% of graduates had a relative in funeral service, which is up from 12.8% of graduates in 2020, and 14.9% in 2019. A total of 161 graduates (10.4%) had a parent in the business in 2021; 1.1% had a spouse, 0.8% had a sibling, 1.2% had an in-law, and 2.7% responded “other” relative.

Graduates who worked in a funeral service-related job while attending school logged in at 68% in 2021. This was up from 63.6% in 2020, and 67.9% in 2019.

Ed Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.

New Enrollees / Graduates By State (Program Year 2021)

State	New Enrollees	Percentage	Graduates	Percentage
Alabama	110	3.24	21	1.36
Alaska	6	0.18	1	0.06
Arizona	4	0.16	26	1.68
Arkansas	34	1.00	23	1.49
California	97	2.86	58	3.75
Colorado	28	0.82	21	1.36
Connecticut	34	1.00	17	1.10
Delaware	5	0.15	4	0.26
District of Columbia	8	0.24	4	0.26
Florida	180	5.30	66	4.27
Georgia	237	6.98	64	4.14
Hawaii	4	0.12	0	0.00
Idaho	6	0.18	5	0.32
Illinois	183	5.39	112	7.24
Indiana	150	4.42	46	2.96
Iowa	43	1.27	21	1.36
Kansas	30	0.88	13	0.84
Kentucky	118	3.48	36	2.33
Louisiana	49	1.44	33	2.13
Maine	14	0.41	5	0.32
Maryland	25	0.74	24	1.55
Massachusetts	100	2.95	40	2.59
Michigan	76	2.24	39	2.52
Minnesota	46	1.35	29	1.88
Mississippi	51	1.50	27	1.75
Missouri	58	1.71	25	1.62
Montana	9	0.27	5	0.32
Nebraska	10	0.29	9	0.58
Nevada	3	0.09	2	0.13
New Hampshire	10	0.29	5	0.32
New Jersey	91	2.68	41	2.65
New Mexico	7	0.21	7	0.45
New York	189	5.57	97	6.27
North Carolina	140	4.12	59	3.82
North Dakota	6	0.18	3	0.19
Ohio	83	2.44	43	2.78
Oklahoma	96	2.83	29	1.88
Oregon	29	0.85	15	0.97
Pennsylvania	165	4.86	76	4.92
Rhode Island	15	0.44	4	0.26
South Carolina	82	2.42	26	1.68
South Dakota	11	0.32	0	0.00
Tennessee	166	4.89	30	1.94
Texas	320	9.43	187	12.10
Utah	33	0.97	17	1.10
Vermont	1	0.03	1	0.06
Virginia	87	2.56	57	3.69
Washington	49	1.44	24	1.55
West Virginia	25	0.74	10	0.65
Wisconsin	41	1.21	34	2.20
Wyoming	4	0.12	0	0.00
Unknown	0	0.00	1	0.06
Foreign	6	0.18	4	0.26
TOTAL	3,395	100%	1,546	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

Taking Your NBE? Prepare to Succeed

By Gabriel Schauf

Congratulations! You've graduated from your funeral service program and your years of studying, homework, projects and exams are behind you. You are now free to begin your journey as a funeral professional. The world is your oyster.

Well, not quite. Your biggest challenge, the national board examination (NBE), is yet to come. Its two sections – arts and sciences, comprising 150 questions – will test your knowledge and critical-thinking skills. The NBE poses the last barrier between you and your goal of becoming a licensed funeral director. Your career, your very future, hangs in the balance!

Now, if that sounds like a feeble attempt to build suspense, it is.

Is the NBE challenging? Yes, but it's not impossible. Unfortunately, many of you may already think otherwise due to others who convey a sense of anxiety and stress about the exam, including your employer or the “more seasoned” directors at your firm, who took their NBE years ago and don't have a clue what it's like now; fellow students who went before you and perhaps weren't successful the first time; perhaps even some of your instructors, who didn't mean to frighten you and just wanted to motivate you to study and prepare properly.

As an instructor, I'm amazed at the number of students every year who show concern and ask about the NBE during the first week of school! They haven't even started but are already aware of the stigma of the exam.

As such, I submit to you this tip when it comes to taking the NBE: Don't get wrapped up in the hype. Often in life, our success or failure is determined by the psychological. Sometimes, our failures are due, in part, to the way we build things up in our heads and make mountains out of molehills.

The same can be said for the NBE. For many who, unfortunately, believe this exam is a terrifying, unpassable monster, their fear can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Don't fall for that trap! Yes, the NBE is challenging. Yes, many who have taken it before you have struggled. With the

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proper preparation, some study discipline, the right work ethic and a bit of confidence, however, you can simply check another box on your way to becoming a licensed funeral service professional.

TIPS FOR NBE SUCCESS

To help with your preparation, and to give you a little confidence along the way, I connected with four recent graduates and NBE test-takers in order to share a little about their test-prep process. Experience is a wonderful teacher and I hope theirs will get you started on the path to success. For this article, I spoke with:

Allyssa Shanahan, graduate, Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC), and funeral director, Martin Schwartz Funeral Home and Crematory, Lancaster, Wisconsin

Jerissa Ward, graduate, Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service, and funeral director, Carter-Trent Funeral Home, Kingsport, Tennessee

Timothy Barnett, graduate, Mid-America School of Funeral Service, and employee at Hickman-Strunk Funeral Home, Whitley City, Kentucky

Kyle Grant, graduate, Milwaukee Area Technical College, and employee at Wilson Funeral Home, Racine, Wisconsin.

WHAT WAS THE LENGTH OF TIME BETWEEN GRADUATION AND TAKING THE NBE, AND WHICH EXAM DID YOU TAKE FIRST?

SHANAHAN: I took arts four months after graduating and sciences after eight months – I kept putting it off because I was so nervous. I took the arts exam first [because] I felt like I knew that section best. Sciences made me nervous because I was not as strong in the math and sciences portions. However, once I started really studying sciences, I became so passionate about it. It was such a good feeling.

WARD: Twenty days for arts and 27 days for sciences. I took the arts exam first because it was the hardest topic for me

when taking my exit exams from Gupton-Jones. I knew if I did well enough to pass this exam, then I would be okay overall. It gave me the confidence I needed to study mindfully on science.

BARNETT: Two weeks. Arts.

GRANT: Two months for arts and three months for sciences. I took the arts first because I felt I was retaining the information better than the sciences.

DESCRIBE YOUR STUDY SCHEDULE?

SHANAHAN: I studied pretty aggressively for a month, but in the months leading up to that, I would study a few times a week for a few hours. After I scheduled my tests, I set aside the three days before to focus on studying without interruptions or distractions. I recommend that to everyone.

WARD: Beginning the week before each exam, I studied daily. I focused on one or two subjects. I only studied the materials for the sciences exam before taking the science and vice versa for the arts. I did not mix studying. I would study anywhere from three to five hours per day, equating to 21 to 35 hours of studying before each exam.

BARNETT: Every day. Four 30-minute sessions.

GRANT: I studied five to six days a week, and each study session was anywhere from two to three hours.

WHAT RESOURCES DID YOU USE TO PREPARE?

SHANAHAN: I used Quizlet, but I was always worried it wasn't the right answer. I also used notes and study guides from my time at DMACC. Using these resources, I was able to make my own notes and break down the information to adjust to my learning style. I am a visual learner, so reading books or words on a page did not do me any good.

WARD: As I was attending school, I used the Funeral Service Compend book to expand my knowledge and facilitate memorization. The International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards' (ICFSEB) study guide was very instrumental in memorizing terms. I also relied on the study guides from our Compend/Capstone class for question structure. From there, I made flashcards out of the harder concepts and studied those while at work. Lastly, I reviewed questions on Quizlet.

BARNETT: The biggest thing I used was the Capstone review course at school. Students had to maintain a 75%, but on the final two exams, you were required to earn at least a 78%.

GRANT: I used my lecture notes from school, read my textbooks, looked at definitions on Quizlet and tested myself on the Death Education Assessment Drills program (D.E.A.D.) I felt that looking at the definitions in the ICFSEB study guide, along with reading the notes I took while in school, were the best. I also liked using the D.E.A.D. program to test myself to see how well I was retaining the information. Quizlet was also a good way to look up definitions. I feel the ICFSEB study guide has a great outline to follow for studying for both sections of the exam.

WHAT STUDY STRATEGIES DID YOU FIND MOST HELPFUL?

SHANAHAN: While studying, I found myself rewriting my notes. I focused on drawing pictures and adding lots of color, too. Making my notes "pretty" made retaining the information easier. I also made note cards with the study guides from each subject. I made each card look clean and neatly done as I struggled to be motivated to look at the material if it wasn't neat or colorful. Messy study materials make me nervous.

WARD: Reviewing the Funeral Service Compend book in conjunction with each course was instrumental in general understanding throughout school. Post-graduation, taking the time to memorize all the terms in the ICFSEB study guide was very impactful. The Capstone/Compend class notes were a great refresher of the overall scope of the material. Quizlet was the least powerful tool used, as many of the questions were not reflective of the style asked on the NBE.

BARNETT: I reviewed my Capstone course material. I also subscribed to the NBEexamprep.com study resource that [funeral director] Jesse Pettway developed.

GRANT: Rereading definitions and testing myself on the D.E.A.D. program were most helpful.

After I scheduled my tests, I set aside three days before to focus on studying without interruptions or distractions.

WHAT IS THE TESTING SITE ENVIRONMENT LIKE?

SHANAHAN: It's a very cold and basic room. You sit in what looks like a cubicle with a computer in front of you. Bring an extra layer; if you're uncomfortable while you're testing, you'll never be able to focus. Read through all the prompts, take your deep breaths and just prepare yourself overall. Once you see that first question, it all becomes very real. It's important to take a deep breath and remember that you've studied hard and you know all this.

WARD: Make sure you bring two types of ID that are state or federally issued. Do not bring a phone, smartwatch, drinks or food with you. Make sure there is nothing in your pockets. This makes check-in run smoother.

BARNETT: The testing centers check you out well: inside pockets, hand scan, photo, etc. They are extremely nice and helpful, though. Be sure to have two forms of ID; one must have a photo. Be on time, too. If you're over 15 minutes late, they can refuse to let you test.

GRANT: The environment is what I expected – a testing center where they have you put everything in a locker. Once you are in by a computer, all you have is a pencil, a piece of paper and your brain. Make sure to bring a valid form of ID.

WHAT STRATEGIES DID YOU USE WHEN TAKING THE ACTUAL EXAM?

SHANAHAN: Everyone says not to reread your questions, but I did. As a test taker, I don't always read the question as thoroughly as I should. Going back and rereading the questions made me have a different perspective on the question. If I was between two answers, I would flag it and come back to it. I made sure I had enough time to go over my test twice and revisit questions I wasn't sure about. Sometimes, I looked at a question three or four times. For each test, I used the whole time given. Some people just want to get it over with, but that wasn't me.

WARD: I would not read a question more than twice before I would flag it and skip over it. As I got to the end of the exam, I reviewed the questions I had flagged and noticed that [they] seemed to [make] more sense at that moment. Use the memorized terms to look for context clues associated with the terms; nothing I had [on the exam] was verbatim. Also, make sure that you take time to read every question and the options all the way through – do not rush these exams.

BARNETT: The first one that seemed correct, I marked. If I had no clue, I flagged it and came back to it at the end.

GRANT: When I took the test, I flagged questions I could not answer immediately. Any question I knew right away, I would answer and not look back. Do not second-guess yourself. I also used critical thinking and the process of elimination for the questions I did not know. Usually, I was able to get it down to two choices using this method.

Do not second-guess yourself. I used critical thinking and the process of elimination for the questions I didn't know.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR THOSE PREPARING TO TAKE THEIR EXAM SOON?

SHANAHAN: My advice is to take them when you feel ready. The day before the test, take care of yourself. The night before my exam, I got my favorite dinner, watched my favorite movie and went to bed early. If something came to my head from my notes, I would look into it, but I didn't overdo it. I wore my favorite comfy outfit and, on the way to the test, I listened to my favorite song on repeat. The confidence I felt walking into the test made me feel like I had already passed.

WARD: Take the time to study hard and focus on terms. These exams are difficult. Our careers as funeral directors and embalmers only happen if these exams are passed. Therefore, respect the process and give it its due diligence.

BARNETT: The biggest thing – and this is very important: “Do the work!” School is set up for your success. Your coursework is designed to get you ready for the exams. Take the time to learn the course material. This is a passable test!

GRANT: If there's one thing to know about both sections, it's to know your definitions. Most questions on both parts are based on knowing definitions. Knowing definitions and using critical thinking are ways to use the process of elimination on this exam as well. Study your definitions, and test yourself with flashcards, [Kahoot](#) or the D.E.A.D. program. Anything you do not know, go back into your notes and textbooks.

Thank you to my four contributors for their thoughts and advice. As Timothy Barnett stated, “This is a passable test.” As you can see from their comments, it just takes a combination of focus, good study habits, the right test-taking strategies and putting in the time.

What are you waiting for? Open those books. Create those note cards. Learn those definitions. Your future, career and that oyster await! Go get 'em, and good luck!

Gabriel Schauf is a licensed funeral director, an instructor with the Milwaukee Area Technical College funeral service program and host of the NFDA podcast “A Brush With Death.”

The Last Big Move

By Chris Raymond

Years ago, comedian Jerry Seinfeld delivered a stand-up bit during an episode of his namesake sitcom about how people become obsessed with finding boxes when preparing to move. This mania culminates, he joked, when funeral attendees look at a casket and think, “Boy, that's a nice box right there. Look at the handles on that baby. I could put a whole stereo in there.”

He then observed that death is life's “last big move,” i.e.,

the hearse is the moving van, the pallbearers are the friends helping you move, and the casket is that “one perfect box you've been looking for your whole life. The only problem is once you find it, you're in it.”

I recalled this recently after reading a statistic stating that the average American moves 11.7 times in their lifetime. (It's unclear if that includes Seinfeld's “last big move” or not, but I doubt it.) Anyway, I scoffed at first, finding that number too high, until I rattled off the places I've called home thus far: 14.

My career choice – publishing – necessitated several of those moves. Long before





telecommuting became a thing, employers actually expected people to show up physically every day. Unfortunately, magazine jobs in the Milwaukee area were neither plentiful nor conveniently located close together. In other words, to paraphrase the old proverb, “Mr. Raymond had to go to the mountain.”

Likewise, while you might prefer living in a particular state, or have your heart set on working for a particular funeral home, you, too, might need to relocate in order to advance your career. As a new grad, you should remain open to moving in order to expand your employment options and elevate your marketability. Sometimes it requires searching to find the spot where the right place and the right fit intersect.

If the next step on your career path might involve two moves – a new employer and a new place to call home – then check out how NFDA’s partnership with Wheaton World Wide Moving can help make the relocation process less stressful, and even less expensive.

As a new funeral service grad, you should remain open to moving to expand your employment options and elevate your marketability.

HOW THIS BENEFIT CAN HELP YOU

As an NFDA student member (*see box above right*), you’re entitled to discounts on full-service moving and storage services from Wheaton World Wide Moving. This Better Business Bureau-accredited company has more than 75 years of experience and a network of more than 350 agents, which enables it to serve 95% of the U.S.

Experts at residential and commercial relocation – whether to a neighboring state, across the country or somewhere

Join NFDA Free

and become a member of the world’s largest funeral service association. Go to nfda.org/membership, hit “Join Now” and fill in the simple form. As a student at an accredited U.S. funeral service school/program, you can tap into NFDA’s tremendous resources and exclusive benefits *free of charge*. (Add \$35 if you’d prefer receiving *The Director* magazine in the mail instead of digitally.)

else – your NFDA membership entitles you to discounted transportation rates on moving services and discounted storage-in-transit rates.

Wheaton also provides, at no charge, up to \$100,000 of “full replacement value protection” and an expedited claims-settlement process in the event a claim is necessary. In addition, the company guarantees on-time pickup and delivery of your belongings – a promise it backs up monetarily.

Perhaps most important, Wheaton dedicates itself to customer service in order to ease one of life’s more-stressful experiences. This involves personalized service via a single point of contact throughout your move, as well as constant communication until they unload the last box. As the company says, “It’s not about simply moving your stuff. It’s about moving your *life*.”

ACCESSING THIS BENEFIT

To learn more about this benefit, NFDA members should visit nfda.org/benefits, log into their account, click on “Discount Advantage Program” in the left sidebar and then click on “Wheaton World Wide Moving | Bekins Van Line.” There, you will find a link to a unique NFDA-member page that offers a toll-free number and a simple online form you can fill out (your choice) to start the process.

If you want to use a casket to move your stereo or anything else, you should probably make that clear up front to avoid any surprises.

Chris Raymond is the former editor of The Director magazine and runs funeralhelpcenter.com.

The Importance of Balance

By Daniel M. Isard

If you are 20-something and love the funeral service profession, ask yourself right now what education you will need to remain valuable into your 50s and beyond. I don’t mean basic funeral service school education; I mean any and all education that will make you “valuable” in a more holistic sense.

Go ahead. I’ll wait.

No, this wasn’t an easy question, but my point is that

funeral service needs to stop focusing on the minimum continuing-education requirements to keep licenses up to date and, instead, focus on the maximum education to keep its practitioners relevant!



Education doesn't stop at graduation. Would you want to be treated by a doctor who says, "I graduated 20 years ago and haven't done any continuing education except the minimum required"?

I think not. If you want to be called a professional, then the funeral service profession needs to adopt the common actions of other professionals.

PEOPLE SKILLS

Most people think funeral directors deal with the dead. Obviously, those who specialize in embalming and restorative art deal more directly with the dead, but the average licensed funeral director spends about 90% of their time dealing with the living. This includes planning funeral arrangements, including at-need, and generally representing your firm within the community. Strong people skills are required in order for employees to be valuable.

Little in the funeral service school curricula will prepare you for this, however. Occasionally, your state convention will offer a presenter who speaks on the subject of people skills, but this will not train you – it will inform you.

Where can you get the people skills you'll need? Well, you can certainly read books on the subject (there are many). You can attend classes at a local college or online that deal with psychology, sociology and human behavior. You can also attend workshops given by leading funeral service minds to learn more about empathizing and understanding what families are going through.

The key here, though, is that you shouldn't just "think about" doing something to gain these skills but, instead, actually do something!

What's the worst that can happen? You might spend some time and money and leave thinking you got nothing out of it. How many fishing lures are you going to buy and lose in the weeds? How many golf balls are you going to hit and lose in the woods? As the late Al Davis, former owner of the Oakland Raiders, said, "Just do it!"

If your body language is poor, the receiver of your message will be distracted; if your writing is improper, you will lose credibility.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Pause for a moment and think about the methods of communication you employ. Can you improve the following skills?

- **SPEAKING** How comfortable are you speaking one on one, to small, and/or to large groups? Is your vocabulary strong? If not, then take classes to improve your skills. Learn about various groups in your area, such as [Toastmasters](#).
- **WRITING** Can you write a good paragraph? Can you write

a good letter? While email as a means of communication has surpassed writing on paper, your writing flaws will remain just as obvious.

• BODY LANGUAGE

How you dress, stand and smile while talking says as much as your words do. Therefore, visit a high-end clothing store and look at what business-appropriate clothing looks like. Dress for people with whom you will meet at the office and not those with whom you will socialize at the bar after work!

Remember, communication involves both saying what you mean as well as what the recipient of your message needs to hear. If your body language is poor, the receiver of your message will be distracted. If your writing is improper, you will lose credibility. If you are not adept at speaking, all else will be lost from that point forward.

Again, look to resources in your community for help. Take a business writing class at the community college. At this point, you're no longer a kid just trying to pass a class.

BALANCE

If our society has learned anything from the millennial generation (1946-64), it is about balance. Unfortunately, the funeral service profession has missed out on that concept for a long time. Any profession in which you are known by your profession rather than your surname has this problem. The physician who is always called "Doc" has the same issue.

In addition, for a long time, funeral directors never retired. Instead, they died at their desks, working long past normal retirement age. This is because they had no passions outside their professional service.

This was wrong, but I clearly see that the next generation of funeral directors will get this right. As you pursue your funeral service career, always strive to balance your personal passions with your professional passions. If you do, someone might someday introduce you to a group by saying, "This is [YOUR NAME], a great _____, as well as our town funeral director."

Noting your profession second will show that you have achieved the proper life/profession balance.

Dan Isard is founder of The Foresight Companies, which has served thousands of funeral homes nationwide for the past four decades. Contact Isard at 602-274-6464 or danisard@theforesightcompanies.com.



The Profession of Funeral Service, Part 2

By Todd W. Van Beck

In the Spring 2022 issue, Todd Van Beck shared his journey of becoming a funeral director. Here, he describes the micro-categories of funeral service as a profession, in addition to the main ingredient – love of your mission.

THE SUBSTANCE OF A PROFESSION

I've arrived at some additional thoughts that provide depth and relevancy to this idea that truly loving funeral service is the ultimate measure of validating its professional status and that of its practitioners. The following evaluative criteria make up the substance of the profession, in addition to love of mission.

Directors' time is not their own. How could anyone make a convincing argument that the typical funeral professional's time is their own? It almost borders on the ridiculous! It seems that if this criterion was the sole qualifier of funeral service being a profession, the ancient debate would certainly be over.

Directors honor the apprentice/mentor learning system. If we lived in the Middle Ages and our parents were peasants, sadly, that would be our stock in life as well unless some expert – a blacksmith, cobbler or miller – hired us and taught us the skills necessary to do the job well. The blacksmith would be the mentor and the learner would be the apprentice. Does this ancient system of learning a profession not sound familiar?

The mentor/apprentice system has never said anything about classroom learning, online learning or receiving an academic degree. What it does teach is the lesson, still applicable today, that there is wisdom in having a veteran teach a novice – an intern, student or apprentice – the lessons learned from years of performing and honing that skill.

Given this approach to establishing the professional status of funeral service, the case can eloquently be made that funeral service, along with numerous other professions, such as medicine, clergy, education, pharmacy, law and, yes, even welding, have a well-established system of the apprentice/mentor path to professional credibility.

An identifiable process of education. The path of education does not spell out the length of the process or identify the precise academic degrees that must be obtained. This professional criterion only states that there must be an identifiable process of education, which is clearly present in our profession. Most important, though, is the presence of a philosophy of education that centers its ethical standards on the ancient idea of “education simply for the sake of education.”



Equating exclusive higher-level academic degrees as a primary benchmark in creating a profession poses serious drawbacks.

Funeral service might not be at an academic level requiring a master's degree or doctorate, but the expectation of equating exclusive higher-level academic degrees as a primary benchmark in creating a profession poses serious drawbacks.

Unique and special skills and knowledge. It seems safe to claim that the average person does not know where the right common carotid artery is located, let alone possess the ability to incise and elevate that particular vessel in preparation for arterial embalming. Clearly, funeral professionals possess unique and special skills and knowledge. And in funeral service, these skills and knowledge go much further than impressive anatomical knowledge and preservative techniques. The depth of unique and special knowledge the typical funeral professional possesses is vast in scope simply because funeral directors confront literal life-and-death situations in any community. In fact, funeral directors probably have more experiential knowledge and expertise concerning death, dying, bereavement, mourning and grief than any other person in the community.

“Wait a minute!” the skeptic says. “What about hospice? They know everything about death, don't they?” Hospice certainly knows a tremendous amount of extremely valuable information, but in my work with hospice since 1979, I have never heard that they routinely, professionally confront the myriad grief situations created by homicides, auto accidents, suicides, stillbirths, decomposed decedents or other modes of death that are part of the daily work of the funeral professional. To be sure, the words “unique” and “special”

apply to many professions, but these two adjectives have a powerful relevance in describing the professional reality of funeral directors.

Bound together by mutual sense of identity. One of the hallmark accomplishments of our great profession is that funeral directors have long exhibited the keen ability to connect with each other, and for good reason. Funeral service is a unique way of life and not everybody understands the call to become a funeral professional.

I have long thought that this is one of the cardinal reasons why funeral directors clearly like to be in the company of other funeral directors. The communication evident is not ordinary chitchat or small talk. Most conversations between funeral directors center around the fascinating world of the case study – in other words, telling stories. Funeral directors love to tell stories, and nothing is as interesting or binds people of kindred spirits more closely than telling and listening to stories.

When I was a young funeral professional, I discovered that the stories I listened to from veteran funeral professionals were a thousand times more instructive than anything I learned in funeral service college. Frankly, a half-century later, I don't remember much about the things I learned in school, but my sense of mutual identity with other funeral professionals continues to be enhanced to this day by the opportunity to tell and listen to funeral stories with some of the very same people with whom I went to funeral service college.

Lifelong dedication and involvement in a worthy mission. Funeral professionals are involved in service to humanity; this is the core of our profession. All service professions have one supreme and inviolate mission – to help other people.

Funeral service qualifies as a profession simply because of its members' dedication and devotion to their mission, which is to help alleviate the misery and suffering of humanity when death enters life. This type of service mission is not contingent on advanced academic degrees or the approval or disapproval of others. The proof of a successful service mission is the simple response of other human beings to the services being furnished, and funeral professionals receive high marks in providing answers to people's many questions when death enters their lives. Remember the Gallup Poll?

The mission of problem solving is contingent on the character of the individual funeral professional and his or her interest in, and attention to, other human beings. Some in funeral service just don't get this vision of mission, however. They don't love funeral service, but they have the credentials. A lack of love of mission in funeral service – or medicine or law or pharmacy or education – might be one of the main reasons state boards were created in the first place.

Keep in mind that professionals are attracted to mission-centered work. Based on this definition, a worker in a fast-food establishment who has a genuine love of fast food and hence a mission in life to be of service to people who are hungry, is as truly professional as the most brilliant surgeon.

Recognizable, well-enunciated set of values governing relationships with the broader community. One of the hallmarks of the funeral service profession is the set of values that most funeral directors hold near and dear. Terms like “nonsectarian” or “service to all” bespeak a set of well-enunciated values that our profession has for decades held as an ethical standard by which all other activities are judged. Reverence for the dead, caretaker of the dead, caregiver to the living – these terms are living examples of a set of worthy values that most funeral professionals see as the bedrock philosophy of our beloved profession. Few professions are held to such a high standard, and few, if any, have maintained this high standard with such consistent excellence in attitude and practice.

One certainly doesn't have to search very far to see the consequences created by rogue members of our profession who are not professional in the least. By their thoughtless actions, they violate this basic set of well-enunciated values, and usually there are consequences... and usually the results are not good.

If these abusers of our values loved being in the profession in the first place, would behave as they do? No one is looking for perfection, but could not loving funeral service result in an increase of abuses? I don't mean natural human mistakes but *avoidable* abuses that trigger the haunting phrase, “They should have known better.”

Most conversations between funeral directors center around the fascinating world of the case study – in other words, telling stories.

Common language/symbols understood inside but not fully understood outside. Ask any funeral service apprentice or intern about how vulnerable they felt before they understood the language of funeral service. Terms such as “trocar,” “arterial chemicals” or “church truck” (a church on a truck?) are examples of our profession's unique language. No one expects the funeral professional to possess an advanced academic degree in order to know the language, but everyone expects all funeral professionals to understand precisely what the language means.

Every fraternal, social and religious group – actually, every group on earth – has its own unique rites, rituals, ceremonies and symbols concerning death, funerals, burials, cremation, etc. In light of this, one can easily conclude that the funeral profession, and hence the global funeral service world, possesses a distinct, common language and set of symbols that we, as funeral professionals, understand but that not everyone outside the profession understands.

Our profession's pioneer educators and colleges propelled our professional knowledge to a level of sophistication never before seen in deathcare history.

Authority and influence with the membership comes through internal discipline. In many states – years before a state medical board, state nursing board or even state bar association board existed – the state board of funeral directors and embalmers was already well-established and thriving through a system of internal discipline. Early in the rich history of our profession, it was quickly recognized that funeral service called out for internal discipline, and such professional vision gave rise to the advent of funeral service colleges and funeral service education across the country.

Our profession's noble heritage should never be forgotten. Its pioneer educators and colleges propelled our professional knowledge to a level of sophistication never before seen in deathcare history.

Roles and activities fully understood inside and reasonably understood outside. How many times has a funeral service outsider asked, “How can you stand being around death all the time?” or something to that effect?

Of course, most funeral professionals know precisely why they are in funeral service, as well as their role and identity as individuals devoted to their life mission as a caretaker of the dead and caregiver to the living. Because people ask that question, however, it is clear that our mission, our profession and our dedication are only reasonably understood by people outside our ranks until, of course, they need us.

A hallmark of the professional status of funeral service practitioners is that most not only understand this state of affairs but are sensitive enough to overlook these “outsider” questions, which can sometimes be ridiculous and insulting, and readily respond whenever the death of a member of the human family occurs. Most funeral professionals are so kind and thoughtful that they possess the priceless ability to understand and let cruel remarks pass.

This ability to understand the DNA of funeral service realities inside and also understand that people outside our profession only reasonably understand what we do (until they need us) is indeed one of the benchmarks of our identity as a profession.

Role definitions are clear, agreed upon and the same for all members. It is interesting how clear and agreed upon the role definitions are in our profession without actually being written down in laws and statutes. The inherent roles of being a caretaker of the dead and a caregiver to the living have been so abundantly clear and agreed upon that these two

definitions of who we are as professionals were understood and accepted decades before anyone thought of creating state boards of funeral directors and embalmers.

When I travel to other countries to present seminars where there is no formal licensing system, the vast majority of these funeral professionals clearly understand the unwritten, unspoken, uncodified definitions of the role of caretaker of the dead and caregiver to the living.

Once, I gave a speech to a gathering of South American funeral directors and experienced a tremendous language barrier. All I had to do to connect with these great people, however, was start talking about the role of the funeral professional and soon we were all speaking the same “language” even though our words to each other were foreign and required an interpreter. This is an impressive global reality that further clears the way for our quest to identify funeral service as a sincere and valid profession.

Enhances the quality of the next generation by influencing education and training. The license is important. An educated, credentialed profession is critically important. Funeral service colleges have a very important mission to fulfill, and this mission needs to be respected and supported by all of us. The colleges of funeral service science do a grand job!

I long ago concluded, however, that when I graduated from funeral service college and received my diploma, I received that fateful day not the keys to the kingdom but the keys to the hearse. In other words, I earned my “learner's permit.”

I believe this to be true: The quality of the next generation in our beloved profession rests with human beings who find their mission to serve humanity through their identified love of funeral service. From this standpoint, our profession excels globally at creating a wise and effective watermark for the newly initiated. Funeral service colleges and licenses might not exist everywhere, but in our profession, the mentor/apprentice system is ever present.

True, there are horror stories about this or that apprenticeship experience, or lack of them, but the same kind of stories are told in abundance in medical, clergy and teaching apprenticeships as well. Apprenticeship on a global basis has never claimed it had to be a love fest.

From the simple position of maintaining, and in many regions enhancing, the mentor/apprentice experience, however, funeral service has utterly excelled at taking very seriously the quality of the next generation who will make up the body, mind and spirit of this great profession. The mentor/apprentice experience should never be underestimated, and in most places it is not.

Sets ideals to be reached, normally in terms of service to the larger community. When I decided to become a funeral director, the decision had nothing to do with what any legislative or governmental agency had to say. In time, what these organizations had to say became of great importance in my life and career, but starting out, my motivation had everything to do with my innate attraction to anything that reflected high ideals in service to others. This is what makes funeral service a profession.

The best definition of “success” I’ve ever heard goes like this: “Success is the progressive realization of a worthy ideal.” Being of service to humanity is unquestionably a worthy ideal. The caretaking of the dead and caregiving of the living has always been the worthy ideal in our profession – even back to the Neanderthal and their primitive yet highly meaningful burial customs.

The worthy ideal concerning the mission of our profession was most eloquently captured by the familiar quote of William Gladstone, prime minister of Great Britain: “Show me the manner in which a nation or community cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender sympathies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land and their loyalty to high ideals.”

While this quote is a beautiful sentiment that thousands of funeral professionals have committed to memory, we now live in and contend with a culture that has lost much of its sentimentality. In the end, almost every worthy ideal that makes a difference in life is based on sentiment because it is from the human ability to feel sentimental that the ability for human sympathy arises. They go hand in hand.

And it is from human sympathy for the misery of another human being that the motivation arises to be of service to humanity. That is the inviolate core of the profession.

It’s not a perfect or problem-free profession, nor one with perfect people in it. Nonetheless, it’s a profession of the first rank.

Requires more training and education than the public demands and insists on a higher standard of behavior. Do you think the average U.S. citizen is aware that funeral service colleges exist? While it’s ultimately irrelevant, it is the very history of funeral service education that sets the solid contemporary foundation for funeral service professionalism. Sophisticated and advanced funeral service education clearly is a primary example of the fact that our professional leadership over more than a hundred years possessed the wisdom and insight to require more training and education than the general community insists on or is even aware of.

I have often wondered what the outcome might be if the combination of our genuine love of funeral service was combined with the worthy ideal of continued advancement in funeral service education. Might this combination result in a bachelor’s degree as the minimal academic entrance requirement to become a funeral director nationally? (Okay, take a breath. I’m just thinking out loud and don’t mean any harm.)

Professional status anywhere on earth is ultimately based on the contributions of one person’s belief in the power of their individual influence that results in a genuine love of being of humble service to humanity. This is the ideal, the

core substance that makes funeral service a profession.

PARTING THOUGHTS

After earning his medical degree, Albert Schweitzer, world-famous humanitarian, physician and theologian, went to the Congo in 1913, at a time when a medical license was not required. He had a burning desire serve humanity in Africa, so he opened a missionary hospital, and the rest is history.

In time, the Congo did require a medical license, but in Schweitzer’s mission of service to others that ultimately didn’t matter. After he had worked a half-century at his profession, the doctor left us with a beautiful thought that encapsulates the professional position held by funeral service worldwide, even countries in which formalized credentials do not exist.

Said Schweitzer: “I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those of you who will have sought and found how to serve.”

Based on the good doctor’s definition of the worthy ideal of service as the best road to personal happiness, I conclude that there must be many happy people in the funeral service profession. Across the globe, funeral professionals have truly, and with tremendous success, sought and found how to serve.

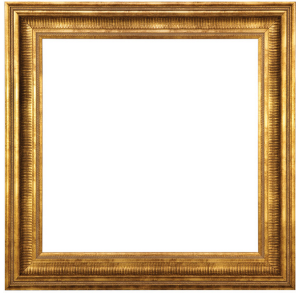
So, once again, is funeral service a profession? Was my unlicensed friend out West so many years ago unprofessional (*see the Spring 2022 issue for Part 1*)? Or was his heart akin to Dr. Schweitzer’s? Is professionalism dependent solely on legislative and government bureaucracy? Is the proof of funeral service’s true, authentic professionalism found solely in the licenses one possesses? If you don’t possess those necessary licenses, are you automatically guilty of being unprofessional?

From my meager and flawed exploration of this subject, it seems funeral service is indeed a profession. It is not a perfect profession, it is not a problem-free profession, and it is not a profession that has perfect people in it. Nonetheless, it is a profession of the first rank, and funeral service professionals are charged with protecting, maintaining, improving and enhancing the noble mission of what makes funeral service a profession in the first place – to be of humble service to humanity and love doing it.

It is not the length or number of letters behind a person’s name that is ultimately important but rather the length someone will go to be of service to others and the number of kind acts one solitary person can pile up in a lifetime. It is the combination of these ideas – the length of service and number of kind acts – that creates, at the end of our life journey, what I call professional immortality. It is also one of the silent but powerful ingredients that got funeral professionals so high up on the Gallup Poll in the noble and worthy categories of trust, honor and respect.

Going the length in service to help others and piling up kind acts in service to others is, in the end, in my humble opinion, what makes funeral service an authentic profession.

Todd W. Van Beck is an educator, author and frequent presenter at funeral service conventions.

From the Editor's Desk

Framing a Picture

By Edward J. Defort

One thing you probably learned before you enrolled in a funeral service program is that statistics hold varying degrees of interest. For example, during the course of any Major League Baseball game, there are certainly enough analytics and data to, well, warrant turning down the volume. For example, broadcasters seemed fixated on a batter's exit velocity – the speed at which the batted ball travels when hit.

Now, I like a good statistic as much as the next person, but there are so many variables involved, such as the park's shape and dimension, weather, etc.

In statistics more relevant to funeral service, the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) issues its report each year offering a detailed look at enrollment and graduation numbers for the 56 accredited funeral service programs. This year, new-student enrollment in funeral service education programs set a record, with 3,395 new enrollees – a staggering 31% increase over 2020 enrollment, and 5.6% higher than the previous record of the 3,213 enrolled in 1996.

Of note, total current-year enrollment (new, pre-graduate and graduate students) in the 56 programs in 2021 was 6,590 students – 10.8% higher than the 5,947 enrolled in 2020, and 17% higher than total enrollment in 2019.

What does this mean for you? While we keep an eye on the number of funeral service graduates, we must still be mindful, too, that a number of states are seeing shortages in funeral director applicants.

And let's not lose sight of that nebulous baby boomer spike predicted to occur anytime between 10 years ago and 2025 (really, it looks like it's going to be less of a spike and more of a gradual increase). About 10 or 15 years ago, prognosticators were suggesting that the baby boomer-fueled spike in the number of deaths would be hitting about now. Even though that projection turned out to be at least a half-decade premature, it still forced the profession to think about the developing labor pool.

The challenge for funeral service programs has been, and remains, producing quality students/graduates who stay in the profession.

It's not an overstatement to say that staffing decisions at a funeral home are the most important ones an owner or manager must make. If these statistics are indeed framing a picture, that importance will only increase.

Edward J. Defort
Editor

The Director.edu

A publication of the
National Funeral Directors Association

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The Director.edu is a quarterly publication of the National Funeral Directors Association. Its mission is to provide objective, comprehensive news and analysis to funeral service students.

Subscription Rates:

The Director.edu is free of charge to all students of accredited funeral service programs. The nonstudent rate is \$40 for one year (4 issues).

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