



5 Questions An Aspiring Funeral Professional Needs to Answer

James Shoemake, President
Dallas Institute of Funeral Service

Simply stated, the purpose of any institution of higher education is to prepare students. “Prepare for what” varies depending on the school’s mission or even one’s belief whether the purpose of higher learning is strictly to prepare one for the workforce, or rather, to nurture critical and creative thinking. I think it’s both. Mortuary colleges obviously focus on educating and preparing students for a career specifically in funeral service, but critical thinking, good decision-making, solid communications and other “soft skills” will also make for a much better funeral professional. That’s why an aspiring funeral professional preparing for a job interview should be ready to answer questions that go beyond the functional requisites of the day-to-day job as an embalmer or funeral director. Following are five questions that reveal deeper preparedness for a successful career in funeral service.

These five questions were composed as a result of data gathered in a survey of funeral home owners and managers that asked what attributes they looked for in new interns. This survey was commissioned by Pierce Mortuary Colleges, parent of Dallas Institute of Funeral Service, Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service, and Mid-America College of Funeral Service. It was conducted by Peacock Marketing Group, an independent third party.

The type of funeral service establishments in the survey included funeral homes, embalming care centers, cemeteries, and combination funeral home/cemetery operations. A wide diversity in funeral firm size was also captured in the survey:

- 31% - firms of less than 99 service calls
- 39% - firms of 100-249 service calls
- 13% - firms of 250-499 service calls
- 17% - firms of over 500 service calls

Interestingly, even though the size of the firm impacts their expectations of interns, there was consensus in

attributes sought that would be reflected in answers to these five questions:

1. Could you give some examples of your creativity?

The innovation and creativity that a new employee brings to a firm was cited by an overwhelming 99% of owners and managers as a very important or important quality. In fact, this attribute received the highest percentage of consensus compared to all others. The ability to find innovative solutions to problems, suggest creative approaches that can improve service to families, find ways to bring more efficiencies to different operational areas, are all examples of where creativity can be applied. Don’t fall into the myth that creativity is only something that certain people are born with. We are all born with imaginations which can and should continue to be nurtured and used. This could happen simply by being open to new ideas and thinking differently. Be prepared to answer this question or if it is not asked, address it yourself by demonstrating how you have been innovative, particularly as it applies to past employment or specific to your mortuary college studies.

2. Could you talk about how you’ve helped someone get through a problem?

This question goes both to compassion and the ability to build relationships, keys in funeral service no matter which part of the business one chooses to follow. It also speaks to management potential as successful management of others involves empathy, relationship-building, guidance, patience and pragmatism. Attributes that contribute towards relationship-building actually surfaced in a free-form survey question

asking what owners and managers considered the most important skill for a mortuary college student to learn. Relationships, communication, listening, empathy and people skills were among the top responses. Ninety-nine percent also indicated that mortuary college courses in communication skills were most relevant.

3. How do you define ethics in funeral service?

This question is very much open to interpretation and a job candidate can take this in several directions, but it is a great question for those very reasons. Answers can range from ethical treatment of families, to the care of the deceased, to legal and regulatory compliance, to personal conduct and more. This question can not only pull out how well someone understands basic codes of professional conduct but also can reveal how impassioned one is regarding ethical behavior which ultimately will reflect on the firm as well as the individual. One hundred percent of owners and managers said that ethics courses were among those most relevant, particularly to someone who aspires to funeral home management.

4. What do you consider to be the most important parts of funeral service?

Another wide open question with no one correct answer, this can illustrate where the candidate's passions lie and how well-versed he or she is in the many aspects of funeral service. Does the person prefer the clinical side or funeral directing? Do they demonstrate proficiency in funeral arrangements and have a sense of event planning? Do they seem knowledgeable in aspects related to final disposition, whether interment, entombment or cremation? Empathy, compassion, genuineness and other people skills can also be reflected in how this question is answered. Again, the survey of owners and managers showed their interest in both practical, operational skills as well as soft skills that aren't necessarily taught.

5. What do you think about the growing cremation rate?

This question is intentionally non-leading so that one can address this any number of ways. However, what is important to ascertain is whether the person embraces cremation and is equally prepared to help the funeral home serve cremation families and maximize cremation revenue. Firms indicated in the survey that

they seek those who are willing to embrace and discuss cremation options, know how to listen and can help plan the service the family wants, know how to market cremation options, and be creative in focusing on the celebration of life for all families. Other comments included the desire for trained crematory operators, understanding the legalities of cremation, and knowing how to create meaningful memories for cremation families.

Summary

While an intern or new funeral professional is not expected to know everything, a solid foundation of technical and operational knowledge and competency is expected in a graduate from an accredited school of funeral service. However, the value of other attitudinal and behavioral qualities – and the ability to discuss and demonstrate those – cannot be stressed enough. This includes attributes that help in communicating and serving families as well as those that enable one to learn and grow such as being open to new ideas, following direction, willing to help wherever there is a need (and yes, that includes general maintenance and cleaning around the facility), and overall confidence and enthusiasm.

So much of this can be demonstrated by how these 5 Questions are answered – whether you are an aspiring funeral professional, or an owner or manager who is interviewing one.



DALLAS
INSTITUTE
OF FUNERAL SERVICE
The Wilbert Group

James Shoemake is the president of Dallas Institute of Funeral Service serving as its president for almost 25 years. He has been a funeral service educator for 37 years and has been licensed since 1976. He has served on committees of the American Board of Funeral Service Education, the National Funeral Directors Association, and the Texas Funeral Directors Association.

From Day 1,
the focus is on you
at
**DALLAS
INSTITUTE**

The focus is on you from your first day as a Dallas Institute of Funeral Service student until long after you graduate. Talk to us about an individualized plan that's best for you. Because you are all that matters.



DALLAS
INSTITUTE
OF FUNERAL SERVICE
The Walbert Group

Graduating Professionals of Distinction

Visit www.dallasinstitute.edu to apply online or learn more
214.388.5466