

Ask The Expert

[Industry leader]

Educator Takes on Funeral Service Challenge

■ Summary

Mitch Mitchell wanted a change; he also wanted to stay in higher education. When he learned that Mid-America College of Funeral Service in Jeffersonville, Indiana, was looking for a new president to lead the school, he applied, convinced he could help students change their lives. At the helm of the school since September 2016, Mitchell talks about the importance of education, what he's learned about funeral service, the recent introduction of an online bachelor's degree in funeral service management and his vision for MACFS. *Patti Martin Bartsche reports*

In September, you were named president of Mid-America College of Funeral Service. How did this come about?

I wanted a change in my life; I knew I wanted to stay in higher education. There is nothing more rewarding than to assist an individual into a profession/industry. Making a positive difference in a student's life, seeing him or her walk across the stage at graduation, is what it is all about.

What attracted you to this job?

The thing that attracted me to the position at first was the higher education piece. I have been in higher education for 16-plus years. I saw this opportunity to help others make a positive change in their lives. I've dedicated my career to helping students change their lives the way education changed mine. The more I did my homework on MACFS, I saw a lot of encouraging and positive attributes, such as the community service aspect of the programs offered at MACFS. The things students do here extend beyond the classroom.

What comes across every time you hear about MACFS – or when you look at the things that are happening – is how engaged the faculty is in the funeral service education of the students and the students' passion for the college. As a president, you want to be in a place that has a background consistent with your own beliefs and approaches to higher



Mitch Mitchell

education, but you also want to be at a place that people are passionate about. That sense of passion really came across.

How much did you know about funeral service before becoming Mid-America's president?

I had little experience within the profession. Higher education is very similar across colleges throughout the nation. I do believe that different cultures can have different expectations. However, when it comes to serving customers and teaching others, I think we are completely in sync. Almost all higher education institutions share in the passion to teach students and to serve others. There's so much at Mid-America

College of Funeral Service that's consistent with my background in the world of academics – the competent approach to higher education and having strong professional programs.

Prior to this job, you spent 16 years in higher education. How would you describe the state of higher education (overall, not just for mortuary colleges) today?

I think the financial challenges that students face are actually a significant component of the state of higher education. My answer is predicated on my experience as an instructor, a dean, and an administrator where I have found the financial aid piece a real struggle for students. Oftentimes they do not understand they are investing in a future. In fact, many even lack the understanding that this is indeed their own investment and don't know the difference between grants/scholarships and student loans. While here at Mid-America College the cohort default is excellent and at an extremely low rate, there are several areas where I believe the Department of Education has to help students. One that comes to mind is the financial aid literacy models that a student can take in order to gain knowledge of financial aid and how it affects them.

A related big issue that I see relates to transferring credits into a new school, where oftentimes a student has to take a certain class over again

(paying for it a second time) because the incoming school did not transfer the credits in. This creates more debt for the student in the long run.

Your doctoral dissertation was on “A Stakeholder’s Approach on Retention: Using Emergenetics in the Classroom.” What are the benefits of this type of personality profile-based assessment?

Individuals learn and gain content in different ways. Testing the student for their preferences and training the instructor on understanding those preferences make a difference in both grades and customer service perception of the class. The study suggests that by using emergentics in the class, the student outcomes were more likely to increase.

Mid-America recently announced that it would be offering an online-only bachelor’s degree in funeral service management. How did this come about, and why is it important?

The bachelor program will start in the spring 2017 quarter. Pierce Mortuary Colleges saw the value of a bachelor program that would provide a strong funeral service educational foundation that would prepare students as funeral service management professionals.

The curriculum is explicitly interdisciplinary for funeral service management careers. The program was designed to offer a higher-level funeral service education and consists of a specially designed curriculum, whereas courses range from preneed sales to hospitality and event planning for funeral service. The program allows students to gain the leadership and management skills to aid in progressing while working in the profession. The online courses help the student engage in a classroom environment on their schedule. The career they have chosen has placed them many times on an on-call circumstance,

and the online program will adjust to this busy and sometimes unpredictable daily work schedule.

One of the core courses for the bachelor’s degree is hospitality and event planning for funeral service. Why is this an important part of the curriculum?

This is very important because as a funeral director you need to bring several events to the forefront in a timely manner. Speaking with someone the other day, an analogy was drawn between a funeral director and a wedding planner who has little or no time to prepare. It is a skill that requires many talents from the event planning perspective to bring it all together.

How will this new degree benefit funeral professionals?

The degree will provide skills that will benefit the individual, their organization and the profession. A win-win-win, it is very exciting to help bring the program together as Mid-America College of Funeral Service moves in the Bachelor of Science in funeral service management direction. Across all professions and organizations, there exists a universal need for proficient managers.

At Mid-America College of Funeral Service, we have designed the new bachelor program to enhance funeral service management capabilities and prepare for a career in funeral service management. The online bachelor’s focuses on management functions, processes and skills – enabling one to effectively respond to complex business and management challenges. Given the continuous need for qualified funeral service managers, those with bachelor degrees in management are well positioned to obtain a management role after graduation.

What is the most surprising thing you’ve learned about the funeral profession since starting the job?

I would say there are several things

that I found surprising. One is how well I handled watching my first embalming! Another would be the profession’s transition to green burial. The biggest would be the professionalism that everybody has – it takes a special person to produce an experience on someone’s worst day.

You served 10 years in the U.S. Army. How did your service impact your life and attitude?

Outside of my family, the military had the biggest impact on my life. I was trained that failure was not an option. I take great pride in the experiences the military gave me and would not change anything. Many traits I have today are directly correlated to the Army. My ‘can do attitude,’ with my ability to create, manage and lead a team in a direction all stem from the military. The biggest trait the Army instilled in me is adaptability.

How can funeral professionals and funeral service better serve our veterans?

When a veteran passes, the profession provides many services; some that come to mind are the American flag, the viewing in full uniform, 21-gun salute and the playing of taps. These are all very important to the veteran. This service the profession provides for the veteran is far above anything I have noticed in any other industry.

While education has been a large part of your professional career, you have also worked in other industries. What have you learned from your time at Capstone Engineering and Harshaw Trane that you bring to this position?

Those two positions provided me with tools to problem solve, schedule and move a project to completion with a standard being met. One of those standards was a satisfied customer.

What is your definition of a leader?

Leadership can take on several variables. I like to use the servant leadership philosophy, which is being there to help others be successful that, in turn, makes the organization more successful. A leader needs to motivate a team by moving them in a direction that aligns with the institution's goals. During times of uncertainty for the organization, a leader will need to take a more direct approach to help move the organization. These times are when a leader needs to call upon his or her most critical asset, which is earned trust. It is the foundation to any relationship within an institution.

What are your goals for Mid-America College of Funeral Service?

VIEWPOINT

Given the continuous need for qualified funeral service managers, those with bachelor degrees in management are well positioned to obtain a management role after graduation.

There are a number of exciting things going on that we want to push forward and pursue. Of course, the start of the new online Bachelor of Science in funeral service management program, which will start in April, is one of the major goals. We are also focused on making sure we reach our goals in terms of what we want to do for Mid-America College and student

success, such as ensuring access and affordability by supporting financial aid for students. In addition, we want to improve the student experience through specific initiatives and our academic programs, incorporating hybrid courses, and including the type of cross-disciplinary teaching that can bring us into the knowledge environment of a 21st-century university. •