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What the National Board Exam Says About Funeral Service Education: Part 2

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Continuing Education, Licensure AAMI, national board exam, The Conference

This is the second in a three-part series by NJSFDA Executive Director Wilson H. Beebe Jr. exploring the implications of the recent 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.

Is the National Board Exam Worth Defending?

THERE ARE LOTS OF GOOD REASONS to have and to protect an examination such as the National Board, not the least of which is that it ought to keep the educational process honest by establishing minimum standards of information that its students must demonstrate they have been exposed to

Newark Archdiocese
Challenges New
Jersey's "Religious
Cemeteries Law"



during their matriculation, and of which they have more than just a passing knowledge. They ought to be able to demonstrate some comprehension of the material.

Fair enough.

But what struck me in reading through the collusive e-mails and documents exchanged between AAMI's president, Margaret "Meg" Dunn, and the school's students, was not the behavior of the participants but by the yawning gap between what the examination defines as the core knowledge needed by future licensees and the reality of the contemporary social and marketplace context of funeral service.

There is always a disconnect between subject matter exams for the purposes of credentialing and licensure, and the actual practice of that occupation or profession that is being tested. But in the case at hand, the peculiar human nature of funeral service would suggest that the educational and internship process itself is probably more important than the NBE for the qualification of students and that, if there is to be some ultra-competency exam like an NBE at the end of a process certain, it is the process that ought to drive the exam and not the other way about.

Criticism of the relevance of the NBE is fairly stock material when it comes to any discussion of funeral service education. This is fueled by the ongoing friction between educators defending their work, and practitioners who are frustrated with ill-prepared graduates who are, in their view, simply "taught to a test" that may not be all that relevant to contemporary funeral service. What usually gets left out of such exchanges are the more complicated issues such as the "open enrollment" academic reality that prevails in most mortuary science programs. If you can pay the fees you can do the program, with the only remaining obstacle to licensure then in fact being the NBE. Often cited as well is the disconnect between the organization that establishes mortuary school curriculum (the American Board) and the group that has ownership of the NBE (The Conference), with

each doing its own thing
regardless of the other
when it comes to the NBE.

The contemporary functions
of the American Board and
The Conference were, once
upon a time, contained
within a single organization.
In 1962, the two entities
were created and their
respective functions were
separated, in order to create
more autonomy and
independence from the
direct influence of the
industry's primary
stakeholders, a not

uncommon interest of the federal government when it comes
to industry certification programs. From a financial resource
point of view, however, it's not an equal partnership, with the
American Board playing David to The Conference's Goliath.
The American Board averages about \$450/500k a year in
revenue, with net assets of about a quarter of a million dollars.
The Conference earns about \$1.3 million a year and has a
similar amount in net assets. The American Board devotes the
vast majority of its resources to its Committee on
Accreditation, leaving precious little in the way of resources
for research, development and advocacy. The Conference
earns most of its revenue from exam fees and spends about
40 percent of that on testing services, which ought to leave it
with far greater resources for research and development. But
the fact of the matter is, there is precious little being spent
anywhere, no less by these organizations, on the exploration
of contemporary educational matters and models that might
be of use to funeral service.

Then there is the matter of their respective constituencies. By
definition, the American Board is captive to the schools that it
accredits (and who pay the freight, mostly in the form of

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accreditation fees). And The Conference is captive to the regulators of the state mortuary or funeral directing boards that are its governing members (who pay very little in the way of dues). While the American Board has members from the national trade associations, and observer status on the board of The Conference (a bit like being the Holy See at the United Nations), there is no overarching structural glue that holds the two organizations to their mutual task of overseeing funeral service education, other than that's the role they've been assigned and that their members are professionally invested in by virtue of their respective educational or regulatory oversight roles.

Neither organization is, however, accountable to anyone in the larger community of funeral service regarding the state, direction and future of funeral service education. The Conference, in particular, is pretty aloof from the other members of the funeral service community. And it's not just the manner in which it is pursuing the invalidation of the exam scores of former AAMI students that suggests that, although that behavior is consistent with the prosecutorial bent of the enforcement agencies that its members come from. This past winter, for example, The Conference published its Model Practice Act, designed to serve "as a guideline to the legislature, regulatory officials and members of the profession seeking to adopt or amend the laws governing mortuary arts and funeral services." If a Model Practice Act constitutes the consensus of an industry's leaders, then The Conference failed to ask anybody that actually matters what they thought about it until the work product was pretty much wrapped up and distributed the week before Christmas this past year. But I digress.

Back to the NBE. In point of fact, test items for the NBE are not random. Test items prepared for the NBE are subject to a task relevancy test, are validated to ensure they can be found in the American Board's curriculum, and otherwise must be referenced in a textbook used by one of the accredited schools. All of which is to say that we can check-off all of the right boxes, pick one each from every column, and claim there is a credible process for developing the NBE, and that

the process is reasonable, well documented and produces... in the end ...well, maybe something that is less than the sum of the parts and perhaps not all that relevant.

Consider this from the “leaked” exam content (presented here without editing):

“Very heavy on scenarios & house removal scenarios. About 4 questions about a house removal. They all begin the same that the practitioner is called to the home and the widow is distraught. One question continues that the widow carries on about her husband’s illness and its stopping the practitioner from his work... what should he do? The choices were, A. stop his work and take time to listen to the widow B. Keep working and ignore her C. Tell the widow to stop and a 4th choice that was equally absurd. Obviously they were looking for A.”

Indeed. The point about this question is that this is not knowledge based, multiple choice material. This is the story of human interaction, which is not something that lends itself particularly well to this format and can quite possibly create its own absurdities in trying to come up with alternative answers that are incorrect. It is probable that competency in this subject matter is more a matter of well-developed interpersonal skills learned in the context of classroom conversation (particularly in the coaching of young people) and in an internship environment, and is best measured in those environments and not as a multiple choice exam question. The “arts” side of the exam then clashes dramatically with the “science” side relating to the care and preservation of human remains. While I have been an advocate for the unitary license, and remain so, the extreme duality of this content makes me more sympathetic to the case of those who advocate for a split licensure system.

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Next week: Is Funeral Service Education Effective?

