



## SUMMER

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## New Student Enrollment and Graduates Down; Total Enrollment Up in 2018

By Edward J. Defort

New enrollment in mortuary science programs in 2018 was the lowest since 2001, and the number of graduates dropped to its lowest level in five years, according to statistics compiled by the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE).

The total current-year enrollment (new students, pre-graduates and graduate students), however, in the 58 mortuary science programs in 2018 was 5,505, 2.3% more than the 5,381 in 2017 and 8.7% below the 2016 total of 6,031.

“As of now, ABFSE sees no cause for alarm, as this year follows previous trends,” said Jzyk Ennis, ABFSE president. “I think the panic [in response] to these current numbers, which are following normal ebbs and flows, is really a result of the funeral employment environment rather than the actual number of graduates.”



ABFSE noted that at the end of 2018, there were 57 accredited programs. Bishop State Community College in Alabama closed its program after the summer 2018 semester, and Mount Ida College in Massachusetts closed its doors in May 2018. Teach-out of students enrolled in funeral service at Mount Ida was approved for Cape Cod Community College

### 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
2007	2,514	1,340
2008	2,361	1,342
2009	2,857	1,278
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

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

for the fall 2018 semester. (Thus, the 2018 statistics include data from both Bishop State and Mount Ida.)

Looking at 2018 mortuary science program total enrollment, the 2,359 new students is down 2.2% from the 2,411 students in 2017 and 6% below the 2,511 in 2016.

This year’s enrollment is 26.6% fewer students than the record 3,213 students enrolled in 1996. But it must be remembered that the 1996 figure is considered an aberration since it was the year the associate degree was implemented as the minimum ABFSE standard. Students flocked to ABFSE certificate and diploma programs to complete their funeral service education before the requirement took effect.

Between 2011 and 2018, new enrollment showed a gradual decline – from 2,917 students in 2011 to 2,359 this year, marking a 19.1% decline.

The 1,501 graduates in 2018 is 8.8% fewer than the 1,646 graduates in 2017 and 8.4% lower than the 1,638 graduates in 2016.

In 2018, 688 students left accredited mortuary science education programs, which is 12.2% more than the 613 who

### ATTRITION PROGRAM YEAR 2018

Reason for Withdrawal	Number	Percentage
Remained in mortuary science-related major but transferred to another institution	9	1.31
Changed major but remained in higher education	43	6.25
Left for academic reasons	259	37.65
Left for financial reasons	80	11.63
Left for personal reasons	238	34.59
Left for other reasons	59	8.58
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>688</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

exited in 2017. Cited were academic reasons, 37.65%; personal reasons, 34.59%; financial reasons, 11.63%; “other” reasons, 8.58%; and “changed major but remained in higher education, 6.25%.

There has been much chatter in funeral service about the decline in enrollment in mortuary science schools possibly creating an environment in which there is a shortage of qualified professionals. This, however, is a two-pronged problem. It’s true that the schools do see attrition, but it is the post-graduate exodus that most concerns funeral directors.

“In my opinion, we get too many calls in the ABFSE office from students who have not thoroughly researched the expectations of a career in funeral service,” said Robert C. Smith III, ABFSE executive director. “If they embark on their education without a realistic understanding of the job realities, that does not bode well for program completion rates, job placement or longevity in the workplace. An increasing number of ABFSE programs encourage job shadowing in some form for potential students.”

Smith referenced a 2010 study prepared by Glenn Gould and MKJ Marketing. “My recollection of one of his recommendations was that funeral directors and employers need to identify individuals with the characteristics to succeed in funeral service and encourage them to go to school and seek licensure,” Smith said. “That advice is still very sound today.”

### NEW ENROLLEE PROFILES

Based on ABFSE statistics, the most likely person enrolling in a mortuary science program in 2018 was a Caucasian female

### New Enrollees by Age PROGRAM YEAR 2018

Age	No. of Students	Percentage
20 or under	341	14.46
21-25	747	31.67
26-30	478	20.26
31-35	293	12.42
36-40	169	7.16
41-45	133	5.64
46-50	85	3.60
51-55	56	2.37
56-60	34	1.44
61-65	13	0.55
66-70	1	0.04
71 and over	0	0.00
Unknown	9	0.38
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,359</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

### New Enrollees by Prior Education PROGRAM YEAR 2018

Level Completed	No. of Students	Percentage
GED	111	4.71
High school grad	2,234	94.70
Other	14	0.59
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,359</b>	<b>100%</b>
High school or equivalent	690	29.25
1 year of college	473	20.05
2 years of college	579	24.54
3 years of college	177	7.50
Bachelor's degree	349	14.79
Master's degree	60	2.54
Other	31	1.31
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,359</b>	<b>100%</b>

Previously attended a funeral service program 171

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

21-25. She was a also high school graduate with at least one or two years of college.

The data also reveal that students entering mortuary science programs have more prior education than did previous enrollees. From 1971-2004, the percentage of students having one or more years of college under their belts ranged between 51% and 62%. In 2009, that figure jumped to 69%. In 2018, it landed at 70.73%, up slightly from 70.02% in 2017 but down from 71.09% in 2016.

Furthermore, in 2018, the number of enrollees with bachelor's or graduate degrees was put at 17.33%, up from 16.63% in 2017 and about 2.66 percentage points lower than the 19.99% recorded in 2016.

Continuing a 21st century trend, significantly more women than men are enrolling in mortuary science programs. The tipping point came in 2000, when women enrolling surpassed the number of men enrolling 51% to 49%.

In 2018, out of 2,359 new students enrolled, 1,572 (66.64%) were female and 787 were male. In 2017, out of 2,411 new students enrolled, the number of female enrollees was higher, 1,599, but the percentage was a bit lower (66.32%). This compares with 2016, when 1,622 (64.59%) of 2,511 new enrollees were female.

Broken down by ethnicity, 66.86% of all new students were

### New Enrollees by Ethnic Origin and Gender PROGRAM YEAR 2018

Ethnic Origin	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Caucasian	573	72.81	1,004	63.87	1,577	66.85
African American	155	19.70	303	19.27	458	19.42
Hispanic	43	5.46	194	12.34	237	10.05
Native American	4	0.51	19	1.21	23	0.97
Asian/Pacific Islander	4	0.51	12	0.76	16	0.68
Other	8	1.02	40	2.54	48	2.03
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>787</b>	<b>33.36%</b>	<b>1,572</b>	<b>66.64%</b>	<b>2,359</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

### New Enrollees by Prior Employment PROGRAM YEAR 2018

Employed	No. of Students	Percentage of Total Students New Enrollees (2,359)
Less than 6 months	333	14.12
6 months to 1 year	247	10.47
More than 1 year	594	25.18
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,174</b>	<b>49.77%</b>

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

### New Enrollees by Family in Funeral Service PROGRAM YEAR 2018

	No. of Students	Percentage of Total Students New Enrollees (2,359)
Parent	188	7.97
Spouse	19	0.81
Sibling	22	0.93
In-law	32	1.36
Other	69	2.92
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>330</b>	<b>13.99%</b>

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

Caucasian in 2018, compared with 65.41% of all new students in 2017 and 63.40% in 2016. The percentage of African-American enrollees in 2018 was 19.42%, down from 20.57% in 2017 and 22.54% in 2016. Hispanics accounted for 10.05% of new students in 2018, up from 9.66% in 2017 and 9.56% in 2016. From a much smaller base, the number of new Asian-Pacific Islander enrollees was put at 0.68%, down from 1.12% in 2017 and 1.35% in 2016. The number of new Native American students in 2018 was 0.97%, up from 0.87% in 2017 and 0.48% in 2016. The number of new students of “other” ethnic backgrounds in 2018 was 2.03%, down slightly from 2.36% in 2017 and 2.67% in 2016.

According to ABFSE statistics, 72.81% of male new enrollees and 63.87% of female new enrollees in 2018 were Caucasian, compared to 71.31% of male enrollees and 62.41% of female enrollees in 2017, and 67.49% and 61.16%, respectively, in 2016.

In 2018, 19.70% of male new enrollees and 19.27% of female new enrollees were African American, compared to 19.12%

of male enrollees and 21.26% of female enrollees in 2017, and 24.18% and 21.64%, respectively, in 2016.

In 2018, 5.46% of male enrollees and 12.34% of female enrollees were Hispanic; in 2017, it was 5.67% of male enrollees and 11.69% of female enrollees, and in 2016, 5.40% and 11.84%, respectively.

Asian/Pacific Islanders accounted for 0.51% of new male enrollees and 0.76% of new female enrollees in 2018, compared with 0.99% of new male enrollees and 1.19% of new female enrollees in 2017, and 1.24% of male and 1.42% of female enrollees in 2016.

In 2018, Native Americans accounted for 0.51% of new male enrollees and 1.21% of new female enrollees, compared to 0.99% of male enrollees and 0.81% of female enrollees in 2017, and 0.22% and 0.62%, respectively, in 2016.

ABFSE reported that in 2018, 1.02% of all new male enrollees

### Graduates by Ethnic Origin and Gender PROGRAM YEAR 2018

Ethnic Origin	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Caucasian	405	76.70	659	67.73	1,064	70.89
African American	82	15.53	165	16.96	247	16.46
Hispanic	27	5.11	110	11.31	137	9.13
Native American	1	0.19	3	0.31	4	0.27
Asian/Pacific Islander	6	1.14	17	1.75	23	1.53
Other/Did Not Indicate	7	1.33	19	1.95	26	1.73
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>528</b>	<b>35.18%</b>	<b>973</b>	<b>64.82%</b>	<b>1,501</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

### Graduates by Age PROGRAM YEAR 2018

Age	No. of Students	Percentage
20 or under	69	4.60
21-25	567	37.77
26-30	344	22.92
31-35	165	10.99
36-40	131	8.73
41-45	83	5.53
46-50	61	4.06
51-55	43	2.86
56-60	24	1.60
61-65	7	0.47
66-70	2	0.13
71 and over	0	0.00
Unknown	5	0.33
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,501</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

### Graduates by Prior Education PROGRAM YEAR 2018

Level Completed	No. of Students	Percentage
GED	59	3.93
High school grad	1,431	95.34
Other	11	0.73
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,501</b>	<b>100%</b>
High school or equivalent	376	25.05
1 year of college	258	17.19
2 years of college	418	27.85
3 years of college	113	7.53
Bachelor's degree	280	18.65
Master's degree	30	2.00
Other	26	1.73
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,501</b>	<b>100%</b>

Previously attended a funeral service program 54

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

and 2.54% of all new female enrollees chose “other/did not indicate,” compared with 1.85% of all male new enrollees and 2.63% of all new female enrollees in 2017, and 1.46% of all male new enrollees and 3.33% of all new female enrollees in 2016.

In 2018, 13.99% of all new enrollees were found to be carrying on, or getting into, the family business, down from nearly 18% of new enrollees in 2017 and 14.3% in 2016.

Of all new enrollees in 2018, 7.97% had a parent in the business, 0.81% had a spouse, 0.93% a sibling, 1.36% an in-law, and 2.92% said “other” relative.

### GRADUATE PROFILES

There were 1,501 graduates from accredited programs in 2018, 1,646 graduates in 2017 and 1,638 in 2016. These graduates represent 49 of the 50 states; 11 graduates hailed from foreign countries. The only state that did not have a graduate was Alaska; there were also no graduates from the District of Columbia. Texas led all states with 130 grads, followed by Illinois with 101, Pennsylvania with 93, New York with 89 and California with 77.

Overall, 64.82% of the 1,501 graduates in 2018 were women,

### Graduates Who Work While in School PROGRAM YEAR 2018

Employment	Number	Percentage of Total Grads (1,501)
In funeral-related services	1,029	68.55
Other non-funeral service employment	228	15.19
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,257</b>	<b>83.74%</b>

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

### Graduates by Family in Funeral Service PROGRAM YEAR 2018

	No. of Students	Percentage of Total Grads (1,501)
Parent	152	10.13
Spouse	14	0.93
Sibling	25	1.67
In-law	12	0.80
Other	46	3.06
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>249</b>	<b>16.59%</b>

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

### ***New Enrollees/Graduates by State PROGRAM YEAR 2018***

<b>State</b>	<b>New Enrollees</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Graduates</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Alabama	50	2.12	38	2.53
Alaska	0	0.00	0	0.00
Arizona	29	1.23	18	1.20
Arkansas	25	1.06	15	1.00
California	102	4.32	77	5.13
Colorado	26	1.10	19	1.27
Connecticut	45	1.91	34	2.27
Delaware	6	0.25	4	0.27
District of Columbia	0	0.00	0	0.00
Florida	94	3.98	53	3.53
Georgia	62	2.63	52	3.46
Hawaii	2	0.08	1	0.07
Idaho	4	0.17	2	0.13
Illinois	128	5.43	101	6.73
Indiana	108	4.58	64	4.26
Iowa	49	2.08	21	1.40
Kansas	16	0.68	17	1.13
Kentucky	95	4.03	32	2.13
Louisiana	50	2.12	29	1.93
Maine	12	0.51	6	0.40
Maryland	38	1.61	30	2.00
Massachusetts	50	2.12	46	3.06
Michigan	50	2.12	57	3.80
Minnesota	25	1.06	17	1.07
Mississippi	60	2.54	16	1.07
Missouri	35	1.48	24	1.60
Montana	9	0.38	2	0.13
Nebraska	18	0.76	15	1.00
Nevada	0	0.00	2	0.13
New Hampshire	9	0.38	3	0.20
New Jersey	97	4.11	57	3.80
New Mexico	8	0.34	4	0.27
New York	195	8.27	89	5.93
North Carolina	45	1.91	26	1.73
North Dakota	6	0.25	3	0.20
Ohio	59	2.50	63	4.20
Oklahoma	73	3.09	20	1.33
Oregon	26	1.10	14	0.93
Pennsylvania	107	4.54	93	6.20
Rhode Island	2	0.08	9	0.60
South Carolina	33	1.40	30	2.00
South Dakota	7	0.30	6	0.40
Tennessee	76	3.22	33	2.20
Texas	259	10.98	130	8.66
Utah	20	0.85	14	0.93
Vermont	3	0.13	3	0.20
Virginia	59	2.50	41	2.73
Washington	27	1.14	19	1.27
West Virginia	17	0.72	7	0.47
Wisconsin	35	1.48	31	2.07
Wyoming	3	0.13	2	0.13
Unknown	1	0.04	2	0.13
Foreign	4	0.17	11	0.73
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,359</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1,501</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

the same percentage as in 2017 – 64.82% of 1,646 graduates – which is up from 2016, when 63.18% of the 1,638 students were women. As noted earlier, 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 mortuary science programs. That year, of 1,661 graduates, 52.2% were women.

According to ABFSE, 70.89% of all graduates in 2018 were Caucasian, compared with 68.96% in 2017 and 71.18% in 2016.

The percentage of African-American graduates in 2018 was 16.46%, down from 18.41% in 2017 but up a bit from 16.36% in 2016.



The percentage of Hispanic graduates in 2018 was 9.13%, down from 9.54% in 2017 and 9.34% in 2016.

The percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander graduates was 1.53% in 2018, up from 1.03% in 2017 and 1.04% in 2016.

The percentage of Native American grads was 0.27%, down from 0.97% in 2017 and 0.49% in 2016.

“Other/did not indicate” ethnic backgrounds increased to 1.73% in 2018 from 1.09% in 2017 and 1.59% in 2016.

Broken down by gender, 76.70% of male graduates and 67.73% of female graduates in 2018 were Caucasian, compared with 2017, when 73.92% of male graduates and 66.26% of females

were Caucasian, and 2016, when 76.78% of male and 67.92% of female graduates were Caucasian.

Last year, 15.53% of male graduates and 16.96% of female graduates were African American, while in 2017, the percentages were 17.96% male and 18.65% female. In 2016, the percentages were 13.93% and 17.78%, respectively.

Among Hispanic graduates in 2018, 5.11% were male and 11.31% were female. This compares with 2017, when 5.70% of male graduates and 11.62% of female graduates were Hispanic. In 2016, it was 6.63% and 10.92%, respectively.

Native Americans accounted for 0.19% of male graduates and 0.31% of female graduates in 2018, compared with 0.35% of male graduates and 1.31% of female graduates in 2017, and 0.33% of male graduates and 0.58% of female graduates in 2016.

In 2018, 1.14% of all male graduates and 1.75% of all female graduates were Asian/Pacific Islander, compared to 1.55% of all male graduates and 0.75% of all female graduates in 2017, and 1.00% and 1.06%, respectively, in 2016.

ABFSE reported that 1.33% of all male graduates and 1.95% of all female graduates classified themselves as “other/did not indicate,” compared to 0.52% of all male graduates and 1.41% of all female graduates in 2017 and 1.33% of all male graduates and 1.74% of all female grads in 2016.

In 2018, 16.59% of graduates had a relative in funeral service, which is down from 17.86% in 2017 and slightly higher than the 16.24% of graduates in 2016. A total of 152 graduates (10.13%) had a parent in the business in 2018, 0.93% had a spouse, 1.67% had a sibling, 0.80% had an in-law and 3.06% responded “other” relative.

## Inside the ABFSE Numbers

By Jzyk Ennis

As president of the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE), let me assure you that the officers and Executive Director Robert Smith annually evaluate and discuss the data. In fact, we had a conference call before our annual meeting in April.

ABFSE will educate any and all who apply and are accepted into our programs. The more who come, the more we will educate. We want more students and opportunities to fill any perceived employment gaps. We are also currently working



on our strategic plan to evaluate ourselves and our performance to our students.

Several points should be made when analyzing the data in context to employment and practice in the profession.

First, new enrollment and graduation data have been collected by ABFSE since the mid-1970s. When reviewing the data since that point, one can see that there have been many times in which enrollment and graduation have gone up and down over the years. The most recent data are consistent with the

Unlike in the movies, if we open more funeral service education programs, students may not necessarily come.

ebb and flow of previous years and decades. In fact, 2016 graduates are a larger number than in 2010 and 2005, for example.

Similar to the call volume in a funeral home, the owner should not have a knee-jerk reaction if call volume drastical-

ly rises or drops for one particular year. Rather, a three- or five-year rolling average would be more useful to make sure trends can be identified. ABFSE also takes this approach to analyzing data by looking at rolling averages to see if a trend can be identified.

As of now, ABFSE sees no cause for alarm, as this year follows previous trends. I think the panic [in response] to these current numbers, which are following normal ebbs and flows, is really a result of the funeral employment environment rather than the actual number of graduates.

Second, the notion that more funeral service education programs will produce more graduates is a misconception. Unlike the movie *Field of Dreams*, if we open more funeral service education programs, students may not necessarily come. If you look at new enrollees and graduates over the years compared to the number of funeral service education programs, there are times in which fewer ABFSE programs produced more graduates and had more new enrollees than we currently have today. Historically, there are norms for how many people enter funeral service education and the profession. Adding more programs will not necessarily cause more people to decide to be funeral directors and embalmers. The one exception was in our most recent national recession. ABFSE programs did see an increase in enrollment, as did other similar career technical programs.

Third, as my colleague and friend Dr. Michael LuBrant [program director, University of Minnesota] has pointed out, much focus has been placed on the top of the employment container, but very little research has been conducted on a possible gaping hole in the bottom. This hole through which

we may be losing more graduates than ABFSE programs can historically produce at any point in time, combined with deaths and retirements of current funeral service professionals, may be the real issue. We must consider this aspect. As previously indicated in my first point, the enrollment and graduation data are really consistent with previous trends. Therefore, several other points must be explored:

**?** If graduation rates are fairly consistent, is there a real shortage of embalmers, or are there shortages in specific areas? Are rural areas more strained than urban areas? Can the “shortage” be because larger generations (the traditionalists and baby boomers) are now dying or retiring at greater numbers than funeral service education programs historically graduate? This, of course, leads to other questions.

**?** Why do current graduates not move to those employment opportunities? And more importantly, why are graduates who have worked in funeral service leaving the profession? Could it be that those leaving the profession are doing so due to factors such as pay, benefits, time off, etc.? Could this be a major contributor to the shortage?

**?** Are new generations of graduates willing to work the same as previous generations have? Most likely, new generations that consider work-life balance as important as salary will not work the hours and schedules some owners/managers demand.

I know there are more questions than answers. I also understand that employers needing help don't want questions; rather, they need answers to how to fill employment needs.

As I mentioned before, ABFSE programs are ready and willing to educate all who enter. We have the capacity to take many, many more new enrollees and produce more graduates if they are presented to us for matriculation.

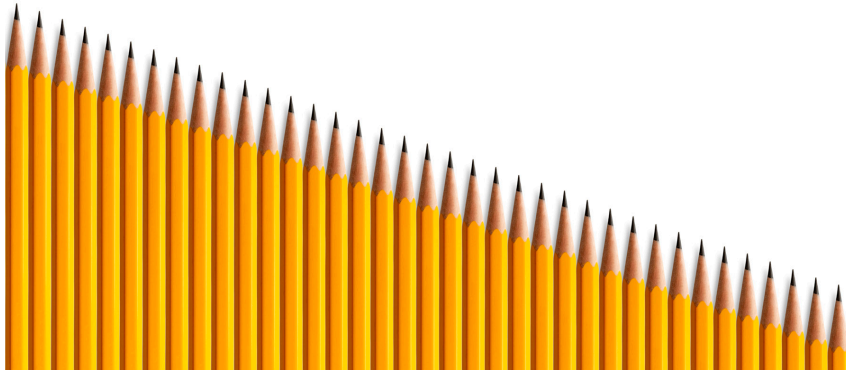
Education and practice must be partners and go hand in hand. Education, along with addressing why graduates are leaving the profession, must be addressed by all stakeholders if we want to continue to supply the employment demands of the profession into the future. ABFSE stands ready and willing to meet anyone at that table for constructive dialog on how to move forward.

*Jzyk Ennis, Ph.D., is an author and funeral service educator at Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham, Alabama.*

Much focus has been placed on the top of the employment container, but very little research exists on a possible gaping hole in the bottom.

# The Impact of Declining Mortuary Science Enrollment

By Dr. George P. Connick



Allow me to ponder this question: In the next five years, will declining mortuary science enrollment cause a major shortage of funeral directors?

The simple answer is likely yes, but there really is no simple answer since there are many potential policy decisions that could change funeral service education as it exists today.

As many educators peer into the future, they can see dark clouds looming on the horizon for higher education. In fact, those clouds have been forming for several years and are getting darker. The issue is the declining number of high-school graduates nationally, for whom higher education institutions compete. This trend is predicted to continue for the foreseeable future. For funeral service, the prospect of declining enrollment in mortuary science programs may also signal the inevitable resulting decline in the number of licensed funeral directors.

The July 2018 issue of *The Director* contained a lengthy article titled “Enrollment in Mortuary Science Programs Sinks to Nine-Year Low.” It summarized a range of statistics from the American Board of Funeral Service Education’s (ABFSE) Annual Report Summary Information 2017. It was the first to document that mortuary science programs are experiencing the same enrollment declines as most other areas of higher education, excluding the STEM sector (science, technology, engineering, math).

In April 2019, ABFSE released its Annual Report Summary Information 2018, which provides an additional year of data. Once again, there was a slight decline from 2017, which saw 2,411 new students, to 2018, with its 2,359 students.

Accompanied by numerous charts, the article’s lead sentence summed up the content: “New enrollment in mortuary

science programs in 2017 was the lowest since 2008... according to statistics by the American Board of Funeral Service Education.”

Although the 2018 ABFSE statistics provide a sweeping historical perspective, they only hint at what the future may hold.

The highest new student enrollment in mortuary science after 1995 was reached in 2011 at 2,917. In 2018, enrollment had dropped to 2,359. This 558-student decline represented a 19.1% drop in just eight years.

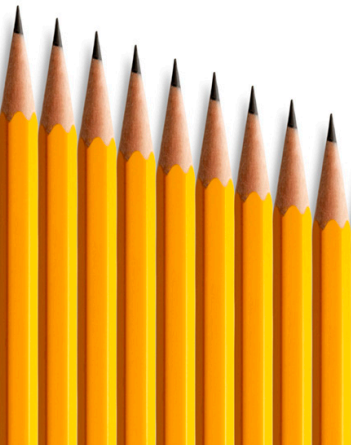
What are the possible reasons for this decline?

Beginning in 2009, as the economy improved each year, the unemployment rate began to decline. As might have been predicted, higher education enrollments also began to decline. However, the acceleration of the decline in the past several years requires further analysis.

A recent analysis of national data by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in an article by Sara Lipka titled, “Colleges, Here Is Your Future,” offers an interesting perspective: “Peer into kindergarten classrooms across the country and you will see fewer students. For every 100 18-year-olds nationally, there are only 95 4-year-olds.”

The worst demographic projections are for the Northeast. For example, selected data for New York, New Jersey and Connecticut indicate the following: “In many of the highest-income, most educated counties – which have reliably delivered high school graduates to colleges – the supply of younger children is dwindling. This pattern is striking in the suburbs of New York City; Long Island; Westchester County, New York; and Fairfield County, Connecticut. In Somerset and Morris counties in New Jersey, both which have median incomes of more than \$98,000, the populations of 4-year-olds compared with 18-year-olds are 26% and 32% smaller, respectively.”

**A number of factors have created a perfect storm of problems for higher education institutions for at least the next five years, and they have no control over any of them.**



For higher education institutions dependent on campus students for their future enrollment, there is much about the demographic downturn that should be of concern.

Historically, enrollments have gone up during bad economic times because people have difficulty finding jobs or they lose a job and decide to pursue education that leads to a career with fewer peaks and valleys. Funeral service has been one of those jobs.

### WHY A NATIONAL DECLINE IN ENROLLMENT AT ALL EDUCATIONAL LEVELS?

There appear to be a number of factors that have created a perfect storm of problems for higher education institutions for at least the next five years, and they have no control over any of them.

The best colleges can hope for in the short run is that they can adapt as quickly as possible to the realities of the next few years.

#### THE REALITIES

- 1** The economy has been booming for more than seven years and there are no immediate signs that it is cooling off.
- 2** In many areas of the country, employers are scrambling, desperately trying to find employees to fill jobs. The employers are making their jobs as attractive as possible in order to recruit successfully.
- 3** The minimum wage has gone up significantly in many states, especially those with the largest populations. This is an added incentive for potential students to enter the workforce rather than go to college. By comparison, the wages and working conditions (hours, nights and weekends) for licensed entrants into funeral service jobs is becoming less attractive.
- 4** The U.S. unemployment rate has dropped to 3.9%, virtually full employment. And more importantly, the rate for adult women (who make up 67% of ABFSE students) has decreased to 3.5%.
- 5** After 15 years of consistent increases in the high school graduation rate, the next decade brings stagnation and a severe drop that began in 2017.

However, in 2017, the United States had the lowest birth rate on record, and it has been declining for decades. It is only in the past several years that the declining enrollments in K-12 have had a growing impact on higher education.

The greatest declines in public high school graduates (who make up 90% of all high school graduates) are projected for the Northeast and Midwest. The West is expected to experience slight increases.

The South will see steady, significant increases. About 33% of public high school grads came from the South in the early 2000s. By 2013, their percentage had grown to 43%; by 2025, it will be 47%.

**6** Not anticipated by many institutions is the challenge of changing demographics and the fact that future students will look and act significantly different than previous students. The number of Caucasian public high school graduates from middle class and more affluent families is projected to decline by 14% from 2013-30.

**7** On the other hand, the number of minority, those less well prepared, and low-income students is expected to grow dramatically. The projection is for Hispanic high school graduates to increase by 50% from 2014 to the mid-2020s. What this means is that colleges will need to find new recruitment strategies for minorities and then provide expanded services to help those students stay in college and graduate.

**8** Finally, and most importantly for funeral service education, is the rapid shift from burials to cremation. In 2015, according to the NFDA Cremation and Burial Report, cremations (47.9%) surpassed the number of burials (45.2%) in the United States. This trend is predicted to continue and accelerate, with cremations accounting for 56.4% in 2020 and 69.7% in 2030.

Fortunately, in the past several years, the ABFSE Committee on Accreditation (COA) has added required curricula regarding cremation. The COA is moving to address the new realities of funeral service, and now may be the time to introduce additional alternatives that will advance funeral education significantly and also attract many more students to the programs and the profession.

Anticipating and responding to accelerating changes in almost every aspect of society is not easy. This is especially true in higher education, generally, and funeral service education specifically. But in education at all levels, change is not taking place fast enough to address the needs of society and students now and in the future.

*George P. Connick is currently acting president of American Academy McAllister Institute of Funeral Service. He was formerly executive director of the American Board of Funeral Service Education (2001-06), president of the University of Maine at Augusta (1985-95) and president of the Education Network of Maine (1995-97).*

# Make It Your Life Quest to Learn

By Daniel M. Isard

## LOOK! YOU CAN SEE YOUR LIFE PLAYING OUT BEFORE YOUR EYES:

- ✓ Mortuary school graduation
- ✓ Mortarboard
- ✓ Switch tassel from right side to left
- ✓ Smile while accepting diploma
- ✓ Pass National Board Exam

**FALSE** Whew! Education complete!

Is funeral service a profession, technical vocation or job? Here are some definitions to help you decide:

- *Profession*: a paid occupation, especially one that involves prolonged training and formal qualifications
- *Vocation*: a person's employment, regarded as particularly worthy and requiring great dedication
- *Job*: a paid position of regular employment.

The governing body for employment law is the U.S. Department of Labor, yet, depending on the state in which you work, funeral directing can be classified as any of these.

The biggest distinction between vocational workers and professionals is the education prior to licensing and the continuing education thereafter. It's this education that allows a practitioner to make independent judgments in the care and treatment of families and decedents.

However, in spite of the value of continuing education, we set the bar very low in the funeral profession. As a requirement for maintaining a funeral director's license, required continuing education can be anywhere from 0 to 8 hours per year (an hour of education can be an actual clock hour or a percentage of a clock hour).

But, wait, isn't this a cop-out? Can you imagine a medical doctor saying, "I'm too busy to learn anything. After all, I got my education 20 years ago, so what else is there for me to learn?" I hope I never have to seek treatment from a doctor with that attitude. Yet many of your peers will have this same attitude, and it goes against the argument of having a professional status for funeral directors throughout the country.

Professionals usually earn more than job holders or vocational workers with equal tenure. So why are we cutting our paychecks by not encouraging more continuing education? In some states, you can't even talk about business subjects, pricing or other contemporary issues in a continuing-education setting! This is silly.



I dare say we must go from requiring minimal continuing education to requiring a *significant amount* of continuing education post-licensing. While there are master's and doctoral programs in thanatology and business you can pursue, I'm thinking of easier and more practical challenges. Most everyone with two years or more of experience in funeral service can qualify for the Certified Funeral Service Practitioner (CFSP) designation. This is not a level of education but a professional designation, and I would think this must be set as a minimum standard at some point in time.

So, as you prepare for your entrance into this profession, I beg you, don't be complacent. Understand that if you think smart, well-educated funeral directors are expensive, you ought to see how much stupid, uneducated funeral directors cost their employers.

Develop a life quest of learning for your own good and the good of the profession.

*Dan Isard, MSFS, is president of The Foresight Companies, a business and management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, accounting, finance and customer surveys.*

# 10 Things to Consider When Searching for an Apprenticeship

By Dan Welch



Graduation from mortuary science school is one of the most exciting periods in any future embalmer/funeral director's life. The months (in some cases, years) of late-night cramming sessions fueled by energy drinks and junk food all come down to one thing: the National Board Exam.

Like many, I feared the exam. From the first day of class, my professors expressed the importance of passing the "boards," and rightfully so; in most states, it's the only way to obtain licensure. However, during my academic career, rarely, if ever, did I receive guidance or one-on-one discussion about the importance of selecting an apprenticeship upon graduation.

For a handful of my classmates, finding an apprenticeship right out of school was as simple as calling Dad, Mom, Grandpa or Uncle to see if they could work for the family business. I did not have that option because I'm a first-generation funeral director. That put me in the position of having to seek out an apprenticeship on my own.

Although everyone learns differently, if an employer has had multiple successful apprentice experiences, chances are the employer is a great teacher.

With that, I learned 10 valuable lessons, and I hope they can assist someone else who's endeavoring to find the perfect fit that not only benefits them but their employer as well.

## 1. START SEARCHING AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

One of the most crucial aspects of securing an apprenticeship is to start the process of searching as early as possible. Starting your search after you've walked across the stage and moved your tassel from one side to the other is not the time to begin. Aside from the "job market" being saturated with

recent graduates looking for employment, waiting until after graduation may not give you the opportunity to find the best fit. It amazed me how many of my classmates took the first job they were offered immediately out of school. Sadly, many are no longer in the funeral profession, claiming they were overworked and never mentored during their apprenticeship. Giving yourself as much time as possible will benefit you immediately and in the long run.

## 2. WORK ON APPRENTICESHIP WHILE IN SCHOOL

If possible, work on your apprenticeship while attending mortuary school. While there are some states that may not allow you to apprentice while obtaining your degree, there are several benefits to doing so. I was shocked at how many classmates worked at restaurants, banks and clothing stores while attending school. One of the greatest benefits to my career goals was this: Each day, as soon as I left the classroom, I worked at a funeral home. So many times I'd find myself confused during a lecture and, lo and behold, I would go to work later that day and be faced with an example that helped clarify what had been taught. These real-life experiences helped supplement what I was learning in the classroom, which made me a better student and a better apprentice. Working on your apprenticeship while earning your degree will also allow you to earn your license sooner and make you a stronger candidate for full-time employment should you choose to change firms upon finalizing your apprenticeship.

## 3. FIND AN EMPLOYER WITH TIME TO TEACH YOU

Of the handful of classmates I've had the privilege to stay in contact with, many of them bounced from job to job the first year. (One worked for three different firms in 13 months while completing his apprenticeship.) Of those classmates who moved around, most of them expressed that it was because they were not learning anything and were simply being used as a "gopher." When selecting an apprenticeship, it's crucial to find someone who has the knowledge, experience, desire and time to teach you, mentor you, guide you.

#### 4. FIND A FIRM WITH AN OPEN-DOOR POLICY

One of the greatest rewards I enjoyed with the firm under which I served my apprenticeship was the ability to go to my employer with any question or concern without feeling like I was an inconvenience. Finding a mentor who can truly show you the ropes and has a desire to teach you will help you learn the skills necessary to forever serve families.

#### 5. FIND AN EMPLOYER WHO'S MENTORED OTHER SUCCESSFUL APPRENTICES

Although every person learns differently, if an employer has had multiple successful apprentice experiences, chances are the employer is a great teacher. Do not be afraid to ask former apprentices about their experiences and do not hesitate to ask a future employer about the successes he or she has had teaching others.

#### 6. FIND SOMEONE WHO WILL LET YOU GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

When a classmate told me he was almost finished with his apprenticeship and had yet to go on a first call or meet with a family on his own, I couldn't believe it. His employer's philosophy on apprenticeship was, "You watch me for a year and then you'll know how to do it." Honestly, that would have driven me nuts as I'm a very hands-on person who has found, especially in funeral service, that repetition can and will make you a better funeral director! Finding a teacher to suit your learning style(s) is critical.

#### 7. FIND AN EMPLOYER WHO WILL GIVE YOU EVERY HOLIDAY AND WEEKEND OFF

Just kidding! Very few, if any, employers will allow apprentices to have every weekend and holiday off. Still, it's important to find someone who values the importance of self-care and who will allow an adequate amount of time off for family. Figuring out what that balance looks like may take some time, but finding an employer who is upfront about expectations in all areas, particularly work hours, is important in preventing burnout.

One of the greatest benefits to my career goals was this: Each day, as soon as I left the classroom, I worked at a funeral home.

#### 8. FIND SOMEONE WHO WILL ALLOW YOU TO UTILIZE AND DEVELOP YOUR STRENGTHS

While completing my apprenticeship, my employer did an incredible job of allowing me to incorporate my knowledge and skill sets of computer technology into the daily tasks of the funeral home in order to better serve families. An employer who is willing to acknowledge those hidden skill sets and allow you to develop them is not only benefiting his or her firm but you as the apprentice as well.

#### 9. FIND THE BEST FIT FOR YOU AND WORRY ABOUT THE MONEY AND BENEFITS LATER

I know this seems illogical to many people, but in the long run, it'll pay dividends to your professional development. Early in my career, I recall seeing statistics of what the "average" funeral director salary was right out of mortuary college. As I lived in the Midwest, you can imagine my surprise when I quickly realized that the coastline salaries dramatically affect the national average. However, looking back on my apprentice year, I realize I never went without, and what I may have lacked in financial compensation was made up for in professional development. Finding someone who places equal importance on both types of compensation is invaluable.

#### 10. FIND A REPUTABLE EMPLOYER KNOWN FOR EXCELLENCE

Typically, a firm that is continually pursuing excellence in every aspect of funeral service will, without a doubt, push you, as an apprentice, to do the same. Doing some simple research prior to engaging with a potential employer will allow you to discover whether the firm is well respected in community, innovative and truly cares about the minute details required to meet the needs of every family.

**FINDING THE RIGHT PLACE TO SERVE** your apprenticeship is a critical aspect to every funeral professional's career. The apprenticeship is the initial foundation upon which all other professional development takes place. Rushing a decision or taking the first opportunity out of convenience may not be the best option. By keeping in mind these guidelines, the groundwork to ensure success as a professional will be laid, allowing you to better serve the families that will one day call on you.

*Dan Welch is a first-generation funeral director and embalmer who resides in Wichita, Kansas. In his spare time, he enjoys hunting and storm chasing.*

# 5 Reasons to Apply for a Funeral Service Foundation Academic Scholarship

By Kelly Manion

The Funeral Service Foundation has funds available for scholarships and, more often than not, students need money for their education. Here are five reasons to apply for a Funeral Service Foundation academic scholarship.

## 5. FREE MONEY!

We get it. School is expensive. Tuition, book fees, commuting costs, childcare – it all adds up. The Funeral Service Foundation can help. Each year, it awards scholarships ranging from \$2,500-\$5,000. Here's the skinny: You must be enrolled in an ABFSE-accredited institution or an accredited Canadian mortuary science program to apply for one of the 18 annual scholarships, nine of which will be awarded in the fall. The online application deadline is November 15. Should you be selected, the foundation will send a check directly to your school to help offset your education costs. Get full details at [funeralservicefoundation.org/academicscholarships](http://funeralservicefoundation.org/academicscholarships).

## 4. YOU'LL IMPRESS YOUR PROFESSORS

Professors can seem a bit tough, but they've been in your shoes, know all that you're juggling and want you to succeed. That's why they've been telling you to "apply for a scholarship already!" For just a little extra work, you could chip away at your tuition. Who knows? You might even score extra points\* when you ask your professors for insight on your essay or video.

## 3. TOTAL. RÉSUMÉ. BOOSTER.

Since 1945, the Foundation has boosted the résumés and careers of more than 6,000 funeral service professionals. Funeral



home owners and hiring managers look at what sets a potential employee apart from other candidates. Noting that you're a Foundation academic scholarship recipient could help send your résumé to the top of the pile. It'll show that you value education and aren't afraid of doing a little extra work to get the job done.

## 2. SEE YOUR NAME IN PRINT

We understand that exposure is necessary to building a successful career. That's why scholarship winners are showcased on the Foundation website and in trade publications across the

profession. You'll also be featured in our annual Impact Report, which lets donors know how their dollars are impacting the profession. (Many of those donors are the same funeral directors looking to hire great talent!)

## 1. YOU CAN TELL YOUR STORY

You're dedicating your (second? third?) career to helping families and communities understand that funerals matter, and your stories inspire the Foundation's work and drive its mission. When you apply online, you'll be able to tell your story through a brief essay and video. Show us your personality, your compassion and your professionalism, and share your great ideas and experiences.

*\*Applying for a Funeral Service Foundation academic scholarship doesn't guarantee extra credit, but it's been known to impress many a professor.*

*Kelly Manion is director of communication for the Funeral Service Foundation.*

**Need Money for School?** Students can explore a variety of resources to learn about scholarships for funeral service education by visiting [nfda.org/careers/scholarships](http://nfda.org/careers/scholarships), where they'll find a comprehensive list of scholarships available from funeral service organizations (including NFDA and the Funeral Service Foundation), state funeral directors associations and mortuary colleges.

*From the Editor's Desk...*

## By the Numbers

One thing you probably learned well before you enrolled in a mortuary science program is that statistics hold varying degrees of interest. Each year, the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) issues its statistical report offering a detailed look at enrollment and graduation numbers at the 58 accredited mortuary science programs in the country.

As for trends, there doesn't seem to be much dramatic shifting going on, save for the 2,359 new students in 2018, which is down 2.2% from 2,411 students in 2017 and 6% below the 2,511 in 2016. Total current-year enrollment (new, pre-graduate and graduate students), however, was 5,505, 2.3% more than the 5,381 in 2017 and 8.7% below the 2016 total of 6,031.

So, what does this mean for you? While we keep an eye on the number of mortuary science graduates, we must be mindful 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 (it's now expected to be less of a spike and more a gradual increase). Some 10 to 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.

However, according to the 2019 NFDA Cremation and Burial Report, the cremation rate in the United States reached 51.7% in 2017 and is expected to soar to 78.7% in 2040. Consequently, casketed burials are expected to account for only 15.7% of deaths in 2040.

The challenge for mortuary science programs has been and remains producing quality graduates who stay with the program.

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

Edward J. Defort  
Editor

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