

you can, drop names and personal information you remember about them to make it clear that you valued them enough to listen and remember what they told you.

2. **Friendly:** Greet customers with a smile. be approachable, warm and understanding. Be sure to be this way with your co-workers, too.

“Also, your customers can hear a smile on the telephone,” Schmidt says. “When you record a voicemail, are you smiling the whole time? You ought to be. A smile on your voicemail shows you are approachable and that you care. People can hear that in your voice, and it will set the tone for a much more positive interaction with your customer.”

3. **Flexibility:** Look for ways to make things work for customers. “When customers believe you are on their side, they will be so appreciative,” Schmidt says.

4. **Follow up:** When you make a promise to a customer (or a co-worker), you need to follow up as quickly and as completely as possible. “Don’t wait 48 hours to return an email,” she says.

5. **Fast:** When you waste people’s time, they will resent you for it. This doesn’t mean to rush through everything, but focus on efficiency. “If they sound rushed and busy, you may need to pick up your speed,” she says. “You need to know your customers, and that comes by really listening to them.”

Debra J. Schmidt motivates, educates, entertains and delights audiences with powerful, humorous stories that drive her message home and hook even the toughest participants. She regularly speaks to funeral service professionals. Visit www.LoyaltyLeader.com to learn more.

The Conference Expresses Disappointment after AAMI Escapes Penalty

The American Board of Funeral Service Education’s Committee on Accreditation has decided not to take any action against the American Academy McAllister Institute of Funeral Service after considering a complaint filed by the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards, which claimed that the school had threatened the integrity of the National Board Exam through the soliciting and sharing of NBE content.

In an Oct. 28 letter to A.R. “Sandy” Mahon, president of The Conference, Robert C. Smith III, executive director of the American Board, wrote that in making its decision, the Committee on Accreditation had reviewed the materials submitted in support of the complaint as well as the materials that the New York City-based AAMI had submitted in response to the complaint.

“Extensive discussions and thorough evaluation occurred during the regularly scheduled meeting of the COA on October 22nd and 23rd, 2016,” Smith wrote. “Following this extensive review by the COA members, the COA has determined that it is satisfied that the issues raised in The Conference’s complaint have been addressed and remedied by AAMI. The COA also noted that the Federal Court has issued a permanent injunction which prohibits the conduct referenced in The Conference’s complaint. Additionally, the COA noted that AAMI has been proactive in its effort to avoid any such future conduct.”

Smith’s letter continues: “When the COA first became aware of the allegations against AAMI, the Committee reviewed its Accreditation and Policy Manual and recognized that the Manual did not directly address issues such as those discussed in the lawsuit. As a result, a new standard was added to the Manual in October, 2015 (Standard 4.6), which specifically addresses honesty and integrity required of all accredited programs.”

The letter concludes, “If The Conference becomes aware of any new misconduct on the part of AAMI or any other program, then the COA will welcome the filing of a new complaint and will give it full consideration.”

Dalene Paull, executive director of The Conference, expressed disappointment that the COA chose not to take any action against AAMI.

“The Conference is disappointed that the COA believed its standards at the time were not robust enough to take action in response to such an egregious situation,” she says. “In the complaint to the COA, The Conference identified multiple standards we believed were applicable. We were equally disappointed that the COA concluded that the issues raised in the complaint had been remedied by the school, though they did not share with us the basis for that conclusion nor has there been a leadership change at AAMI. The response we received from the COA noted a new standard which now requires honesty and integrity of the programs they accredit. Our hope is that if this situation repeats itself, the COA will be in a better position to investigate and take action.”

Asked if The Conference can challenge the COA’s decision, Paull notes, “It is our understanding that there is no right of appeal that would apply.”

However, The Conference has asked for information substantiating the COA’s decision, Paull says. “Though we understand the need for confidential proceedings, we have also expressed concern that the process allows for The Conference’s complaint to be shared with AAMI prior to their response to the COA but does not allow for The Conference to see AAMI’s response, even when the matter is closed,” Paull says.

Board members with The Conference unanimously voted to file the complaint at its February 2016 meeting after receiving “credible information” regarding activities undertaken by AAMI that threatened the integrity of the NBE through the soliciting and harvesting of NBE content, according to a resolution to file a complaint.

The Conference is still deciding the fate of hundreds of former AAMI students who allegedly participated in or benefited from the alleged scheme, which it says AAMI carried out to presumably increase pass rates, providing the college with “financial and reputational gain,” according to a complaint that The Conference filed against AAMI in January 2014 in U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York.

AAMI denies those charges, and in June 2015, AAMI and The Conference entered into a confidential settlement resolving that complaint. Since then, The Conference has overturned the scores of about 100 former AAMI students who participated in or benefited from the alleged scheme – and hundreds more could still have their scores invalidated, according to Jennifer Ancona Semko with Baker & McKenzie LLP’s Washington D.C., office, who represents The Conference.

New Jersey’s Executive Director Critical of The Conference

George R. Kelder Jr., CEO and executive director of the New Jersey State Funeral Directors Association, has been paying close attention to the dispute between AAMI and The Conference, and he penned a critical column on The Conference’s actions in overturning the NBE scores of AAMI graduates in the January issue of The Forum, which is the association’s digital information resource.

Kelder took issue with The Conference invalidating scores without giving AAMI graduates access to evidence that they participated in any wrongdoing.

“It would seem to me in the spirit of the New Year that agents of all the parties, The Conference, AAMI, student representatives and perhaps the American Board of Funeral Service Education should

lock themselves away for a day or two and bring this entire debacle to a satisfactory and amicable resolution – for the sake of everyone involved as well as the future of funeral service,” he writes.

Kelder adds in his column, “If The Conference needs to hear that they made their point and issue a final warning to all future takers that the exam is sacred – so be it. If AAMI needs to hear that they are still a top funeral service school, and have acknowledged no wrongdoing – great. Hey Conference, we all heard you. AAMI, you still have an excellent online program. Now is the time to set aside your sense-of-self and come to a reasonable and mutually beneficial conclusion for the licensees.”

Kelder also wonders why there has seemingly been a lack of outrage about the situation from elsewhere in the profession. “I’ll even settle for some modicum of concern over the fact that our newest peers are being denied due process,” he writes. “Their livelihoods, licenses and futures are hanging in the balance, and not one shred of evidence that can prove or disprove that questions were harvested is being provided to them in their defense. Surely there are licensees in states other than New Jersey in the same boat.”

Kelder is correct in stating that the dispute has had far-reaching effects, and the effects have been especially felt in New Jersey: NJSFDA knows of at least 25 New Jersey licensees who are “caught up” in the investigation, and it believes there to be more, Kelder says in an email.

“We are unaware at this time of any correspondence from The Conference to the New Jersey State Board of Mortuary Science notifying its board members of exam score invalidations,” Kelder says. “We are on record, however, with our State Board since September of 2015 that we do not believe the graduates have been afforded the most basic provisions of due process, that the terms of settlement appear onerous . . . and lack merit. Should The Conference begin communicating exam score validations to the Mortuary Board, the NJSFDA will use our best efforts to persuade any New Jersey regulatory body, regulator or other authority that The Conference’s action should be disregarded until the former students are afforded proper due process.”

Kelder notes that the NJSFDA believes everyone has had a say in the dispute between AAMI and The Conference *except* the graduates.

“It’s time that all parties come together and attempt to bring this matter to an amicable conclusion for the sake of funeral service,” he says. “The Conference’s role is to measure entry-level competence. Unfortunately, what we have seen in its settlement offers to graduates has been disproportionate to its role in funeral service education. Although no one has reached out to NJSFDA at this time, we are willing to mediate and broker a conclusion so that graduates, who are now contributing licensees, are not constantly worried about the status of their licenses, their livelihoods and their careers.”

Paull took issue with Kelder’s portrayal of the situation in his column. “It is unfortunate that the NJSFDA prints inflammatory articles based on faulty assumptions because that adds to the misunderstanding of the entire situation,” she says. “For them to assert that The Conference went through the exercise of defending the validity and credibility of the NBE simply to prove that it is ‘sacred’ is irresponsible.” She adds, “The Conference has a duty to defend the National Board Exam program and will continue to do so on behalf of The Conference membership and the integrity of the licensure process.

Paull notes that the number of affected examinees appears to “have been captured at roughly 300” and that “The Conference continues to work with all examinees to resolve the unfortunate predicament caused by AAMI. The number of invalidations will likely continue to rise as The Conference completes its evaluation of each individual examinee.”

A lawyer who represented AAMI in this matter who was contacted had not responded with any comments as of press time.