

FUNERAL SERVICE EDUCATION IN A PANDEMIC — AND BEYOND

BY JILL KARN



While the COVID-19 pandemic has caused stagnation for many businesses, the funeral profession has experienced not only a higher level of activity, but also has had to modify various processes and traditions. Whether these evolving practices result in permanent changes remains to be seen. Nevertheless, during these times it is even more incumbent upon our profession to support our families and communities.

That same professionalism and need for responsive flexibility applies to funeral service education. The pandemic crisis has struck the entire education system like a lightning bolt and shaken it to its core. Across the nation, we have seen all colleges and universities suspend on-ground instruction, send students home and ask on-campus instructors to teach online in order to help flatten the curve of COVID-19. College administrators have had to make rapid decisions about the appropriate response, often with imperfect information. Confusion and uncertainty was and still is pervasive for all stakeholders – students, instructors, administration, and even accrediting bodies.

Specific to funeral service higher education, single-purpose mortuary colleges, as well as general colleges who offer mortuary science programs, have been forced to switch entirely from in-person to remote instruction. Funeral service programs have made an enormous shift toward online courses with faculty and staff transitioning to all-online learning in a very short period of time.

Going online that quickly is challenging, especially for those institutions that did not have the technologies or an existing online program already established before the crisis. In the short term, educators are applying a first-aid solution while shifting their learning structure exclusively online. While the ability to do this so quickly has indeed been impressive, the effects on teaching and learning has been very mixed. There are several aspects of higher education that are ideal, or in some cases only possible, onsite. For example, embalming cannot be learned and practiced virtually. Collaboration with other students and staff is best face-to-face, even though online collaboration via platforms such as Zoom is done.

The crisis that institutions of higher learning have faced may well spark needed innovation and technologies more broadly. Robust, high-quality online instruction takes time to plan and develop. For many colleges, time was not available due to the sudden mandatory campus closures. Still, the adoption of online solutions in recent months has been extraordinary.

This sudden shift to online learning, whether temporary or long-term, poses a challenge for funeral service programs to quickly scale up their program to a distance learning format under less than ideal conditions. Classroom lectures shifted to web broadcast. Interactions with students have been via polls, message boards, breakout discussions, and live online sessions. Many instructors had to learn and incorporate them on short notice. Instructors have been required to think about courses in new ways, trying new teaching techniques and learning to use new online tools. Although there are numerous educational technologies that support engaging course activities, these solutions tend to require more advance planning and technological ability.

But one thing is undeniable: the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored how indispensable distance learning is for our students and higher education at large. More fundamentally, the pandemic is causing us to be more digitally literate to function in a world in which social distance is mandated and consider how we deliver education. It also emphasizes the importance of lifelong learning and how a greater degree of digitally-centered communications may increasingly become the new norm to facilitate that.

There's another interesting macro aspect to consider: as painful and stressful of a time as this is, a long overdue and welcome rebirth of our education systems may be a valuable outcome. With COVID-19, we are seeing how yesterday's disruptors can become today's lifeguards. In the long term, it may make students who had positive experiences more likely to consider online programs in the future. While opinions and attitudes toward online learning will certainly continue to be polarized, the appetite from students for online offerings will likely grow long after the pandemic.

As colleges prepare for many unknowns, it is imperative to keep the unique needs of students front and center. The overnight shift to remote learning has revealed much about what matters most and what accounts for little. Whatever the future may hold, higher education institutions will likely end up being better prepared to teach online in the future

– whether that is under a planned basis or precipitated by emergency circumstances.

As we navigate the many challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has taught us that the most significant challenge and obligation that higher education faces is recognizing that, in the long run, our students' needs, abilities, or aspirations should not be overlooked. As the next new academic year unfolds, and even if we return to a situation that resembles a pre-pandemic higher education, colleges will likely have a sharpened appreciation and knowledge of the obstacles and challenges that their students face. We expect and hope that all higher learning institutions are, in fact, making adjustments to these circumstances based on the unique characteristics of their student body and work to support their students during this crucial time.

Stay safe. Stay inspired. **FBA**

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