

Ask The Expert

[Industry leader]

Pierce Mortuary Colleges' New COO

Q&A with Dr. Jill Karn

■ Summary

In August 2013, Pierce Mortuary Colleges announced the addition of Dr. Jill Karn as chief operating officer. In her position, Karn oversees the operations and overall strategic direction of Pierce Mortuary Colleges, which includes Dallas Institute of Funeral Service in Dallas; Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service in Decatur, Georgia; and Mid-America College of Funeral Service, Jeffersonville, Indiana. Although this is her first funeral service industry position, Karn has more than 15 years of experience in executive leadership roles, including 12 years in higher education. She talks about her transition, the strengths she brings to the job and how she'll seek to strengthen funeral service education.

Patti Martin Bartsche reports



Dr. Jill Karn

Can you explain your decision to leave your previous position to become chief operating officer for Pierce Mortuary Colleges?

I chose this position because it was an opportunity and environment in which I could thrive. My previous position was a chapter of my life that was very satisfying and challenging, and I was happy to help that organization achieve its goals. But what Pierce Mortuary Colleges further offers is an environment where students are truly seeking to make a difference in a noble profession, and faculty members are committed to helping them do that. This is vivid within each campus of Pierce Colleges. Personally, it is gratifying to see people's lives change as a result of their education and learning experiences in college. I am truly grateful for the opportunity and am excited to see the development in years to come.

What strengths do you bring to the position?

Over the past 15 years I have had the opportunity to work in leadership roles with organizations both large (\$1 billion plus) and

small. I believe I have a pragmatic skill-set that helped me transform and grow these organizations through building teams to solve business challenges. I also have developed experience in executing ideas and vision. I plan on applying these strengths to help Pierce Mortuary Colleges grow and build upon their solid foundation and heritage of preparing funeral professionals.

What, if anything, did you know about funeral service before accepting the COO job? What have you learned since you started?

Candidly, I knew virtually nothing about funeral service prior to accepting this position. My background is operations, higher education, information technology, law and business. Although Pierce Mortuary Colleges have a unique program compared to the general higher education focus of other colleges, there are certain fundamentals that remain the same: what drives the market, where the demand might be, what resources are available and cultural nuances.

Academia isn't intuitive. There are far more similarities than differences among my roles – for example, it's important to have strategic vision and guide the colleges toward that vision. One component of this is to align systems and structure to implement higher levels of standards and performance.

As for the funeral service area, I am the student. It is part of my makeup to be constantly learning something. I guess that is where my passion for higher education comes from. It is the key element that personally motivates me. I am absorbing as much as I can and enjoying every minute of it!

What are your goals for the colleges?

Pierce Colleges' strategic planning is a process that aligns short-term decisions with long-term goals. A few of our short-term goals being implemented are:

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– Dr. Jill Karn

- Enhancing access through distance education delivery modes
- Promoting strong employer partnerships
- Developing a comprehensive career services center
- Developing and implementing an enrollment management plan with an additional focus on adults 25 years of age and older

Our long-term strategic goals focus our collective energy on ensuring that we are all working toward the same end: strengthening our effectiveness through innovation, continuous process and systems improvement, staff development, and enhanced internal collaboration.

There has been discussion on the value of students obtaining a bachelor’s degree versus the traditional associate degree. What are your thoughts?

It is well known that a college degree has an impact on earning potential and can put an individual on a better path toward a career in the industry. Here at Pierce Colleges we are taking steps and are investing over the coming years in strengthening the market position of our accredited bachelor’s program already offered at Mid-America College of Funeral Services. Our ambitious plan will enable improvements that will structure the program to meet the needs of the

profession, enhance quality, and expand the range of courses to include an intensive education that will set the norm for the industry.

Do mortuary students need a more rigorous curriculum to be competitive in the marketplace?

I believe so, but I also believe that our curriculum at Pierce Colleges already provides a strong balance of the science, the business operational skills, ethics, and quantitative and qualitative proficiencies. That said, we are strongly committed to analyzing what more we might do to even better position our students to gain a competitive edge in the market. For example, all Pierce College graduates will now have cremation arranger certification and crematory operator certification, which we are offering in partnership with the International Cemetery, Cremation & Funeral Association.

In light of rising cremation rates, has there been any talk about offering specific cremation courses versus weaving the content into existing curriculum?

There have definitely been discussions regarding this, and as I’ve mentioned, we’ve already incorporated cremation-specific certifications in partnership with the ICCFA. We will be further exploring curriculum specific to cremation, but we also must

be cognizant of the total education that is currently required for accreditation and the potential impact on students in terms of the time they would need to further invest in their education.

Perhaps an overarching driver will be the industry itself. As cremation grows so will the need for funeral professionals to be better educated on the specific operational and legal aspects specific to cremation. Some states are already considering licensing for the cremation side. As these initiatives and needs increase, this will naturally lead to more response on the educational side. In the meantime, at Pierce Colleges we will continue to work with the ICCFA in providing those aforementioned cremation certifications.

What is your education philosophy, and how does it mesh with the mission of Pierce Colleges?

Behind every college and every instructor is a set of beliefs, one being the education philosophy. But you almost have to first define “education philosophy,” as it can run the gamut from creative engagement of a teacher and the students, to the actual learning process, to the centrality of the classroom, to the development of critical thinking skills, responsibilities outside the classroom, social development, service-learning experience, and so on. I look at it more holistically – regardless of the institutional stage of development, the colleges’ philosophy of education should be a commitment to constant process improvement, including the arts and sciences representing the core values of academic identity. Further, the colleges must constantly and consistently challenge its students academically. •