

Education

By Patti Martin Bartsche

A Conversation with ...

Jack E. Lechner

It was nearly three years ago that Jack E. Lechner returned to his alma mater to become president of Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. The New Jersey native started his career as a funeral director before enlisting in the U.S. Army. After retiring from the Army, Lechner went on to work at Arlington National Cemetery, serving as superintendent from 2014-2015. As we enter 2019, Lechner offers his thoughts on what the future holds for mortuary science education and what CCMS is doing to meet those needs.

Now that you have been president of the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science for almost three years, what do you think the future holds for mortuary science/funeral service education?

We are long overdue for a shift to the educational paradigm. The client families we serve today are looking for a much different experience than what we were taught when I graduated in 1976.

How would you implement a paradigm shift?

It won't happen easily. For many years, practitioners have been pointing out that we need "more of this" or "less of that" – but the curriculum changes very little and very slowly because it happens at the national level. The wants and needs of the 21st-century client family are



changing faster than ever before. CCMS is adapting our curriculum in order to keep up with the rate of change of the 21st-century client families we serve.

Why does the national curriculum change so slowly?

The International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards requires that to take the National Board Examination, a candidate must graduate from an American Board-accredited program. To be accredited by the American Board, a program must deliver the American Board curriculum. The American Board reviews and updates the entire curriculum over a seven-year cycle. These two simple, nationwide processes have slowed down the evolution of the educational process to a crawl.

What needs to change in order to meet the needs of today's client families?

Funeral service and mortuary science programs need to change

faster than the prescribed curriculum. I can't speak for all 56 programs; I can only speak for CCMS – the first and oldest mortuary college in the United States. Our board of trustees has directed me to figure out how to deliver the American Board curriculum (so our graduates can continue to pass the NBE at the high pass rates we enjoy today) while adding the necessary elements needed by practitioners to be successful in the 21st century.

What curriculum changes are underway at CCMS?

The board of trustees and college leadership have aligned to establish significant and exciting goals that will cause a shift to curriculum for students and practitioner education.

Cremation. Teaching a hands-on cremation program that produces a technically and ethically qualified cremationist is one of our highest goals. Cremation rates have continued to climb from 5.69 percent when I entered the death-care profession in 1973 to 50 percent in 2016, with 2018 coming in at 51.5 percent. We're expanding the cremation curriculum to be hands-on and to include ceremony. With the national cremation rate projected to reach 78 percent before stabilizing – it just makes sense to focus more on setting the educational standard for cremation.

Alkaline Hydrolysis. Legal in 17 states today, alkaline hydrolysis is gaining in acceptance much like cremation did over the last 50 years. Sooner or later, AH will reach a critical mass where it is generally accepted by the client families we serve. Mortuary students deserve a comprehensive course of instruction on AH in order to meet the needs of future client families.

Pet Loss. Another significant goal of CCMS is to expand our pet loss curriculum that prepares graduates



to serve the growing needs of client families. Pet disposal and bereavement needs of pet parents are real needs of the 21st century.

Online Presence. A partnership with Terra State Community College was established in 2016 to deliver an associate degree (prerequisite courses) 100 percent online for the "pre-mortuary science student." Today, a student can earn their Associate of Individualized Study in Pre-Mortuary Science online at Ohio "in state" community college rates (\$180/credit hour), regardless of their state of residency. We worked to build this program with TSCC to help students nationally fulfill all CCMS prerequisites efficiently and effectively. AIS grads automatically matriculate into the CCMS bachelor of mortuary science degree program, where they will earn their regionally and professionally accredited bachelor of mortuary science in 16 months from CCMS. We've seen the evidence that general education earned online in the AIS program is quality, affordable education that students appreciate, while retaining the seated portion of our program.

Why did you enact those curriculum changes?

These are some of the important things today's client families are looking for in a death-care professional. We want to produce the death-care professional who is eminently well-qualified and has a

solid educational foundation in death-care matters. It makes no difference whether you like cremation or not, it makes no difference whether you like alkaline hydrolysis or not, and it makes no difference whether you believe pet loss is best handled by the funeral home – what does matter is that a graduate of the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science, who has earned a regionally and professionally accredited bachelor of mortuary science degree as authorized by the Ohio Board of Regents, has the ability to speak on those subjects authoritatively from a basis of hands-on experiential training.

We are already the only mortuary science program in the nation that has made certified celebrant training part of the curriculum for every BMS student. Every single student also earns the crematory operator and cremation arranger certification, as well as disaster management certification. We need to, and will continue to, adapt with the times.

What excites you most about being president and CEO of CCMS?

My passion and enthusiasm for the death-care profession has been reignited being at CCMS. I can see where we are going, and the future of the death-care profession never looked brighter. I've met so many incredible death-care professionals from all over the country, and their sincerity and passion for what they do inspires me.

When I earned my Associate of Science Degree (1975) and then graduated from a funeral service program (1976), I was a "C" student. If you asked me why I was attending college, I would have told you something like "... the state requires me to do this to earn a license." I was young and immature. My first and only concern at that time was earning a license, so I could get on with becoming a practicing funeral director and embalmer. The right answer to the wrong question.

I was fortunate that the Army sent me to CCMS to earn a bachelor of mortuary science degree when I was 35 years old. I was married, had two children, was a lot more mature and desiring an education, and I graduated summa cum laude. Because I earned a BMS at CCMS, I was able to continue my formal education and earn two graduate degrees. By attending CCMS, I learned that education equals opportunity.

Coming back to become the president and CEO of the oldest and most respected mortuary college in the nation affords me an incredible opportunity to help shape the future of the death-care profession. We've never compromised our principles or ethics; we continue to evolve to meet the needs of our profession, and I can say without any reservation that we are continuing that same path today.

If my children wanted to become death-care professionals, I would

send them to CCMS. We are a regionally accredited (Higher Learning Commission) college, which means after earning a degree from CCMS, you can transfer to any university in the U.S. if you want to continue your formal education. Students who graduate and later leave the profession have options because they have earned a fully accredited bachelor's degree. We are professionally accredited by the American Board of Funeral Service Education. We have professional accreditation, which means our students can sit for the National Board Examination, and our NBE first-time pass rates average 83 percent arts and 78 percent sciences (*ABFSE.org, 2014-2016 statistics*) — one of the highest average scores in the nation.

Our campus is single purpose. We perform over 500 embalmings per year, so there is plenty of hands-on opportunity for students to embalm in our modern seven-embalming

station lab. Students practice dressing, casketing, cosmetizing, arranging visitations, conducting visitations and conducting funeral services.

Our speakers program is beyond great, and our access to allied industries is awesome. Every student gets the opportunity to visit a crematory at least once if not several times. Visits and presentations from burial vault companies, embalming chemical company representatives, memorial providers, casket manufacturers, hospice, USAF Honor Guard, and death-care professionals (alumni) are just a few of the experiences of a CCMS student.

Being a privately owned, nonprofit institution means that I do not answer to a board of directors that is only concerned with the next quarter's profit. The nonprofit board of trustees I answer to holds me accountable for achieving the goals for meeting and improving upon our high educational standards to ensure

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CCMS students and graduates remain the most knowledgeable and sought after in the nation.

This is an exciting time to be at CCMS. This past year we hosted a gala at Paul Brown Stadium, home of the Cincinnati Bengals. It was an awesome evening of creating and renewing friendships with alumni, supporters, and friends of CCMS. With over 300 in attendance at this formal event, we honored (then) National Funeral Directors Association President Ken Cahall, a CCMS alumnus, along with three past presidents of NFDA, all alumni. CCMS has produced 12 presidents of NFDA – a legacy of leadership that is unrivaled.

So, if I sound excited – it is because I *am* excited. The most dangerous thing in the world is the right answer to the wrong question. “How can I become a funeral director?” is the wrong question – it can send a prospective student in a thousand different directions. The right

question is, "Where can a prospective student earn a fully accredited bachelor of mortuary science degree, only being away from home for 16 months, and establish a broad and solid educational foundation on which to build a career and lifetime of learning in the death-care profession?" The correct answer is CCMS.

Why isn't the program fully online?

After long discussions with board members, faculty, staff and students, we realized that we already provided the best hands-on, seated, mortuary science education in the nation and that the best way to expand and improve upon that was to develop a more convenient way to deliver the general education requirements (the first .60 credits online). We achieved this by partnering with Terra State Community College to develop a seamless matriculation through an associate degree program.

However, for the more advanced

mortuary subjects taught at CCMS, like embalming, restorative arts, grief, and bereavement, we are convinced a hands-on approach to learning is best. There is a tremendous amount of value that comes from the synergistic effects of students and professors coming together for classes. Over 75 percent of students do not come from a death-care family. A full 25 percent have never been in a funeral home. It is important to set the right standards of care from the beginning, and we believe this is best done in a class, on campus with other students and instructors.

CCMS is a special, safe environment where students are totally immersed in death-care studies. They learn not only from the books and instructors but from each other. There is no substitute for first-hand witnessing of body language, tone, and inflections when discussing grief and bereavement topics. During the 16 months that

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the students are together, either they, or someone in their cohort, will likely experience the death of a loved one or friend. At that point, the discussion, perspective and feeling go from theoretical to personal. That kind of emotional learning can only occur in the crucible formed by being on campus and in class.

Three semesters of onsite embalming lab can't be substituted with theory alone. The confidence, consistency, foundation and level of understanding that comes from participating in routine group embalming sessions is invaluable. Our students graduate with a solid clinical foundation – understanding of personal protective equipment, universal protocols, experience raising vessels and setting features, and chemical mixtures. We don't believe that the level of competency we are trying to achieve with our students can be achieved without hands-on hours spent in the lab.

Millennials need the time to interact together and develop their interpersonal skills. Making funeral arrangements, conducting services and going through certified celebrant training together all contributes to the crucible effect of educating these young professionals.

By partnering with Terra State Community College, a prospective mortuary science student from anywhere in the U.S. or Canada can earn a transferrable, fully accredited degree. Terra State is also a transfer-friendly choice for students who may have completed previous general coursework at another institution. The student ultimately graduates from CCMS having earned a regionally and professionally accredited bachelor's degree authorized to be conferred by the Ohio Board of Regents in only 16 months.

BMS students complete intensive

training from faculty and licensed trainers to earn their funeral celebrant certification, crematory operator and arranger certifications, as well as specialized FEMA training to earn their disaster management assistance certification. Students learn anatomical body systems hands-on in our on-site Gross Anatomy Lab. Each group of four students is provided an anatomical cadaver for total dissection in our gross anatomy course, and each student will participate in a six-week co-operative program, learning under the mentorship of a licensed funeral home. These programs can't be replicated as well online.

This tailored hybrid model delivers the best of two programs: general education courses online that do not require the student to leave home, followed by 16 months in Cincinnati to earn the bachelor of mortuary science degree. •

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