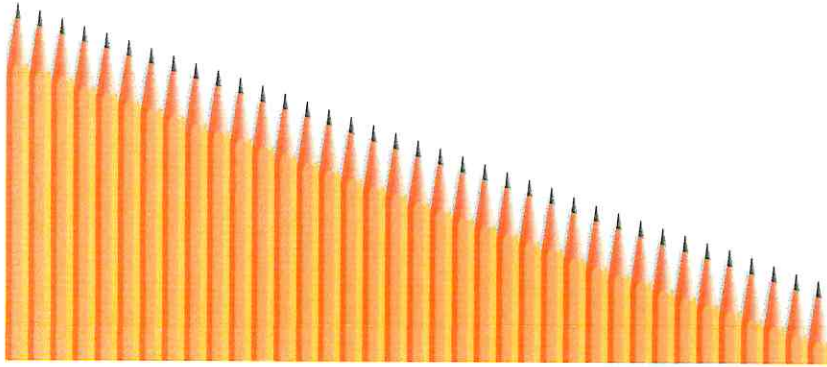


The Impact of Declining Mortuary Science Enrollment

By Dr. George P. Connick



Allow me to ponder this question: In the next five years, will declining mortuary science enrollment cause a major shortage of funeral directors?

The simple answer is likely yes, but there really is no simple answer since there are many potential policy decisions that could change funeral service education as it exists today.

As many educators peer into the future, they can see dark clouds looming on the horizon for higher education. In fact, those clouds have been forming for several years and are getting darker. The issue is the declining number of high-school graduates nationally, for whom higher education institutions compete. This trend is predicted to continue for the foreseeable future. For funeral service, the prospect of declining enrollment in mortuary science programs may also signal the inevitable resulting decline in the number of licensed funeral directors.

The July 2018 issue of *The Director* contained a lengthy article titled “Enrollment in Mortuary Science Programs Sinks to Nine-Year Low.” It summarized a range of statistics from the American Board of Funeral Service Education’s (ABFSE) Annual Report Summary Information 2017. It was the first to document that mortuary science programs are experiencing the same enrollment declines as most other areas of higher education, excluding the STEM sector (science, technology, engineering, math).

In April 2019, ABFSE released its Annual Report Summary Information 2018, which provides an additional year of data. Once again, there was a slight decline from 2017, which saw 2,411 new students, to 2018, with its 2,359 students.

Accompanied by numerous charts, the article’s lead sentence summed up the content: “New enrollment in mortuary

science programs in 2017 was the lowest since 2008... according to statistics by the American Board of Funeral Service Education.”

Although the 2018 ABFSE statistics provide a sweeping historical perspective, they only hint at what the future may hold.

The highest new student enrollment in mortuary science after 1995 was reached in 2011 at 2,917. In 2018, enrollment had dropped to 2,359. This 558-student decline represented a 19.1% drop in just eight years.

What are the possible reasons for this decline?

Beginning in 2009, as the economy improved each year, the unemployment rate began to decline. As might have been predicted, higher education enrollments also began to decline. However, the acceleration of the decline in the past several years requires further analysis.

A recent analysis of national data by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in an article by Sara Lipka titled, “Colleges, Here Is Your Future,” offers an interesting perspective: “Peer into kindergarten classrooms across the country and you will see fewer students. For every 100 18-year-olds nationally, there are only 95 4-year-olds.”

The worst demographic projections are for the Northeast. For example, selected data for New York, New Jersey and Connecticut indicate the following: “In many of the highest-income, most educated counties – which have reliably delivered high school graduates to colleges – the supply of younger children is dwindling. This pattern is striking in the suburbs of New York City; Long Island; Westchester County, New York; and Fairfield County, Connecticut. In Somerset and Morris counties in New Jersey, both which have median incomes of more than \$98,000, the populations of 4-year-olds compared with 18-year-olds are 26% and 32% smaller, respectively.”

A number of factors have created a perfect storm of problems for higher education institutions for at least the next five years, and they have no control over any of them.



For higher education institutions dependent on campus students for their future enrollment, there is much about the demographic downturn that should be of concern.

Historically, enrollments have gone up during bad economic times because people have difficulty finding jobs or they lose a job and decide to pursue education that leads to a career with fewer peaks and valleys. Funeral service has been one of those jobs.

WHY A NATIONAL DECLINE IN ENROLLMENT AT ALL EDUCATIONAL LEVELS?

There appear to be a number of factors that have created a perfect storm of problems for higher education institutions for at least the next five years, and they have no control over any of them.

The best colleges can hope for in the short run is that they can adapt as quickly as possible to the realities of the next few years.

THE REALITIES

1 The economy has been booming for more than seven years and there are no immediate signs that it is cooling off.

2 In many areas of the country, employers are scrambling, desperately trying to find employees to fill jobs. The employers are making their jobs as attractive as possible in order to recruit successfully.

3 The minimum wage has gone up significantly in many states, especially those with the largest populations. This is an added incentive for potential students to enter the workforce rather than go to college. By comparison, the wages and working conditions (hours, nights and weekends) for licensed entrants into funeral service jobs is becoming less attractive.

4 The U.S. unemployment rate has dropped to 3.9%, virtually full employment. And more importantly, the rate for adult women (who make up 67% of ABFSE students) has decreased to 3.5%.

5 After 15 years of consistent increases in the high school graduation rate, the next decade brings stagnation and a severe drop that began in 2017.

However, in 2017, the United States had the lowest birth rate on record, and it has been declining for decades. It is only in the past several years that the declining enrollments in K-12 have had a growing impact on higher education.

The greatest declines in public high school graduates (who make up 90% of all high school graduates) are projected for the Northeast and Midwest. The West is expected to experience slight increases.

The South will see steady, significant increases. About 33% of public high school grads came from the South in the early 2000s. By 2013, their percentage had grown to 43%; by 2025, it will be 47%.

6 Not anticipated by many institutions is the challenge of changing demographics and the fact that future students will look and act significantly different than previous students. The number of Caucasian public high school graduates from middle class and more affluent families is projected to decline by 14% from 2013-30.

7 On the other hand, the number of minority, those less well prepared, and low-income students is expected to grow dramatically. The projection is for Hispanic high school graduates to increase by 50% from 2014 to the mid-2020s. What this means is that colleges will need to find new recruitment strategies for minorities and then provide expanded services to help those students stay in college and graduate.

8 Finally, and most importantly for funeral service education, is the rapid shift from burials to cremation. In 2015, according to the NFDA Cremation and Burial Report, cremations (47.9%) surpassed the number of burials (45.2%) in the United States. This trend is predicted to continue and accelerate, with cremations accounting for 56.4% in 2020 and 69.7% in 2030.

Fortunately, in the past several years, the ABFSE Committee on Accreditation (COA) has added required curricula regarding cremation. The COA is moving to address the new realities of funeral service, and now may be the time to introduce additional alternatives that will advance funeral education significantly and also attract many more students to the programs and the profession.

Anticipating and responding to accelerating changes in almost every aspect of society is not easy. This is especially true in higher education, generally, and funeral service education specifically. But in education at all levels, change is not taking place fast enough to address the needs of society and students now and in the future.

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