

# Education

By Patti Martin Bartsche

## Learning During **COVID-19**

### How a Pandemic Impacted Mortuary Schools

**W**e've all heard (and read) the stories about how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted the funeral profession. Funeral directors were forced to navigate everything from a lack of PPE to weeks-long waits at crematories to helping grieving families remember loved ones in a time of ever-changing restrictions and guidelines.

But what about the funeral directors of the future? COVID-19 made navigating education difficult on every level, with colleges and universities suspending in-class instruction, sending students home to learn and asking instructors to become virtual teachers.

We reached out to a number of mortuary schools to find out COVID-19's impact on learning and what the future holds. Participating in the discussion were Melissa A. Cyfers, program director, FINE Mortuary College, Norwood, Massachusetts; Jill Karn, chief operating

officer, Pierce Mortuary Colleges; Barry Lease, program director, Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science; Jack E. Lechner, president and CEO, Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science; and the Graduate School at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland.

#### **What has the past year been like for your school?**

**Cyfers:** The past year has been full of changes! While COVID has definitely presented challenges, some of the change we were forced to do has produced great results. The building is quiet. The virtual classrooms are busy. There have been struggles but overall, some of the changes were really good for us as a whole.

**Karn:** Flexibility, responsiveness and professionalism were the bywords of the past year. Like all higher education institutions, Pierce Mortuary Colleges had to make rapid decisions about the appropriate response, often

with imperfect information. All three Pierce Colleges faced varying protocols from their respective states and health authorities, which we swiftly put into place in addition to our own thorough mitigation processes and metrics. Instructors had to transition to all-online learning in a very short period of time. Administration and support staff pulled together to control the pandemic within each college and remain 100% committed to providing top-notch education to our students – and students had to adjust beyond their existing comfort zones to continue their learning in a different environment. The year has been challenging, but everyone rose to the challenge and we continued providing education without a hitch.

**Lease:** Wow ... in a word, I would say ... different! In March 2020, Pennsylvania went into a strict lockdown on schools that was not substantively removed for schools like PIMS, until the summer. We have

managed to provide in-person instruction since June 2020 and as of this writing, we have a full-on campus experience (in accordance with state and local health departments and CDC protocols of course!).

That said in terms of what the past year “has been like” well ... we have needed to be flexible and adaptable, but such need to change has been transformative for the good of the organization. The old mantra of where some see a threat, others see an opportunity is something we have embraced.

Perhaps the one notable point is the speed in which changes and strategies must be recalculated over the past year. In quite literally hours, everything you expected to be doing in the next week of class could be changed by a possible exposure. Moreover, an email from the numerous educational overseers and health departments, could necessitate a new policy, procedure, or safety plan (that would have to be drafted, approved, and initiated without delay). Hence, I believe the operative phrase over the past year has been “speed to the market” in all considerations.

**Lechner:** It felt like all well-coordinated and comprehensive plans had to be put on hold while we figured out what to do and how to do it daily. Information kept changing, guidelines kept changing, so we had to monitor every credible source we could to make informed decisions to protect the health and safety of our students and faculty.

**Graduate School at Hood College:** Hood College, including the graduate school, is a small, nimble college near Baltimore/Washington, D.C. Thus, we proved to be quite adept at moving all instruction and course formats to digital delivery over the past year. Big kudos to our faculty, students and administrators who showed flexibility and adaptability in the face of the unfolding pandemic.

### **When was the decision made to go to all-remote learning? How difficult was that decision?**

**Karn:** Each Pierce College went to all-remote learning by April 2020 but returned on campus a few weeks later. The decision itself wasn’t really difficult because safety for students and staff is always paramount, with or without a pandemic. Of course, the virtually overnight shift to all-remote learning wasn’t without challenges, but having existing online programs already established before the crisis, Dallas Institute of Funeral Service, Mid-America College of Funeral Service, and Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service all were able to pivot quickly to all-remote. Embalming courses were the only exception, as embalming cannot be learned and practiced virtually, but with careful planning and coordination, we were able to continue on-site learning on a limited basis without any COVID outbreaks. Throughout the past year, Pierce Mortuary Colleges have adapted to the pandemic or state requirements on whether the college would remain on-ground, have a hybrid format, or be fully online.

**Lease:** This decision was made in the beginning of April 2020 after three weeks of being closed. Our original thought was to “sit out” through March and then make up the three weeks on campus by extending the term into our trimester break in May. This idea was born of the notion that lockdowns would be temporary and we would be able to get “back to business” sooner than later – obviously, our calculations were incorrect.

The decision was not difficult for us as the state of Pennsylvania offered clear guidelines to shift campus students into remote learning or “alternative delivery” to use the phrasing of the State of Pennsylvania Department of Education. Moreover, we already had an online platform,

so the shift was less cumbersome than it otherwise might have been without the distance learning program.

In the previous comments, I spoke of the changes fostered upon us being transformative. One such transformation is that we now have fully integrated the online learning platform into the campus experience as a learning supplement, which has been well received at large.

Conversely, the need to become proficient at delivering remote classes for campus students, via Zoom, has expanded our use of such technology to the online students. Once again, allowing for a transformative “blended learning” experience for both campus and distance learning students. Such changes have been well received to this point in both the campus and online programs.

**Lechner:** Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine made the announcement on a Thursday that K-12 would be closed indefinitely in the state. We made the announcement on Friday during classes and began distance learning on Monday.

I was incredibly impressed with how quickly the students and faculty adapted to distance learning. Everyone literally had only one weekend to adapt to the new teaching environment. We shifted our budget plans from classroom centric to remote learning centric, i.e., we began updating computers and installing new technology that better enabled distance learning.

**Graduate School at Hood College:** The decision to go all-remote learning went into effect almost immediately last March (spring semester 2020) when the pandemic started. Our president responded decisively to the crisis through our shared governance model. It was a difficult decision, however, given the impact of such an immediate change in course format and delivery.

**Cyfers:** The decision to go remote was made March 15, 2020. It was not difficult as it was really the only choice to make with the limited interaction from people to people being allowed and concerns for safety.

### **What are the biggest challenges with remote learning for mortuary colleges?**

**Lease:** Obviously, clinical experiences, such as Restorative Art lab and embalming, are quite challenging as this type of learning tends to be “hands on.” Whether you are a campus or online student at PIMS, these are mandatory labs that need to be in person with the students.

These labs are important experiential learning components where students can apply their knowledge. Moreover, we have significantly invested in such experiences, notably our synthetic heads in the RA lab, which were designed by a special effects artist to provide a sense of “real world” restoration. Therefore, from our perspective, attempting these types of experiences remotely would appear to be a challenge. To date, we have been fortunate that all our clinical experiences were approved by the state to continue for in-person training albeit with smaller cohorts and safety protocols.

**Lechner:** The largest demographic of students is those who are entering the profession without any experience. One of the major benefits of the cohort model we employ is that our students get to spend 16 months in a crucible with other mortuary students, mortuary science instructors and a mortuary-orientated staff daily. When students are limited to distance learning, they do not get the same intangible benefits that come from spending so much time with their peers in person.

**Graduate School at Hood College:**

Hood College is not a mortuary college, but our graduate school offers a related thanatology certificate program. Since that program was already on track to launch fully online in fall 2020, the shift to remote instruction during the pandemic did not present much of a challenge for this particular graduate certificate program. In fact, the interest in our online thanatology program is growing, and we are now receiving inquiries from all over North America.

**Cyfers:** Our college has adapted well to the remote learning as we have used virtual classrooms. Some of our students want to keep the current setup post pandemic. Of course, in the larger metro areas, the students have been relieved from the traffic nightmares of having to commute to campus.

**Karn:** Robust, high-quality online instruction takes time to plan and develop. For many colleges, time was not available due to the sudden mandatory campus closures. Still, the adoption of online solutions in recent months has been extraordinary. Classroom lectures shifted to web broadcast. Interactions with students have been through our learning management system, via polls, message boards, breakout discussions and live online sessions. Our on-campus instructors had to learn and incorporate them on short notice. On-campus instructors have been required to think about courses in new ways, trying new teaching techniques and learning to use new online tools. Although there are numerous educational technologies that support engaging course activities, these solutions tend to require more advance planning and technological ability. While the ability to do this so quickly has indeed been impressive, the effects on teaching and learning has been very mixed. Of course,

our online instructors were already utilizing these tools, so they really did not have any challenges.

### **What does your pathway forward look like?**

**Lechner:** We are exploring adding distance learning to our educational offerings, but we are really focused on our Educational Cremation Center, which will allow us to teach “hands on” cremation training, alkaline hydrolysis, enhanced pet loss and hospitality. Our board of trustees sees how the public’s needs are evolving and it has challenged us to find ways of fulfilling those evolving needs.

**Graduate School at Hood College:** Hood College is closely monitoring the pandemic and will try to resume more in-person classes in the fall. We will likely continue to offer a combination of in-person, online and hybrid course formats for graduate instruction in the near future and possibly beyond.

**Cyfers:** We will continue to offer virtual classrooms even after we return to campus. We are currently working on a plan to satisfy all student needs by being able to continue the online environment for those who want to remain virtual, returning to campus for those who want in person instruction, and a possible hybrid situation.

**Karn:** All Pierce Mortuary Colleges are now operating in the same mode prior to the pandemic. Those students that are within the funeral service online bachelor, associates, and certificate programs continue to learn through distance learning and students that are enrolled in the on-campus programs are learning on-ground. But again, since we already had active distance learning in place at each college, we will build on our offered distance learning curriculum, as the pandemic has underscored how indispensable dis-

tance learning is for our students and higher education at large.

**Lease:** I keep speaking of the changes we needed to implement being transformative to our organization, thus it is my sincere belief that the pathway forward is promising! We have improved our social media presence and overall applications of technology, streamlined administrative processes, and refined our approach to presenting the curriculum in a perhaps more contemporary and experientially based manner. Finally, we have made a significant investment in the campus, in accordance with CDC and state/local health department guidelines regarding the safe opening for schools.

Moreover, with the challenges in other service industries, particularly restaurant and hospitality, we believe those naturally service-oriented individuals who otherwise would have been employed in those fields are finding us. We have seen an uptick in interest for all programs, particularly from such service-focused individuals, further endorsing the notion that that pathway forward looks hopeful.

### **Will the pandemic alter the way you operate in the future?**

**Graduate School at Hood College:** The pandemic will surely alter the way Hood College's graduate school operates in the future as we hope to incorporate, more permanently, many of the virtual best practices that emerged during the pandemic.

**Cyfers:** The pandemic has really forced us to jump ahead 10 years in regard to technology. It has also allowed us to seek very qualified adjunct instructors to serve in a remote role.

**Karn:** First and foremost, it is imperative to keep the unique needs of our students front and center.

The many challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic have taught us that the most significant challenge and obligation that higher education faces is recognizing that, in the long run, our students' needs, abilities, or aspirations should not be overlooked. We have a sharpened appreciation and knowledge of the obstacles and challenges that our students face, but we also have seen the importance of digital literacy to function in the world of funeral service. In the long term, it may make students who had positive experiences more likely to consider online programs in the future.

As painful and stressful of the experience we all shared, a long overdue and welcome rebirth of our education system throughout the world may be a valuable outcome. With COVID-19, we see how yesterday's disruptors can become today's lifeguards.

**Lease:** The pandemic has created economic uncertainties, physical challenges and even hardships for so many individuals and organizations. We are sensitive to all the issues; we are particularly empathetic to the families who were touched by death and illness due to COVID-19.

We recognize the efforts of the first responders who cared for the sick but also the last responders who were entrusted to care for bereaved families and their loved ones. In fact, our clinical embalming facility has been instrumental in caring for numerous individuals who died from COVID-19. We are humbled to be a part of the funeral service at large competently providing such care in a most dignified manner.

While the funeral service will never be something that client families "look forward" to arranging, the pandemic may have demonstrated the best faces of our profession

and certainly re-established our purpose – provide comfort to the living while caring for their decedent loved ones. It seems like, over the past few years, we have been focused on the "event" rather than the tender touch needed to transition decedents from presence to memory for their bereaved loved ones.

In proceeding forward, while we will continue to evolve in our attempt to provide the best and most comprehensive funeral service education we can for our students, we will also seek to be more of an advocate and educate the public about the value of funeral service. For years, this has been something that has been done at a grassroots level by local funeral directors and at higher levels by professional associations. While the profession at all levels will continue to espouse the value of funeral service, we believe that schools, and particularly PIMS, may also play a role in this regard.

From an operational purview, it seems the balance of hybridizing the virtual and physical learning modalities will continue to play a key role.

**Lechner:** The pandemic will cause us to be more vigilant and to always have a contingency plan for the education of aspiring death-care professionals. We prefer to be in the classroom and in the lab with our students, but we will now remain vigilant and ready to shift to distance learning or a hybrid model if required.

Our students adapted perfectly to the distance learning environment – although they expressed a feeling of loss at not being able to see, talk and travel with each other. They have my sincere gratitude for adhering to the rules we had to put into place to protect everyone, including social distancing and constant wearing of face masks. •