

Viewpoint • Part Three • Is Funeral Service Education Effective?

What the National Board Scandal Says about Funeral Service Education

(This is the third and final part of the series by Wilson H. Beebe Jr., executive director of the New Jersey State Funeral Directors Association, in which he explores the implications of the late litigation between the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards and the American Academy McAllister Institute over the alleged compromise of the National Board Exam. The litigation was settled without any acknowledgement of wrongdoing by the defendants AAMI and its president Margaret “Meg” Dunn. The series is copyright by the New Jersey State Funeral Directors Association, and it was first published in The FORUM, the association’s digital funeral home resource. The series is being republished here with the permission of the NJSFDA.)

Perhaps even more troubling than questions of the paramountcy of the NBE itself is that a school like AAMI – accredited by the American Board – should go (or feel it has to go) to the lengths that it allegedly did to coach students on the content of the NBE as a core and primary objective. In this view of funeral service education, the social and learning process of education is subordinated to ensuring that every single student that passes through its classrooms and through its online channels passes the NBE. In this model, it’s not the process of education that is paramount, but what one has to do to pass the NBE and what *de minimus* clinical work has to be done to meet the standards of the American Board.

One of the standards of accreditation by the American Board is the requirement that schools maintain a 60 percent pass rate on the NBE. That is reasonably liberal, if one is going to use that as a yardstick. And probably somewhat meaningless without a lot of other data. The current accreditation standards of the American Board also require schools to track the timely graduation and employment rates of its students. And program attrition rates are currently under consideration to be added to the mix as well.

Be that as it may, AAMI has heavily exploited the NBE pass rate in its marketing, advertising and program conduct. Dalene Paull, the executive director of The Conference, testified in her declaration that “historically, the national average passing score on the Arts portion of the National Exam has been 72% for first-time test takers.” By comparison, she stated, the passing rate for AAMI students “on the Science portion of the National and State exams was 92% for first-time test takers.”

Enrollment at AAMI has grown significantly, much of which is from all accounts attributable to its online program in which it has invested heavily. Ten years ago, AAMI had a five-year rolling average of 94 new enrollees each year, and 60 graduates (which translates into a market share of 3.7 percent and 4.7 percent respectively). By 2014, that market share in the case of new enrollees had more than doubled (and nearly tripled), with AAMI having 9.4 percent of all new enrollees (or 242 students) and 7.9

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percent of all current graduates (or 114 persons). The next closest program is the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science with 143 new enrollees and 96 graduates. Out of the 58 mortuary science programs, someone is losing market share, since the overall numbers of new enrollees and graduates is pretty stable, and just recently began recovering its pre-Great Recession volume. As reported by the ABFSE, 30 programs had a decline in enrollment in 2013.

Between 2010 and 2012, AAMI invested between \$1.5 and \$2 million in online learning development, with \$1 million of that invested in 2010 alone (based on the data contained in the latest available IRS Forms 990 filed by AAMI). That's out of an operating budget of about \$4 million. AAMI ran small operating deficits in each of these years, contributing to a decline in net assets from \$3.38 to \$2.6 million. Its online program development has been credibly led by George Connick, who is listed as AAMI's executive vice president, and who has a distinguished resume in online learning development for the University of Maine System and other academic institutions, and who also did a stint as the executive director of the American Board, and is thus able to combine his expertise in funeral service curriculum with that of online learning.

In one sense, this place that AAMI has arrived at among its peers is perhaps to be applauded for its vigor and for its farsighted investments in online education. One could also make the case that AAMI is doing the profession a service to the extent that its strategy is contributing to a concentration of funeral service education. Funeral service education, like anything else, could benefit from the more effective concentration of financial and policy resources on fewer institutions seeking to hone and refine its skills as something of a "center of excellence." Of the current 58 mortuary science programs, fully one third of them enroll fewer than 25 new students a year.

On deeper reflection though, if you pair the juiced-up accessibility of AAMI's online programming, and AAMI's past emphasis on gaming the NBE just to get it done, pour in the limited two-week clinical work exposure (which is the only in-person requirement of its online matriculates), and then add in the total absence of any internship (serving an internship simultaneous with mortuary school is not permitted in New York), well then you create the perfect environment for the behavior that allegedly occurred at AAMI. Where the almost total incentive is to get past the NBE.

In this view, while the conduct relating to the alleged compromise of the NBE is not good, the larger issue has to do with the rise of online education and the disassociation of that from experiential, classroom and social environments. The online program is not a problem, per se; but its growth at AAMI, paired with the NBE coaching designed to help make it a success, does suggest that the accreditation process of the American Board hasn't really wrapped its arms around the issue of effectiveness of its educational outlets, or kept pace with the changes being led by a school like AAMI (for better or worse). It's not as though AAMI wasn't recently reaccredited, either, which it was, in 2013 (which also raises the question about what the American Board knew at the time it reaccredited AAMI about the activities being scrutinized by The Conference at that time). The American Board's current accreditation standards and process seem to view the online environment as more or less a substitute for the classroom, with the delivery mechanism not making a qualitative difference in the outcome.

A claim I don't buy. If the experiential process of obtaining training and education is as crucial a component for a business and profession that serves the most human of the human needs, as is the case with funeral service, then effectiveness is a real, tangible and crucial issue. And that, among many other things, is what's at stake at AAMI and in funeral service education. (The American Board does have distance learning guidelines contained in Appendix E of its standards. These do not address the kinds of qualitative issues being raised here).

There is a reason that there have been myriad ad hoc efforts in the Midwest (among the states of Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky and Michigan), in New York, New Jersey and elsewhere to rethink the current strategies in an effort to arrive at a better outcome. From four-year degree requirements, to funeral director only curriculums, to captive schools, to structured internship programs, to new minimum aptitude standards. All of those reasons are the result of escalating concerns with effectiveness.

And the AAMI/Conference conflict plays directly into those concerns. The Conference thinks, by its current methodology, that it is in fact aiming at the very issue of effectiveness of the educational process that I'm raising. That its protection of the integrity of the exam is a valid substitute for the effectiveness of the educational process as a whole. But that assumes that the NBE is all that important in shaping a well-rounded funeral director.

In my book, I think The Conference would be far more productive if it were to convene a working group of the American Board, itself, some of the leading executives who have been at work on educational issues, and to include a judicious sprinkling of top-flight outside resources in occupational and vocational education and training, to commence an urgent structured conversation about the course of funeral service education and the industry's needs. The National Funeral Directors Association needs to be a part of that process at a professional, staff level, as does the Funeral Service Foundation. There is nothing more urgent, and nothing more strategic than education. (Outsiders are critical to inform such a process and to bring examples from other fields. And since I'm mentioning outsiders, let me add that every single one of the boards of directors of The Conference, the American Board and the schools could benefit mightily from a couple of outside directors each – as would our trade associations.)

AAMI is the canary in the funeral service education coal mine. The infrastructure of funeral service education is in need of a radical critique. The role of the ABFSE. The role of The Conference. The structure of the curriculum. The number of mortuary schools. The lack of credible, highly structured internships. It all needs to be on the table.

Because, ultimately, what it means to be a funeral director is already there.

Send comments to wbeebe@njsfda.org. If you misplaced the first two parts of the series and want to reread them, email tparmalee@ucg.com.

Matthews International Completes Transaction to Buy Aurora Casket Co.

Matthews International Corp. announced in a news release Aug. 17 that it has received FTC approval to complete its acquisition of Aurora Casket Co. from Kohlberg & Co. Matthews expected to close the transaction this week. Under the terms of the transaction, Matthews will purchase Aurora's stock for \$214 million, subject to a working capital adjustment.

Two days later, it announced that it has, in fact, completed the purchase.

Matthews will integrate Aurora within its existing Memorialization Segment, which is a leading total solutions provider to the funeral and cemetery industries. The combined funeral home operations will be branded Matthews Aurora Funeral Solutions. Steven D. Gackenbach will remain Group President of Matthews Memorialization.

Joseph C. Bartolacci, president and chief executive officer of Matthews, states, "This acquisition represents a major step in Matthews' strategic growth vision and in the growth of our Memorialization business. It will build greater value for our shareholders as we become an even stronger competitor in the Memorialization market."

Gackenbach adds, "I am excited to welcome Aurora's customers and employees to the new Matthews Aurora Funeral Solutions. While both companies were strong independently, together we are better positioned with stronger capabilities to serve our funeral home customers. Matthews Aurora Funeral Solutions will become the premier provider to the funeral home industry. Essentially nothing will change for customers immediately, and our number one priority will be to ensure that our customers receive seamless service throughout the integration."