

The Creative Advantage



Welcoming creative and diverse learning experiences in the classroom and giving graduates and interns freedom of expression to create meaningful services in the funeral home will go far in elevating the profession in the minds of consumers.

This is an exciting time to be involved in funeral service education. More than that, I believe it could not be a more perfect time to be choosing funeral service as a profession. Many in our industry might think otherwise, with the fear surrounding the rise in the cremation rate and diminished service requests, but that is exactly why we should be energized about the future. This is the time for change in the types of services we offer and how we educate new practitioners.

As management guru Peter Drucker said, "Innovation is the specific instrument of entrepreneurship, the act that endows resources with a new capacity to create wealth." This is the perfect time for innovation in funeral service education as it is the creator of the next generation of small-business owners and entrepreneurs in our profession. This is our opportunity for innovation in education.

Traditional Teaching Model

Traditional funeral service education teaching methodology utilizes what has long been called the sage-on-the-stage model. An instructor projects images onto a screen and students either take notes or nod off in a darkened room. Students are given handouts, definitions to memorize and multiple-choice tests to assess their understanding of content.

As a new instructor, I imitated the teaching model I had witnessed. I created slides, projected them onto the screen, created handouts and gave multiple-choice tests. However, after my first quarter of teaching, I realized that my students could do so much more than what I was asking of them. They weren't challenged. They wanted to discuss what was happening in funeral service. They wanted to know why they needed to know what I needed them to know. They didn't want multiple-choice tests. They wanted activities and a combination of in-class work juxtaposed with hands-on funeral service experience. They were craving a creative outlet in order to demonstrate to me that they completely understood what I was trying to teach them. I had to change the way I was delivering content and assessing my students' knowledge so it could be framed in a meaningful way for both of us. I could see how the traditional model was not going to be sufficient moving forward.

Suggested Teaching Model

Content needs to be delivered in various ways to reach students' varied learning styles in our classrooms. Traditional teaching methods delivered content one way in hopes of getting through to the majority of students. Those who did not "get it" were often labeled lazy or apathetic. Preceptors often teach the same way as well, not taking into account the varied learning styles of interns. Both have not always considered the possibility that there are more interesting ways to engage students and interns to learn.

The second quarter I taught, I decided to modify one class, restorative art. One of the first projects I incorporated into my classroom was a Styrofoam head and felt pieces to teach the muscles of facial expression. Students had to draw and

cut the individual muscles out of the felt squares and pin them into the correct position on the head. The next project was for students to create a color wheel that could be created in any form the student found interesting so long as the information was correct. Then students were asked to create one of the major features of the face in a non-traditional manner, again making sure all of the components were present.

What I learned from those creative activities in the classroom was that information was being received and translated differently by each student. No two projects were ever alike. Loosening the parameters of the activities allowed for creative expression. New ideas emerged and students learned from each other.

This directly relates to what should be happening in funeral homes. New graduates and interns should be taught by example but given the freedom of their own expression to create meaningful services. Seasoned funeral directors could learn new ways of doing things while demonstrating to new hires the tried-and-true practices of the profession. More importantly, creative student expression helped me identify in which area of funeral service a particular student was going to be proficient. Those students with fine motor skills who paid a lot of attention to detail were generally the better embalmers and restorative artists. Those with the grander concepts and less detail tended to create elaborate mock funerals. I was able to identify individual strengths so I could then teach to the weaknesses. It built student confidence and made me a better instructor. I believe the same could happen with preceptors and interns, as education certainly extends beyond our classrooms.

Using This Creative Approach to Our Advantage

Googling "creativity in funeral service" generates 1,580,000 results, illustrating that there is clearly a public desire to incorporate creative expression and share ideas when designing unique funeral experiences. These ideas should be developed in our schools through the use of interesting assignments and assessment methods that are not necessarily traditional methodologies. Our profession

needs to be the one providing these ideas for families, which means funeral home managers should be supportive of student projects and utilize the student brain trust available when figuring out how to best serve their community and build business. Harnessing student innovation in the classroom and using it in practice is a firm's creative advantage, and it demonstrates to families that we are relevant and willing to do things differently if asked.

The Need to Incorporate Curriculum Innovation

There seems to be too great a disconnect between what faculty are trying to do in the classroom and what employers are expecting to see from recent mortuary school graduates. Our profession has a unique opportunity to partner with funeral service educators to develop curriculum and creative projects that foster innovation in the next generation of funeral practitioners. This collaboration will result in a higher standard of service to families that are expecting more from funeral directors today and also help existing firms replenish their pool of ideas, which often run dry without regular injections of inspiration.

Currently, there are national examination standards used to assess a new funeral professional's competency in our field, but do those multiple-choice exams best identify which candidates are most likely to be successful or which are best suited to meet a family's need when assisting them in creating a service?

As an educator, I believe the best form

If firms fail to embrace the creative endeavors of current graduates, those graduates will take their innovation elsewhere and become the competition rather than your firm's creative advantage in the marketplace.

of assessment is in the application of classroom learning, not in the identification of a correct answer on a multiple-choice exam. The descriptor “real world” is often used in conjunction with funeral service education, but can we practice what we preach? Adult students gain mastery in a task by being able to actively apply knowledge in a way that builds meaning to the content, therefore increasing student motivation and reinforcing the value of what is being taught in the classroom.

The missing link in this equation is the participation from funeral directors in mentoring students and the students being provided the opportunity to apply their knowledge. Firms would do well to listen to students’ ideas and try incorporating them into their business practices instead of insisting new graduates fall in line and continue to do things the way they’ve always been done. When students are unable to get the support of their own profession, it devalues their interest in the work and the education they are paying for. This in turn demotivates students, and their grades and attendance fall.

Students will be better practitioners if they can practice while they are learn-

ing. As we measure competency on embalming cases, so we should be measuring competency on funeral directing activities. But the support of local funeral directors is required to make that happen. A comprehensive mentoring program with ongoing peer feedback in a final portfolio could be the most effective form of assessment for a student about to graduate from mortuary school. It could also be where a student could present his or her ideas to a potential employer, letting the hiring manager see the value of the student’s education. A partnership between the funeral directing community and educators could be mutually beneficial. Without it, the opportunity for academic and professional growth is lost.

A Call to Action

My mortuary education experience was admittedly not inspiring. However, the school did what it was charged to do, and I was very prepared to take and pass the National Board Examination so I could obtain my internship license and proceed with my career. However, I do consider myself one of the lucky ones because when I graduated, I ended up at a funeral

home that wholly supported the idea of creating personalized funeral events. I was challenged to think more critically about how I presented merchandise and interacted with families. My co-workers and I competed with and assisted each other in finding interesting ways to do the same things differently. We all went out of our way to attend those services that were unlike any we were doing at other locations. I felt empowered as a new funeral director. I obtained the experience I wish all students could have.

I thought every firm did that for new hires, but I was wrong. So often, employers shut the door to prospective hires because new graduates don’t appear to look the part of what we have known to fit the traditional funeral director mold. I challenge employers to look beyond that traditional model and focus on uncovering the not-so-obvious hotbeds of enthusiasm for our industry. Funeral service is not the same profession it was even a decade ago. All firms need to encourage and embrace the creative endeavors of current graduates. If they fail to do this, those graduates will take their innovation elsewhere and become the competition, rather than a firm’s creative advantage in the marketplace.

As Laura van Dernoot Lipsky wrote in her book *Trauma Stewardship*, “We may resist change even when existing structures are out of date and detrimental to us personally and professionally.” Let’s not resist the changes we have already identified as occurring in funeral service. Instead, let’s be proactive about finding interesting ways to get ahead of the curve in order to stay relevant in the consumer’s mind. Cremation isn’t the enemy. The consumer isn’t the enemy. How firms respond to and prepare the future funeral directors and embalmers to interact with these elements is the greatest challenge.

Our profession can change the way funeral service education is delivered, but it must start advocating for a more diverse and robust educational experience in the mortuary schools so we can bring forward a new kind of funeral professional for an innovative funeral service experience for today’s – and tomorrow’s – consumers. ★

Lauren Budrow is president of Mid-America College of Funeral Service in Jeffersonville, Indiana.

INFLATION. PAYROLL EXPENSES.
HEALTH INSURANCE. RISING PRODUCT PRICES.
Is your funeral home cracking
under the financial pressure?

Don't go at it alone.
Professional Partners
can help.

Professional Partners is an alliance of independently owned funeral homes that have joined forces to boost their purchasing power. As a result, our members **save up to 30%** every year—allowing them to contend with ever-increasing business costs. To top it off, membership is absolutely FREE.

NO MEMBERSHIP FEE. NO CATCH. NO STRINGS ATTACHED.



Discover what Professional Partners can do for you.

For more information or to sign up online, visit ProfessionalPartnersOnline.com
or call for more information, 855-318-1965.

