

Funeral Service Education: What is Taught & Why?



{ by Patty S. Hutcheson, CFSP }

Patty Hutcheson is President of Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service, Decatur, GA, a Pierce College. She has dedicated 26 years to the college and students as a professor in Grief Psychology and Restorative Art in addition to serving as president since 2000. Patty is a licensed Funeral Director and Embalmer and a Certified Funeral Service Practitioner, and together with her husband owns Hutcheson's Memorial Chapel and Crematory in Buchanan, GA. She is Past- President of the American Board of Funeral Service Education.

“What do you all teach at that mortuary college?”

It's a fair question that educators often hear. Naturally, it's one of the first questions asked by prospective students. But it's also raised occasionally as a challenge by those already in the industry who voice concerns that new graduates “don't want to work” or “can't embalm”. As president of a mortuary college – and as a licensed funeral professional – I take these concerns quite seriously. Along with my colleagues and fellow educators, I strive to build a curriculum that fully prepares tomorrow's funeral professionals to capably meet the demands of the business and find rewards in the career. But building curricula is not done unilaterally or in a vacuum. What exactly is that process? How are courses and requirements determined? And can we simply stop with “book smarts” or are there other soft skills that we need to develop?

There is a very involved process of curriculum development for funeral service education. The American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE), which is the accrediting body for all mortuary colleges, is responsible for developing

the curriculum taught in mortuary colleges. The ABFSE is comprised of representatives from the fifty-eight accredited mortuary colleges, the National Funeral Directors Association, The National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association, The International Cemetery, Cremation, and Funeral Association, and appointed public members. The ABFSE has a Curriculum Committee comprised of twelve members representing NFDA, NFD&MA, ICCFA, and the educators. Every year the Curriculum Committee meets and reviews several of the twenty-one subject outlines. These twenty-one outlines, approximately 1,700 pages in total, are on a five-year rotation for review.

The graph to the left (Figure 1) illustrates the current curriculum structure for funeral service education:

Each student must also complete a minimum of ten embalming clinicals.

The minimum twenty-five percent of general education credits is to meet an Associate's Degree, the minimum

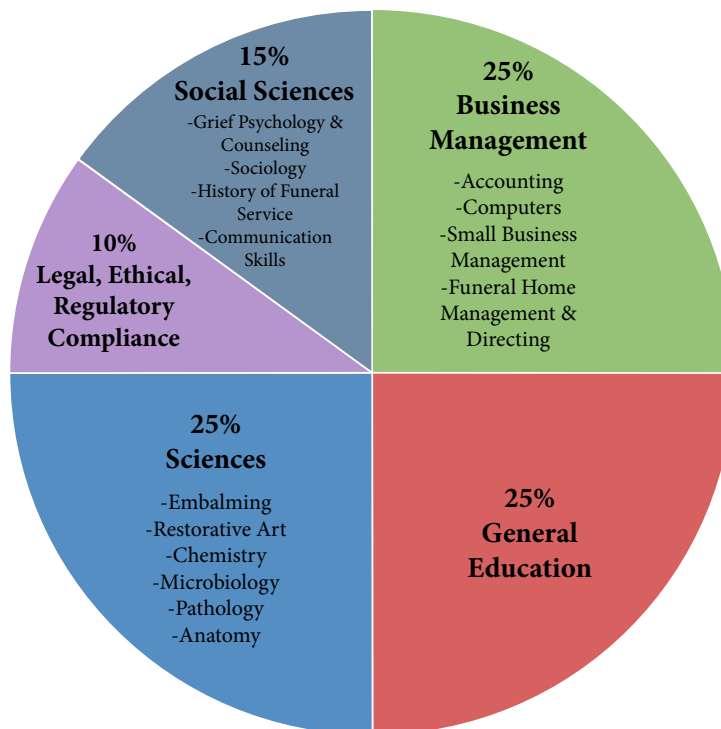


Figure 1

LEADERSHIP

requirement for program completion. Each instructor has the autonomy to include more information than found in the curriculum based on geographic location, cultural norms or trends within the profession.

In April 2010, the ABFSE Curriculum Committee decided that since all the outlines had been reviewed in the last five years, they would review the curriculum in its entirety as to how it meets the needs of today's funeral professional. Representatives from the member organizations, the colleges, and student body members from the Cypress Community College funeral service program met in California. Based on the feedback this committee received from student surveys from all mortuary colleges and the Expectation Survey authored by NFDA, mortuary colleges seem to be accomplishing their task of educating students for entry-level positions within the profession. The group did discuss updating the curriculum to include more of the alternatives to a traditional service and disposition. Cremation is already covered in the curriculum under Law and Funeral Directing, but other alternatives and merchandising options could be added.

It should be noted that the goal of mortuary science education is to equip students with the basic knowledge and skills to enter the profession. The educators then rely

on funeral service practitioners to mentor and further develop the intern's skills. This really is no different than other disciplines.

What about the complaint that graduating students "don't want to work"? This may be a generational concern that is beyond the role of the college. While I can only personally speak to the protocol at Gupton-Jones College, I trust that other colleges take similar steps to inform students that funeral service is 24/7 and that death does not take a holiday. We stress the need to complete more than the minimally-required embalming cases for more experience. Instructors talk about the need for good communication skills and for providing families with every option available. We discuss proper dress, punctuality, and going above what is expected.

As licensed funeral professionals ourselves, instructors realize that that we have a responsibility to the student and to the profession. The future of funeral service depends on having qualified, compassionate funeral service personnel willing to go beyond the minimum expectations. We strive to accomplish this goal and are always willing to make adjustments when and where necessary to improve the quality of education available to students of the funeral service profession. FBA

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