

# A DAY IN THE LIFE

## Of a Mortuary College President

Jill Karn, Chief Operating Officer, Pierce Mortuary Colleges

A mortuary college is a dynamic environment that requires effective management in order to provide the best results for students and ultimately, the funeral profession. Of course, leading the faculty and its staff team is the college president, who is responsible for both the day-to-day management of the college, as well as ensuring that the long-term strategies and objectives are achieved. It's an incredibly challenging balance of human and financial resources that requires business acumen and leadership. Collaboration and communications with staff, faculty and students are key attributes for a successful college president. Let's explore a day in the life of a mortuary college president.

Many people would probably regard a college presidency as the perfect career, where one is greatly admired, has many exciting experiences, and a career with several perks and luxuries. For most college presidents the workday begins and ends under artificial light. There is a mounting range of duties and skillsets that demand a much greater balance to manage the pressures and constituencies that occur on a day-to-day basis for a college president.

A college president is always a leader first. Everything he or she does must forward the college's mission, goals and central aims and objectives. Their job, essentially, is to be a leader for the college both on campus and off campus. It's a 24/7 job. As a campus leader, internally, a president is responsible for the organization and administration, submits annual budgets, participates in numerous audits, directs the development of the academic programs, manages the P&L, and recommends all additions or changes in personnel. They are responsible for all state and accrediting approvals and all mandatory reporting such

as Integrated Postsecondary Education Data (IPED) and American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) annual reports.

Presidents develop the significant levers to shape the college. They establish the college structures and lines of responsibilities throughout the college. What's more, presidents are expected to meet with students and faculty and address a multitude of concerns. One of the major challenges for any college president is learning to juggle all the day-to-day responsibilities while coping with the inevitable crises that arise throughout the day. Presidents develop a plan and set an agenda but ultimately "things happen" and they are forced to adapt. A president's ability to cope and to stay centered is essential. Potential distractions are everywhere. The college president must balance all of this and "nudge" the levers that shape the choices and preliminary institutional outcomes that move towards positive success. That's the job.

Within these organized anarchies, the president's key responsibility is to set the college agenda. In other words, the president identifies the important overarching priorities and leads the strategic planning process while executing a significant change in higher education. Easier said than done. All-embracing, the president has to keep everyone focused on a few fixed targets despite any differences and varying perspectives. This is hard, but essential.

No matter how small or large a college may be, a president of a college must track college data and be astute to the latest trends in higher education, student debt, admission rates, retention rates, conversion rates, student satisfaction and engagement rates, graduation

rates, student loans and default rates, reports on student success, NBE pass rates, academic success rates, and gainful employment rates - all while increasing enrollment and reducing withdrawals. The list goes on. There is little denying the importance these rates and trends play in the overall campus environment. This role gives special priority to the trends and college data while keeping them somewhat in perspective for those improvements that may be needed, some immediate and some long term. College metrics can be at the very center of critical campus conversations and the catalyst for institutional change. This is a balancing act, to say the least.

Upon hearing the title, the predictable response one hears is, "Oh, so you run the place?" While larger institutions employ dozens of administrators to manage all the college departments, smaller institutions still have the identical silos to lead. At the end of the day, only one person on campus has full responsibility of the college – the college president. The level at which the college president is required to participate, coupled with the overall goal of the college, often dictates how s/he approaches the day-to-day management of the college. At smaller colleges such as ours, the presidents juggle and manage dozens of college units, answering to multiple constituencies and still find the time and energy to stay integrally involved in the business itself. So to answer the question as to "running the place", my answer is an unequivocal yes.

As a college president, boredom certainly is not part of the equation as one gets to change hats about twenty times in a given day. A day in the life of a college president would see one taking on roles including strategic leader, the official representative of the college, problem-solver on every level, coffee maker, sounding board for faculty, staff and students, partnership manufacturer, builder of a solid college network, financial aid expert, infrastructure specialist, hiring discerner, marketing guru, dignitary for all events, public speaker, vendor negotiator, cheerleader, crisis director, developer of higher education programs, people reader, author, constituent connector, and basically the person that everyone calls first. This is the short list, when personally speaking of our colleges, as it would be difficult to list all the layers to the president. In this position you must be able to connect with others without getting paralyzed by the multiple issues confronted on a daily basis. A president cannot

be one-dimensional. Again, this is difficult, but critical.

A president serves and protects the college, while remaining transparent, compassionate, ethical, and professional - all crucial attributes of any college president. S/he must ensure that the college acts with integrity and empathy, and must show appropriate due diligence and honesty. S/he must not only know the law, but also the standards of the accrediting body, regulations of the Department of Education, state laws, and local laws. The job is tough, but it gets done.

As we reflect on the qualities, a president is smart when considering all assets both financial and human. Higher education touts and expects this superior type of intelligence. It is a synthesized intellect that applies knowledge in a visionary way to generate tangible strategies and indicators of future success. However, I must say, it is more about the intrinsic abilities and traits described here that make a successful president. The campus president is everything to everyone at all times while remaining a genuine individual and committed to the college. This makes a well-rounded college president.

After pointing out all the ways in which a president must have knowledge, expertise and patience, let's not forget that we are talking about being the leader of an educational institution. Discipline-specific falls within the program's curriculum and faculty for each course that is offered. It is important for the president of a college to be emblematic of higher education by being an expert in administration, effective management, leading the institution, and business acumen and leadership, but a college president is not discipline-specific. I repeat...not discipline-specific.

So a day in the life of a mortuary college president is not for the weak of heart. But there is a tremendous sense of purpose to working in higher education. At Pierce Mortuary Colleges, we are educating students to be our future leaders in funeral service and are therefore very proud to be a part of something bigger. Presidents get to sit with students who didn't know what they were going to do with their lives and then choose to become funeral directors. Presidents get to play a part in improving the lives of our students and learners. They are surrounded with good people who share their passion and beliefs. They get to be an entrepreneur that shapes the institution –inside and out. They get

to coach and mentor people in the institution to move forward and to be successful. They get the luxury to hear stories of generational families and be inspired by them. They get to craft innovative programs that will assemble the right skillsets needed for the profession. They get to see the future as it unfolds daily. They get to explore the disciplines of thought with some of the brightest people in funeral service. Most of all, they get to present hundreds of graduates every year with their diplomas, their success in reaching their educational goal.

As the Chief Operating Officer of Pierce Mortuary Colleges, I would like to dedicate this article to the presidents of Pierce Mortuary Colleges.



*Jill Karn is Chief Operating Officer for Pierce Mortuary Colleges and oversees the operations and overall strategic direction of all Pierce Mortuary Colleges, including Dallas Institute of Funeral Service, Dallas, TX; Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service, Decatur, GA; and Mid-America College of Funeral Service, Jeffersonville IN. Jill has over seventeen years in executive leadership roles, including fourteen years in higher education.*

## Pierce Colleges of Funeral Service

### Mid-America College of Funeral Service

Mid-America College of Funeral Service (MACFS) is located at 3111 Hamburg Pike in Jeffersonville, Indiana, the northeast sector of the greater Louisville, Kentucky metropolitan area, including Jefferson County, Kentucky and Clark and Floyd Counties of Southern Indiana. Mid-America College of Funeral Service seeks to offer educational opportunities to those interested in funeral service as a career. The College provides the intensive theory portion of funeral service education, which prepares the student for a State and/or National Board Examination that enables him or her to begin or continue apprenticeship training for licensure in the funeral service profession.



### Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service

Located in Decatur, Georgia (a suburb of Atlanta), Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service (GJCFS) is a non-profit institution offering post-high school education to men and women interested in funeral service as a career. The central purpose of the college is to give students a thorough acquaintance with those areas of knowledge essential to their specialization. The college is dedicated to the advancement of funeral service education and the funeral service profession. While attending Gupton-Jones College, one may enjoy exciting Atlanta which offers a variety of recreational, artistic, and historic attractions!

### Dallas Institute of Funeral Service

Dallas Institute of Funeral Service (DIFS) is a non-profit institution dedicated to education and research for the funeral profession. The institute provides the theory portion and practical application of funeral service education preparing the student for entry into the profession and for a State and/or National Board examination enabling him/her to begin or continue apprenticeship or internship for licensure. Dallas and Dallas Institute... The excitement of a great city... The tradition of a great college. Come for the fun of it all!

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