



# JOURNAL OF FUNERAL SERVICE EDUCATION

## Contents

Using Depersonalization in Grief Assignments to Illustrate the  
Necessity of Personalizing Grief in Funeral Service Education  
Angela Knight  
Justin Gibbons.....5

The Evolution of Funeral Service Education: Conception to  
Accreditation  
Thomas A. Shaw, PhD,  
Anthony Fleege, MBA,  
Kent Epplin, MS Ed. ....21

An Examination of the Baccalaureate Degree and Related Skill  
Sets in Funeral Service Education  
John B. Fritch  
Janice Williams Miller.....43

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**Using Depersonalization in Grief Assignments to Illustrate the  
Necessity of Personalizing Grief in Funeral Service Education**

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## **Abstract**

The challenge for funeral service educators in the area of grief center around teaching a topic that is so personal and unique to the individual. This article demonstrates the need for personalizing grief education by creating an assignment in a psychology of grief course that eliminates as many personal components as possible. Students at the University of Central Oklahoma in the Psychology of Grief course were given a group grief assignment on MySpace. The student's written reports on this group grief project proved to be more negative than positive, with a statistically significant difference in the use of negative words versus positive words when asked to describe the group grief project. These results and student reports demonstrate a need for personalizing grief in funeral service education.

## **Introduction**

Grief is personal, private, and unique to the individual experiencing it, and this presents a challenge to grief educators in the field of funeral service education. Breen and O'Connor have emphasized the difficulties with Grief education today in that grief is highly personal to any given individual. In order for us to test the validity of Breen and O'Connor's theory that grief is unique and highly personal, we chose to develop a MySpace grief project for students that eliminated as many individualized aspects of grief as possible. With this study, we were attempting to depersonalize grief and force it into a "one size fits all" model in an effort to validate the work of Breen and O'Connor, and Gould, demonstrating the need for the subject of grief to be personalized for the student in grief education classes.

Students in this research project were required to contribute not to their own personal MySpace grief page, but to a group collaborative grief MySpace page, thus eliminating any personal or individual student representations of grief. The Psychology of Grief students were asked to go online as a group and make a

virtual representation of grief with MySpace. The online social networking site, MySpace, was chosen for this group grief project because it allows for visual images, songs, videos, and blogs that can be quite artistic. MySpace pages have the potential to look like anything the designer chooses. Students enrolled in The Psychology of Grief course for the spring semester of 2009 at The University of Central Oklahoma were given the assignment of going online to create a class group agreed upon representation of grief with MySpace.

This MySpace project was a collaborative effort that forced the students to express their grief education not in terms of how they think or feel about grief personally, but how their ideas of grief fit into a group grief collaborative project. Each individual student was encouraged to add content to the group grief MySpace project they felt was appropriate to the concept of grief, and to remove content they felt did not fit the grief MySpace page that another student had added. The students in this project used MySpace functions which included, blogs, pictures, songs, videos, images, and filled sections of “about me”, “who I’d like to met”,



interests, mood and status. The students had to agree on the grief content. Each student in the class could add grief content at anytime or remove grief content that seemed incorrect at anytime.

Before assigning the project to the group we postulated potential student responses based on current literature. Students should feel apprehension and discomfort when asked to describe and articulate grief though a general group or class consensus. With a limited amount of effort involved in a group grief representation because grief is personal and it would seem inappropriate or inaccurate if one representation was created for everyone. Grief is a unique experience that occurs within a personal context that specifically corresponds to each individual (Breen & O'Connor, 2007). Before administering the MySpace group grief assignment we developed a roster of anticipated student responses concerning the uses of the group MySpace grief homework.

We expected, based on current literature, the students would report a clear distain for the group MySpace grief assignment, with feelings of trepidation in terms of not knowing

what to do with the project itself, along with a discomfort for changing something on MySpace that another student had put on MySpace. General feelings of discomfort associated with expressing grief as a group or as a whole were also expected. We did not anticipate that many students would like the group MySpace representation of grief project.

Teaching the personal grief reaction presents a challenge to the educator, because grief is so personal and fluid. The goal in this qualitative quasi study involved asking students to think about grief in the context of a class assignment therefore, demonstrating the need for personalization in grief pedagogy.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Individuals participating in the MySpace group project consisted of 33 students enrolled in a Psychology of Grief course in the spring semester of 2009. Of the 33 students, 6 were male and 27 were female.

### *Procedure*

The class was given a group assignment to design and create a class representation of grief on MySpace. A blank MySpace account was set up in advance and was ready for the students to start designing immediately. All students were given the username and password to the account so that each individual student could have equal and unrestricted access to the group MySpace grief page. Students were directed to log on as frequently as they could and post material as if they were the personification of grief. Individuals were encouraged to “police” the MySpace grief group page for accuracy submitted by other students contributed material. Students were given permission to delete any material that they felt did not represent grief. Students were told that they would all receive the same grade based on the quality of the group grief assignment and how well it accurately reflected grief.

### *Data Collection*

Students were asked to anonymously self report their likes and dislikes about the MySpace Grief project and give as much detail as possible in a written document. The students were given

as much time as necessary to anonymously report what they liked and what they did not like about the group grief MySpace project. The student self report was taken during the end of the group MySpace project. The students written reports were then analyzed with the LIWC, a computer program that categorizes words into areas and provides a percentage of word use in each area. The LIWC has proved to be effective in reflecting a mental process or emotional life for the individual producing the writing. (Pennebaker and Lay, 2002) With the LIWC we were specifically looking for the percentage of positive words used and negative words uses when students were asked to write about the experience in creating a group grief MySpace page.

The self reports from students were then analyzed, reviewed, categorized and filed by hand in terms of whether or not the student reported an affinity for the project or not. Positive and negative student responses were counted, that is, each negative response from a student was counted and each positive response was counted. By far, the majority of students in describing their like or dislike of this MySpace grief project disliked the project.

The negative comments or responses from the students were then evaluated in terms of the subject matter relating to the negative response. Within each negative response we looked for a reason or an explanation for the dislike of the group project.

## **Results**

LIWC analysis showed a higher percentage of negative word use when students were asked to describe what they liked and did not like about the group MySpace grief project verses the percentage of positive words used. Of all student written reports on the group MySpace grief project, 80% of words used by students to describe this project were negative. Student reports contained 47% use of positive words. A T-test was used to determine if there was any statistical difference between positive words used and negative words uses with a statistical significant difference of  $p = 0.004$ .

Negative student responses for the project consisted of more than half of all recorded opinions. Out of total 60 separate and different individual opinions counted in student reports, 40 of such were negative. Some of the negative specific responses students reported were that they had problems with their peer's

choices of material or had minor aesthetic issues with the content. These students felt like some of the material added by other students was inappropriate and out of place. Through narrative self report, some of the students mentioned that they felt emotionally disconnected with the group project. These students were unsatisfied with the level of subjective involvement the project provided. Others divulged that they were afraid of offending their peers by either bringing up sensitive topics or misrepresenting someone else's representation of grief and appearing insensitive.

Students did have more negative than positive opinions regarding the group MySpace project as predicted. One of the most frequent complaints by the students involved affective and creative disagreements with their peer's choice of media, which includes blogs, art, songs, and videos. Some felt that others in the group treated the project too irreverently. One individual later added that they had in fact changed the background of the grief page themselves to something they felt was more appropriate. Some students had issues with the relevance of some the blogs while

others said that the page seemed too bare or wasn't eye-catching enough.

A portion of the negative opinions expressed by the students involved an emotional disconnection with the project. These students were concerned with the lack of emotionality, which should otherwise be plentiful in a grief themed group project. Students felt that it would have been more valuable to them if more people included material about their own personal grief experiences. One individual noted that they would have been more attached to the project if it were more personalized. They went on to say that they in turn could not get excited about the project and did not have the urgency to complete the assignment. One distraught student detailed that they did not like how broad the project was, because they were unsure how personal they could get with the assignment. They went on to say that they would talk themselves out of actually posting something because they were unconfident about whether or not their contribution would fit.

One student recounted, "I feel that it is too generalized. Grief is a personal experience, but no one has put anything

personal on the site. This may be due to fear of offending people or we just don't know how to express grief in these terms". Other students who felt similar fears of offending others said they disliked the project, because they were unsure about what to add or take away. Some said that they would not feel right about changing what others had contributed even if that individual disagreed with what the other had to say. There was a common feeling of hesitation and worry in regard to the alteration of media on the group grief MySpace page. This could be a collective acknowledgement of the sensitive nature of grief, which highlights the difficulty of teaching grief education and the development of thanatological pedagogy.

Some liked the idea of a group project. The majority of positive opinions centered on a general liking of the material added on the group MySpace page. The students who reported positive feedback mentioned that they liked that the fact it allowed them to creatively express current subjects in their life within the realm of privacy. One student remarked, "I like that we can be completely free and open with the assignment because no matter what we say



or put, it is something that means something to us and no one will have to know or even be able to question". Others liked how they could add material at their discretion anytime they wanted. While there were positive comments, these opinions represented a relative minority. Many of the students who had positive things to say about the project said that they generally enjoyed the material that was uploaded to the class MySpace grief page.

Due to the multitude of negative responses relating to the group grief project, the students were offered an alternative to the group project. We gave each individual student a choice with the assignment, they could either stay with the group class grief MySpace project or they could choose to start over and create their own grief MySpace page. All of the students chose to create their own grief MySpace page.

### **Discussion**

Creating the personification of grief with MySpace as a group was ineffective. Students in this study chose to do more class work when they all chose to create their own MySpace grief page and abandon the class grief MySpace page. This reaffirms

that grief cannot be put into a standard “one-size-fits-all” model and illustrates the importance of personalizing grief education. One student adequately reported, in line with our hypothesis, that they would have been more attached to the project if it were more personalized. Grief contains personal unique responses that can be influenced by a myriad of variables making it difficult for anyone to agree on one representation of grief.

Here we required students to work together on a group grief project that ultimately produced apathy and disdain in the student towards the grief MySpace group project. Grief is personal and should be taught in Funeral Service Education in a personal manner. A personal pedagogy is needed for grief education. Five out of the thirty three students that created their own individual MySpace pages created memorial pages dedicated to a lost loved one. One student created a detailed memorial page devoted to the loss of her two year old daughter that drowned in her back yard pool while under the supervision of the babysitter. Human beings as social animals experience grief, and always will. The question is not if, but when we will experience grief. Grief education is a life

skill and therefore essential. Making grief education personal in order for the student to fully understand what grief is like is the charge that we have undertaken in the field of Funeral Service education.

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**The Evolution of Funeral Service Education:  
Conception to Accreditation**

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## **Abstract**

This manuscript provides a chronological account of the evolution of the accrediting body that governs funeral service education. From its infancy to national recognition the progression has been deliberate and at times contentious. The purpose of this manuscript is to provide to the reader a better understanding of the mechanics involved in gaining national recognition and acknowledging the parochialism of our past is still a potential barrier to our future.

Funeral service education, which was formally recognized by the U. S. Department of Education in 1972 (The Director, April, 1972; Bigelow, 1997), resulted from a tripartite effort of professional organizations, mortuary science educators, and state licensing boards. This recognition represented almost one hundred years of struggle to crystallize a formal funeral service curriculum and to gain acceptance as a vocation.

Early schools for embalming began in the late 1870s and early 1880s. These “schools” were primarily individuals, allied with embalming chemical companies, who traveled around the country conducting one-to three-day seminars on embalming. Chemical companies helped subsidize the teaching seminars through donation of their fluids. Instructors would then attempt to market the fluids and supplies required to accomplish embalming to seminar participants (Habenstein & Lamers, 2001). According to Habenstein and Lamers (2001), low demand for embalmers and the high cost of instruction are reasons why non-commercial embalming schools were not established until the beginning of the twentieth century. By about 1894, establishment of licensing

boards in many states led to embalming schools assuming responsibility for ensuring knowledge acquisition, skills attainment, and related student outcomes (Habenstein & Lamers, 2001). As a result, independent schools of embalming began to emerge.

Efforts by state licensing boards (composed primarily of funeral directors) to create consistency in regulations soon followed. By 1904, state boards had organized The Joint Conference of Embalmer's Examining Boards and State Boards of Health (International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards, 2004; Habenstein & Lamers, 2001). The Conference's charge was to achieve uniformity among states regarding embalming regulations, state licensing reciprocity, and transportation rules (Habenstein & Lamers, 2001). Turf battles and solidification of power were barriers for most of the first decade.

The greatest obstacle faced by the Conference was the mind-set of state parochialism. Habenstein and Lamers (2001) allude to this in quoting a Conference participant:

From the beginning, nearly every state delegate opined that his license law was superior in some provisions.



Practically everyone thought his own law as a suitable pattern for all and was willing to try for uniformity provided his own law was the pattern. (p. 331)

Such attitudes by the states probably impeded the evolution of funeral service education.

Twenty-three years after its formation, the Conference established standardized criteria for the national accreditation of embalming schools. The standardized requirements included adoption of a six-month curriculum, formation of entrance requirements, and a plan for evaluating embalming school programs (Ford, 1968; Bigelow, 1997; Habenstein & Lamers, 2001). An Accreditation Committee, authorized to assign grades of A, B, or C to participating embalming schools (Bigelow, 1997; Habenstein & Lamers, 2001).

The evaluation process was somewhat simplistic. According to Bigelow (1997), the difference between a school graded “A” and a school graded “B” was whether or not a student finished high school or completed the eighth grade. The difference between a school graded “B” or “C” was the duration of attendance, (i.e., six months or three months). There appeared to be

little concern for other aspects of the program other than educational background of students and length of the program. The six-month curriculum focused on the technical or embalming (embalming, anatomy, microbiology, pathology, chemistry, hygiene, and restorative art) aspects of the occupation with the germination of business related content, (i.e., funeral service law, accounting, and ethics curriculum).

The majority of embalming schools during the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century were single purpose institutions. The Conference, whose charge was to manage the evolution of funeral service education, consisted of traditional and progressive thinking funeral directors and educators who might have had a vested interest in keeping the educational requirements status quo. This is amplified by Bigelow (1997) in quoting an educator from a 1928 meeting:

I do not believe we should issue accreditation to a university or college to teach embalming. They may be equipped to teach chemistry, hygiene and maybe anatomy, but there are some things they cannot teach. I don't believe a student could be a finished product when he graduates from a university and I believe we are lowering our profession every time we grant accreditation to a college or university embalming school. (p. 6)

This quote provides evidence once again of the myopic attitude of some, as well as, a perception of the genuine threat represented by public institutions. Another point Bigelow (1997) cited is the concern felt by some funeral directors regarding raising academic standards which were viewed as intending to keep people out of funeral service.

The creation of the Joint Educational Council in 1933, by the National Funeral Directors Association, was an attempt to coordinate the professional evolution of funeral service education. This was accomplished by organizing the three major entities in funeral service for the purpose of strategic planning on educational issues: (a) the National Funeral Directors Association, representing professional interest; (b) the National Association of Embalming Colleges, representing educational interests; and (c) the Conference of Embalmers' Examining Boards, representing state licensure interests (National Funeral Directors Association, 1933).

Over the next two years, the Council provided recommendations involving content of the curriculum, legitimizing public education of funeral service and standardizing program

length (National Funeral Directors Association, 1934). Actions of the Council, however, reflected some inconsistencies. The Council endorsed a course of study consisting of 39 weeks as the standard length of attendance in a graded embalming college or school, while in another recommendation it called for the elimination of all accounting and bookkeeping courses. The Council's rationale was that not enough time would be devoted to business subjects and that the content could be presented better by some other educational institution (National Funeral Directors Association, 1935).

The second recommendation represented a constricted view of some funeral service professionals, which is embalming is the primary function of funeral service. Less than eight years later the Council called for the addition of various business related content into the funeral service curriculum.

Tensions between public and private institutions were exacerbated when discussions about curriculum content took place (Bigelow, 1997). The use of standardized textbooks as a source for Conference exam questions was the main issue of debate. Bigelow

(1997) pointed to a 1937 letter emanating from the University of Minnesota in which concerns were expressed for academic freedom and linking the National Board exam questions to a text instead of professional practice. Animosity continued to develop between the parties until in 1938 the University of Minnesota refused to charge students 15 dollars to help fund accreditation activities of the Conference. As a result, the Conference reduced the institution's grade from an "A" to "AA". The University of Minnesota responded with threats of civil action based on the Conference's grading adjustment in which the center of dispute was financial and not curriculum.

Habenstein and Lamers (2001) explained a paradigm shift of the curriculum during the early to mid 1940s. This pertained to increased awareness of business skills needed to effectively maintain business activity (National Funeral Directors Association, 1946). Topics such as public relations, marketing, and management activities were being incorporated into funeral service education. This was an epiphany of sorts in that the funeral service profession was beginning to realize that business and people skills

might be as important as embalming skills. The idea that embalming is at the center of funeral service was beginning to be questioned.

In 1946, the National Funeral Directors Association decided to replace the Joint Educational Council with the Joint Committee on Education. Membership of this committee was the same as the Council's membership: (a) funeral directors representing the National Funeral Directors Association, (b) educators representing mortuary science institutions, and (c) individuals representing the Conference (Ford, 1968; Bigelow, 1997; Habenstein & Lamers, 2001). Article II of the Joint Committee's constitution stated their responsibility to “. . . formulate and promulgate and enforce rules and regulations setting up standards concerning the schools and colleges teaching mortuary science” (American Board of Funeral Service Education, 2003, p. 1-1). Article V of the constitution gave accreditation authority for the institutions to the Conference (American Board of Funeral Service Education, 2003). This action established the

Conference as both the accreditation and national testing agency for mortuary science education.

This body strengthened the accreditation standards for funeral service institutions. It established rules and regulations that accreditation must be accomplished every three years, increased program length to either 9 or 12 months, and created written policy standards for accreditation (Bigelow, 1997).

By the middle of the 1950s, the Joint Committee had firmly established itself as the sole authority for funeral service education standards and supported the Conference's attempt to gain federal accreditation authority (National Funeral Directors Association, 1956; National Funeral Directors Association, 1957). During this period, the Joint Committee began developing and revising the rules and regulations influencing funeral service accreditation.

By 1958, the Committee had completed the task of establishing new rules and regulations and submitted revisions to the National Funeral Directors Association for approval along with a recommendation that the Committee change its name to the American Board of Funeral Service Education (National Funeral

Directors Association, 1958). It is interesting to note that, prior to its submission of the revisions, the Committee held a public hearing to solicit comments about the proposal. All interested parties were given notice, but no responses were received. This is mentioned because the resulting action is the fundamental structure for funeral service education today, as well as, the catalyst for ensuing discourse.

In 1959, the National Funeral Directors Association learned that the U.S. Department of Education was more likely to grant accreditation to an agency if it was comprised of representatives of the profession and funeral service education (National Funeral Directors Association, 1959). Thus, the American Board of Funeral Service Education recommended that all issues and procedures for national accreditation of funeral service education be directed toward that agency. When this recommendation went before the individual entities, the Conference did not accept the recommendation. This set the stage for potential conflict between the Conference and American Board of Funeral Service Education for ultimate governing authority of funeral service education.



This issue was quickly diffused when the American Board of Funeral Service Education invited Dr. William K. Sheldon of the National Commission on Accrediting to its summer meeting in which the Conference also participated. The meeting resulted in a resolution which effectively gave the American Board of Funeral Service Education sole authority involving funeral service education accreditation. In part, the resolution stated: “. . .the American Board of Funeral Service Education in cooperation with all the colleges of mortuary science participate in further development of a professional accreditation program designed to be recognized and approved by the National Commission on Accrediting” (National Funeral Directors Association, 1960, p. 113). This resolution was subsequently passed by the Conference and National Funeral Directors Association, providing unification among the agencies for attaining funeral service education accreditation.

The 1963 revision of the American Board of Funeral Service Education accreditation manual marked the beginning of an ambitious, yet ultimately doomed attempt to increase minimum

requirements for admission. In an effort to explain the proposal to National Funeral Directors Association's delegation, Mervin Stover, Chairman of the Sub-Committee for the revision of the Accreditation Manual stated:

. . . as the other professions as well as the public in general increase their level of education, we in funeral service must increase ours as well. It is impossible for funeral service to keep pace with the average level of education possessed by the general population if it maintains the status quo.  
(National Funeral Directors Association, 1963, p. 79)

After a lengthy debate, the motion was carried and by September 1, 1966, students enrolled in funeral service education were required to have at least one year of college. The Conference and the University Mortuary Science Education Association (UMSEA) endorsed the increased admission requirement the following year (National Funeral Directors Association, 1964). Conspicuously absent from the endorsement was the National Association of Colleges of Mortuary Science, which is the educational association representing private funeral service education schools.

Reactions from various states were almost immediate.

Torres (1983) cited negative responses from California, Oregon,

and New York. Such adverse reactions and threats of withdrawing could possibly have been dealt with by the American Board of Funeral Service Education. But, what made the threats more provocative was the fact that the National Association of Colleges of Mortuary Science was now going to accredit proprietary schools of funeral service education (Bigelow, 1997; Torres, 1983). Thus, began a contentious period between the National Association of Colleges of Mortuary Science and the American Board of Funeral Service Education.

The National Association of Colleges of Mortuary Science added more pressure by withdrawing from the American Board of Funeral Service Education in 1964 and applying for national accreditation recognition (Bigelow, 1997; Torres, 1983). This action significantly reduced oversight of the American Board of Funeral Service Education by two-thirds. In the notice to withdraw from the American Board of Funeral Service Education, the National Association of Colleges of Mortuary Science stated how it was strongly opposed to admission changes by the American Board of Funeral Service Education “. . .the American Board, as

presently structured will not receive the approval of the U.S. Office of Education as the accreditation agency for funeral service schools. . .” (University Mortuary Science Education Association, 1969). Berg described the feelings of proprietary schools by stating:

. . .those schools willing to accept dictation from the American Board would be admitted -the others would be left out in the cold- a frontal attack against the proprietary schools that has only one objective, the destruction of the private schools as such.( National Funeral Directors Association, 1966, p.10-12)

In the meantime, the American Board of Funeral Service Education continued with its application process for national recognition. By October 1967, the American Board of Funeral Service Education had been denied approval as the national accrediting agency for funeral service education. In explaining its rationale for the denial, the U.S. Office of Education noted that only one agency can accredit a profession (National Funeral Directors Association, 1967). As a result, the National Association of Colleges of Mortuary Science had successfully derailed the American Board of Funeral Service Education’s attempt to become the sole authority on funeral service education accreditation.

By 1968, the stalemate had reached its zenith. The National Association of Colleges of Mortuary Science had won an injunction against the American Board of Funeral Service Education forbidding them to withdraw accreditation from five proprietary schools that were not following admission criteria along the American Board of Funeral Service Education mandate. In addition, the National Funeral Directors Association abandoned the American Board of Funeral Service Education by passing a motion:

. . . to withdraw the support of this Association from the American Board of Funeral Service Education, if at any time it becomes necessary to do so to carry out the educational policies that have been adopted by a vote of the House of Delegates. (National Funeral Directors Association, 1968, p. 28).

The irony of this conflict is that the National Funeral Directors Association was the catalyst, by a vote of the House of Delegates, for the establishment of a one-year college entrance requirement.

A year later, the National Funeral Directors Association recommended that the American Board of Funeral Service Education resolve the litigation and delete the one-year college requirement for entrance (National Funeral Directors Association,

1969). It is interesting to note that in the same recommendation, the National Funeral Directors Association proposed “. . . to secure increased educational standards through requirements for licensure of the states. . .” (National Funeral Directors Association, 1969, p. 4). Therefore, the National Funeral Directors Association maintained some integrity in regard to educational standards by moving the emphasis from educational requirements to licensure requirements.

The American Board of Funeral Service Education resolved this conflict by creating a Commission of Schools and by re-organizing the agency’s membership (National Funeral Directors Association, 1970). The Commission of Schools was charged with the development of accreditation standards, enforcement of the standards, and accreditation of all funeral service education programs. Membership reorganization consisted of making each school a member of the American Board of Funeral Service Education instead of educational associations (National Funeral Directors Association, 1970). This effectively

gave more authority to proprietary schools, due to their greater numbers.

These actions by the American Board of Funeral Service Education removed the barriers created by the National Association of Colleges of Mortuary Science and provided the structure required by the U.S. Office of Education for American Board of Funeral Service Education recognition as the sole authority for funeral service education accreditation.

Recognition was finally achieved in 1972. This provided stature as well as eligibility for guaranteed student loans, National direct student loans, and Educational Opportunity grants (National Funeral Directors Association, 1971). Thus, the practice of funeral service continued its evolution into a profession. With the educational foundation in place and with the ability to weather discourse, the American Board of Funeral Service Education accrued the knowledge base and applicable procedures and processes necessary to lead and sometimes pull an educational body that is responsible to the needs of the funeral service profession and society

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**An Examination of the Baccalaureate Degree and Related Skill  
Sets in Funeral Service Education**

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## **Abstract**

This study explored the perceptions of funeral home operators (N=50) who were members of the Illinois Funeral Directors Association. Participants completed a self-report questionnaire which assessed their belief in the necessity of obtaining a B.S. degree in funeral service. Also presented were nine skill areas within the profession with participants identifying the areas they believed were attained with a B.S. or an associate degree. Survey responses were statistically analyzed with chi squared goodness-of-fit tests across the two groups (B.S. necessary, B.S. unnecessary). A surprising pattern of results was obtained; unanticipated was the number of skill areas reported as not clearly attained in either group. The results highlight existing critical elements while adding to the body of empirical research aiding those charged with assessing the instruction and developing curricula in the growing field of funeral service education.

## **An Examination of the Baccalaureate Degree and Related Skill Sets in Funeral Service Education**

In the 1900s a cultural movement led to the establishment of the modern funeral home. The public began to require the assistance of professional funeral directors to assist with the care of the dead body and this ultimately led to the full service funeral industry we know in modern America. Entrepreneurs realized the potential profitability of the profession, which led to an increasing number of people seeking the opportunity to practice as a professional in the industry. This created a need for a training ground for individuals interested in pursuing a career in funeral service and formal funeral service education was born (Kastenbaum, 2007; Laderman, 2003). Independent trade schools, programs within community colleges and departments in colleges and universities are currently part of the national funeral service educational scene. Today there are 56 funeral service programs accredited by the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) in the United States ([abfse.org](http://abfse.org)). Of the 56 accredited programs 12 schools are dedicated exclusively to funeral service education, the remaining programs are largely community college

associate degree programs, with only seven schools offering a baccalaureate degree (Habenstein & Lamers, 2010). The ABFSE is responsible for insuring a common curriculum and each school must undergo a comprehensive evaluation every seven years to secure and maintain accreditation. The accrediting board does not provide any type of program ranking system and all schools must meet the same accreditation standards (Bigelow, 1997). Although programs hail from distinctly unique educational institutions, each offering vastly different educational expectations and requirements, the accreditation standards remain the same.

Profound differences exist in the quality, breadth and depth of education received from each institution. Examination of the critical educational elements that exist in funeral service education would greatly benefit the industry. It would be very beneficial to examine the belief in the necessity of a baccalaureate degree in funeral service, and to explore the professional skills identified as important by those that believe a bachelor's degree is necessary and others that find this degree unnecessary.

Limited empirical research was identified directly involving funeral service education which specifically addresses competing methods and degrees in the discipline. One such study (Frade, 1997) investigated contemporary and future trends in mortuary education. He discussed educational enhancements within the context of current and long-range perspectives in student education. Both internal and external enhancements and trends were examined, with the central element being technological support in the new global environment. Survival in an ever-changing educational environment was cited as a need for the enhancements and trends proposed in the study.

Carter (1999) identified ways to evaluate and improve funeral service education through effective instruction. The theory underlying his research was that a definition of effective teaching in a school of funeral service education can be determined by analysis of specific practices used in effective teaching and those employed in ineffective teaching. A list of behaviors was derived from the opinions of chairpersons and supervisors and distributed to students and instructors. Practices common for effective and

ineffective teaching in funeral service education were thus developed.

Utilizing frequencies and percentages Broomfield (2000) examined attitudes and opinions of funeral home operators regarding the importance of a baccalaureate degree in mortuary science. The purpose of his study was to identify the perceptions of Illinois funeral home operators regarding the importance of a bachelor's degree in mortuary science. It was concluded that the majority of funeral home operators do not believe that a baccalaureate degree is necessary in mortuary science. He further determined that Illinois funeral directors do not believe a baccalaureate degree should be required for licensure nor would they offer a higher wage for employees with a baccalaureate degree.

Taken together, the research reviewed here suggests that funeral service education has become a topic of interest among those in the field of mortuary science. The current study seeks to extend this line of inquiry by exploring the beliefs about education among funeral home operators. More specifically, this study



builds on Broomfield's (2000) descriptive research into the necessity of obtaining a Baccalaureate degree in funeral service, as perceived by funeral home operators. The current study will also determine whether or not the professional skills identified by those believing in the necessity of the B.S. degree significantly differ from those indicating that a baccalaureate degree is not necessary. Through this assessment, this research seeks to develop a further understanding of the necessity of a baccalaureate degree in funeral service and the perceived impact each degree option has on identified professional skill sets. The research questions for the study included (1) Do funeral home operators believe in the necessity of a B.S. degree in mortuary science? and (2) Do the professional skills identified by those believing in the necessity of this degree differ from those indicating that a B.S. degree in mortuary science is not necessary?

### **Method and Results**

Data used in this study were part of a larger attitudinal survey (Broomfield, 2000; permission for use via personal communication, September 21, 2010), where the respondents were

members of the Illinois Funeral Directors Association. The fifty participants were comprised of both funeral home management staff (30%) and funeral home owners (70%), with 42% ( $n = 21$ ) categorized as ranging in age from 20 to 40, 48% ( $n = 24$ ) from 41 to 60 years, and 10% ( $n = 5$ ) aged 60 or above.

These funeral home operators voluntarily completed a self-report questionnaire developed to assess their perceptions of the importance of a baccalaureate degree in mortuary science (please see Broomfield for a detailed description of the instrument).

Responses to the item “Do you believe that a baccalaureate degree in mortuary science is necessary for funeral service practitioners?” were statistically analyzed in the current study with a chi squared test for goodness-of-fit (Conover, 1999). For this sample, the number of “yes” ( $n = 15$ ) and “no” ( $n = 35$ ) responses significantly differed, with most operators indicating “no” ( $X^2(1) = 8.0; p = .0047$ ); a B.S. degree in mortuary science was *not* important to them.

Table 1  
*Contrast of Funeral Home Operators across Skill Areas*

Baccalaureate degree in mortuary science

Skill Area	Necessary (n = 15)		Not Necessary (n = 35)		X <sup>2</sup>	
	Yes	No	Yes	No		
Professional recognition	12	3	5.40 (p = .02)	20	10	6.43 (p = .011)
Advancement	10	5	NS	21	14	NS
Communication	14	1	11.27 (p = .001)	24	11	4.23 (p = .028)
Technical	5	10	NS	27	7	11.76 (p = .001)
Business	15	0	Significant	16	19	NS
Interpersonal	8	7	NS	27	8	10.31 (p = .001)
Analytical	10	5	NS	13	22	NS
Personal satisfaction	10	5	NS	13	22	NS
Ethics	4	11	NS	23	12	NS

Nine specific skill areas within the profession were then addressed (see Table 1). Those reporting the necessity of the B.S. degree (n = 15) were instructed to check all skill areas they believed were attained with that degree, while the group indicating the B.S. degree was *not* necessary (n = 35) were instructed to check the skills they believed were attained with an associate degree. It should be noted that multiple responses did occur across the nine skill areas for each group. Each skill area was thus treated separately within a group, and tested with a chi squared analysis which determined whether or not the number of “yes” and “no” responses significantly differed.

Results suggested that, regardless of whether or not the B.S. degree was deemed necessary, there were significant differences between the number of yes – no responses in the areas of professional recognition (B.S. necessary  $X^2 = 5.40$ ;  $p = .02$ ; B.S. *not* necessary  $X^2 = 6.43$ ;  $p = .011$ ) and communication (B.S. necessary  $X^2 = 11.27$ ;  $p = .001$ ; B.S. *not* necessary  $X^2 = 4.23$ ;  $p = .028$ ), where most responses were “yes”. A similar but non-significant pattern existed in the areas of advancement, personal satisfaction, ethics, and analytical skills, where both groups reported no real difference between the numbers of yes – no responses. A different pattern emerged regarding technical and interpersonal skills. Whereas there were *no* differences between the number of yes – no responses for those reporting the B.S. to be necessary, there were significant differences between the frequency of yes or no for the *not* necessary group ( $X^2 = 11.76$ ;  $p = .001$  and  $X^2 = 10.31$ ;  $p = .001$ , respectively). Interestingly, this pattern was reversed for business skill where the yes – no difference was non-significant for the *not* necessary group but

significant for the B.S. a necessity group (where all 15 respondents indicated “yes”).

## **Discussion**

The results from this study provide funeral service educators with information useful in developing curricula, assessing instruction, and noting trends in the profession. Overall, the findings of the study suggest a surprising pattern of results. Evidently, many professionals in the field still resist the necessity of the B.S. degree (Broomfield). Further, funeral service education appears to be in the development phase, which offers educators’ unique opportunities. The results presented here coincide with Habenstein and Lamers’ research which noted that differences do exist between degree options. Further, funeral service educational programs may choose to differentiate program requirements and skill set proficiencies. The nine skills assessed in this study provide specific perceptions from professionals which may serve to guide those developing educational programs. However, the limitations of the study should be noted, which include the limited generalizability due the small sample size from one state, Illinois.

Further, a self-report instrument was used, although the confidential nature should ensure response accuracy.

In the current study, both professional recognition and communication skills were identified as attained in the educational program, regardless of whether or not these funeral home owners and management staff believed in the necessity of the B.S. degree. Technical and interpersonal skills were perceived to be attained with an associate degree for those believing the B.S. degree to be unnecessary while these skill areas were not perceived to be clearly attained by those who believed in the necessity of the B.S. degree. Further, whereas business skills were perceived to have been obtained for the B.S. necessary group, these skills were apparently not clearly acquired for the B.S. unnecessary group. Unanticipated was the number of skill areas reported as not clearly reached in *either* group. Four skill areas were deemed not clearly attained: advancement, personal style, analytical skills, and ethics. Are these skill areas critical for success in the funeral industry?

Funeral service education programs are the training ground for funeral professionals and attaining proficiency in the needed skills

serves as the cornerstone of the industry. For example, communication was identified in this study as a critical skill that has been attained. However, the responsibility to instill ethical standards in the future custodians of this noble profession *should* be a critical element of the educational process, even though it was not identified as such here. In other words, the skills not identified as attained present educators with those areas that may need to be included in programming decisions. It is our belief that successful programs will differentiate themselves by graduating highly skilled, ethical funeral directors.

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