EDUCATION

By Alice Adams

The University of Arkansas Hope-Texarkana campus.
(Photos courtesy Alice Adams)

The Best-Kept Secret in Texas Funeral Service:

UA Hope-Texarkana's Mortuary Programs

Tucked neatly into where the state boundaries of Texas and Arkansas meet just above the northern Louisiana border, University of Arkansas Hope-Texarkana is one of the best-kept secrets for individuals seeking training in mortuary science.

Here is a little background:

In 2020, the online associate of applied service degree in funeral service education at Hope met all the conditions for accreditation. "We are happy to say that after the mandatory one-year evaluation, the online degree received unconditional full accreditation from the American Board of Funeral Service Education," said Karen Davis, dean of health professions at the community college.

Supported by a Hempstead County sales tax, UAHT currently offers more

The University of Arkansas Hope-Texarkana's online associate of applied science degree in funeral service education has been accredited since 2021. *(Photo courtesy UAHT)*

than 46 degrees and certificates of study for its students.

Funeral service instructor Brad Sheppard points to the high regard the mortuary science program has earned among area funeral directors across neighboring states.

"Our online degree is a natural extension of our on-campus program, which has been continuously accredited by the ABFSE since 1997 and will reflect the same quality education as our on-campus degree," he said.

Davis, who has been a part of the funeral service program at UAHT since 1997, added that that being able to offer an Associate of Applied Science in Funeral Services degree 100% online is a positive for students wanting to make funeral service their career.

"For many students, it isn't feasible to move or give up a full-time job to go to school as they have other family responsibilities," he said. "The online program will allow those students to earn their degree while honoring family responsibilities."

A LITTLE BACK STORY

The Cairo and Fulton Railroad crossed Arkansas in the late 1850s and pushed their rails to the Texas border. The two railroads joined where the city of Texarkana had been established Dec. 8, 1873. Three years later, Texarkana, Texas, was granted a charter under an act of the Texas state legislature.

State Line Avenue, Texarkana's main street, was laid out exactly along the dividing line between the two states.

With a population of 10,000 and a determination to affordably educate students in the area in 1965, until many years later, the college that would become UA Hope-Texarkana Community College was established. In 1996, the school joined the University of Arkansas System, part of a state-wide initiative to train essential personnel for community businesses, services, and health care.

College spokesman Casey Curtis said the UA System includes seven community colleges across the state, one university, and these centers – the UA Clinton School of Public Service, the Division of Agriculture, the Arkansas Archeological Survey, the Criminal Justice Institute, and the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute.

"The UA Community College at Hope expanded its operations in 2012," he continued, "including an instructional site encompassing 22 acres. Existing on the site were the Red River Vocational-Technical School and Red River Technical College. UAHT offers the first two years of a traditional education, all transferable to a four-year university degree.

FUNERAL SERVICES IN HOPE

Sheppard was licensed as a funeral director in 2001 and is a graduate of Arkansas State University. Although his high school science classes were his favorites, he grew up studying music and went on to specialize at the Mozarteum University Salzburg in Austria.

"After studying music at several prestigious schools in Europe, Shep-

pard returned home, where he had a life-changing experience. "A friend passed away," he recalled, "and to my surprise and that of many of his friends, his family chose not to have a service.

"I was talking with a friend – a funeral director – and expressed how much many of us were left feeling emotionally empty, because our friend's death was practically ignored and there was no opportunity to celebrate his life and what it had meant to each of us."

About that same time, Sheppard, who had been teaching music for 11 years, decided he wanted to do something different, something where he could be directly involved in making a difference.

"I saw information about funeral service, liked serving families and the challenges of embalming – and the rest, as they say, is history," he said.

Although the program at UAHT is relatively small (there are 20 students enrolled in the first-year associate degree class this fall), graduates say they were well-mentored, and the instructor receives high praise for the closeness of the students and "family" they found in every class, including those taking courses online.

Along with the personalized instruction and attention, students also say the program's accessibility (all are online or in-person) and affordable tuition led them to consider this program.

Typically, 90% of the students are women.

The greatest advantage UAHT offers students is its affordable tuition – some of the lowest in the state. As an example, online tuition is $143 per credit hour.

"If a student goes to a four-year school and lives on campus because the school is too far from home to commute, the cost – on average – would be around $34,568 a year," Sheppard said. "Students completing an associate degree at UAHT – including an associate of science degree in funeral service – may also enroll on any University of Arkansas campus to complete their final two years for a four year-bachelor's degree – with tuition at a cost of $143 per semester hour, just as they did at UAHT."

"In addition, many of the students qualify for financial aid, grants, and/or

The train station in Texarkana, Arkansas.

scholarships, Sheppard said.

Tuition for in-person classes is the same as online classes for all three funeral service credentials – the associate degree, the funeral directing certification, and the funeral director's technical certification.

The two-year associate degree requires 60 credit hours of classes. Without textbooks, tuition is $8,500 for each of the two years. The technical certification requires 30 credit hours of study with a tuition cost of $4,200.

Hope's students also may choose from a wide-ranging variety of certificate and licensure programs, designed to prepare them to succeed in modern society's ever-changing workforce.

To make classes more affordable, UAHT also offers a textbook rental program, located in the Rapert Library Complex on the Hope campus.

Students must opt in or out of the textbook rental program by renting all or none of their books for the semester from UAHT. The rental cost is $20 per credit hour plus tax per semester.

The associate degree academic program in funeral service is designed to meet specific state or professional needs. It is recommended prospective students check with the state funeral service commission of the state where they plan to work.

Students choose the state of their licensure. Some opt for dual licensure although this choice requires double the work, Sheppard said.

Students in the associate degree program in funeral service already work at a funeral home, and at graduation, graduate employment is 100%.

"I am particularly proud of our graduates as they leave here with strong communication skills necessary to build relationships with families and to provide help with arrangements to meet every need," Sheppard said, "but most all also leave our program with excellent embalming skills and a passion to meet the expectations and needs of every member of the decedent's family."

Recognizing the importance of caring for the bereaved, the college has, in its own words, "designed curricula not only to educate the student in the care of the deceased, but also in the care of the living." •

Alice Adams, *an award-winning writer and co-author of the recently published "One Block West of the White House," about the history of Joseph Gawler's Sons Funeral Home, has written about the men and women of America's funeral service profession for more than two decades.*