

The Morgue: a Mortuary Science and Funeral Services Database

Authors: Cheryl Postlewait, Director of the Library, Kansas City Kansas Community College; Pamela Drayson, Dean of Libraries, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, and Joseph Grasela, Jr., Public Services Librarian, Kansas City Kansas Community College.

Abstract

The Morgue is an online index to English language journals within the fields of mortuary science and funeral services. Begun in 2001, *The Morgue* provides students, faculty, and researchers with an on-line tool specifically targeted to this very specialized professional literature. As of August 2014 there were 115 journals regularly indexed in the database with over 16,400 articles.

About The Morgue

As may be imagined, *The Morgue* is a rather unique database. It was developed and is maintained by the library staff at Kansas City Kansas Community College (KCKCC) to meet the information needs of their own students and faculty. As the only index covering the professional mortuary science and funeral service literature, it is also becoming known to those working in the profession around the world. Access to the database is available through the open Internet from the KCKCC Library website free of charge.

Need

Over 100 students are enrolled in the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) accredited Mortuary Science program at KCKCC annually. This two-year associate's degree program educates students in every phase of funeral service. Through a mix of classroom, lab, and field placements students develop the proficiency and skills necessary for the profession. The faculty of this career oriented curriculum at the post-secondary level also encourage research and publication in the field of funeral service. As such, the students and faculty tend to be regular library users seeking information on a wide variety of mortuary related topics. The need for a mortuary science index became apparent to KCKCC Library staff over several years of watching mortuary science students leaf through the tables of contents pages of the journals when needing relevant articles for class assignments. This situation was due to the professional and trade publications not being included in other commonly accessible indexes covering the sciences, medicine, allied health, mental health, business, or management. Most of the mortuary science journals did not even provide an annual index to their publication at the end of the year or last issue of a volume. Several online index providers were approached about the possibility of beginning to include at least a few key mortuary journals in their

databases, however due to the limited number of academic programs in the field there was little interest from vendors in accommodating the request.

With the need for an appropriate finding tool for these students evident, the library staff decided in 1999 to proceed with a pilot project for what eventually came to be called *The Morgue*.

Development

Preliminary work was undertaken by a Library Science graduate student who took on the project to develop indexing procedures for the library. She individually interviewed each of the KCKCC faculty who taught in the Mortuary Science program, seeking information about the curriculum, course assignments, and their insights into information transfer in this field. Observations and conversations with students enrolled in the program came next, followed by several in-depth discussions with the library director. A review of the professional and trade publications was the next step. This involved reading articles, taking note of any special features, and generally becoming knowledgeable about the publication.

These measures resulted in a short list of preferred terms as well as an understanding that students in this program covered subject matter in three primary areas: 1) business and general studies (including small business management, accounting, communications, public relations and marketing); 2) science (including mortuary chemistry, mortuary microbiology, pathology, and anatomy); and 3) courses specific to the field such as the psychology of grief and grieving, restorative art, mortuary law, embalming theory, and ethics.

To test the procedures and determine the robustness of the initial terminology list, indexing was completed on several years' issues of the *American Funeral Director* (AFD). The resulting index was then reviewed with the pertinent faculty to assure the final product would meet their needs.

The software program originally used for the index was written in perl by the college's webmaster, who also suggested the database name "The Morgue". Though the first software seemed adequate initially, its use of drop-down boxes to select subjects, authors, and journals was cumbersome. An upgrade was accomplished in 2007 when a new program was written using Ruby on Rails and *The Morgue* was transferred to a Linux server. The new program allowed more flexibility and specifically allowed for easy editing of records. In the early version the webmaster corrected errors as time allowed. The new software also allowed for keyword searching greatly enhancing the functionality for users.

Meanwhile with the first computer programming for the project completed in 1999-2000, another graduate library science student, doing her field placement at the college, picked up the project. Citations and indexing entered for additional years of the AFD resulted in positive feedback from the student and faculty users. Subsequently additional periodicals were included beginning with *The Director*, *The Embalmer*, *Funeral Monitor*, *Mortuary Management*, and *Death Care Business Advisor*. This helped get the word out to librarians at other colleges and universities with mortuary science programs resulting in some wonderful e-mails thanking the KCKCC Library for making the index available.

Content and use

Over the past fourteen years the indexing has been mostly done by a reference librarian during quiet times during the academic year. More recently, a second year mortuary science student was hired to do the indexing under the watchful eye of the library director. While the use of a student to make the initial pass through the journal issues speeds up the processes needed to get key articles into the index, it does result in some subsequent editorial work by professional library staff for quality control purposes.

The database has grown since the first 50 or so entries in 1999 as additional periodical titles have been acquired by the library. As of August 2014 there were 115 journals regularly indexed in the database with over 4,300 authors and 16,400 articles, covering over 9,500 subject entries. The database has seen an average of approximately 500 users per year over the past two years. However, usage has gradually been increasing over time and as additional content is brought into the index its value and subsequent use is expected to improve.

The database is searchable by author's name, subject/key word, and periodical title. Although initially subject searching was limited to a relatively structured vocabulary of terms, a change was quickly made to provide key word searching. Abandoning the use of a structured thesaurus simplified the indexing process thus reducing the time lag between when an issue was received and when it appeared in the database.

At this stage in its development, the database covers only major articles in the journals. It does not include items relating to association news, conventions, reader's forums, advertisements, classified ads, obituaries, or brief comments. While these various categories of items within the publications would likely be of interest to researchers investigating aspects of the publications from an historical perspective, the students and faculty interviewed in the first stages of the project indicated that these were not of a high priority to their information seeking needs. Their information seeking priorities were and remain to find articles in their professional journals which will help them with specific course assignments. However, it must be said that the advertisements alone would constitute a fascinating research study someday.

Future developments:

Since knowledge of the grieving process has become more important for funeral directors and their business in the past several years we are beginning to add more grief and bereavement journals to assist them. We have had one or two titles in this area but are now expanding to ones dealing directly with the grieving process. One of our major goals for the future is to update our software as the current version is now seven years old. With this anticipated software rewrite, it may be possible to provide additional information regarding the journals' place of publication and publishing history and possibly abstracts. We are also in the process of doing some cosmetic changes especially with authors to make the citation more readable.

An extensive collection of periodical back runs has recently been received from a mortuary program library in the northeast United States. These contributions bring an additional 50 journal titles to

the index over the coming year. As at least one of these journals reaches back to 1929 and several others extend back to the 1960's, their inclusion will significantly increase the coverage and usefulness of the database. Some of the journals being added to the index include the following:

- Bereavement: a magazine for hope and healing
- Death Studies
- Funeral Consumers Alliance Newsletter
- Ideas today: a journal of contemporary funeral service management techniques
- Journal of Funeral Service Education
- Professional Mortician
- Today in Deathcare
- Journal of Forensic Sciences

Due to the increased number of titles to be added to *The Morgue* two part-time staff members have joined the library staff to assist with the indexing along with their other duties. With this staffing change the plan is not only to increase the number of articles in the database but also to investigate several new features that could be implemented. One of which would be to include the of abstracts for those publications that make this a part of their format.

Before moving forward with new functionality or significant changes to the index, the library staff will once again return to the stakeholders to ask what features they would find useful. This continuing feedback from the faculty and students has allowed the library to prioritize the work of maintaining the index and ensured that the tool best meets their unique information needs.

Brief Biographies

Cheryl Postlewait has been the current Director of the Library at Kansas City Kansas Community College since 2003. She has been with the college since 1990.

Pamela Drayson is currently the Dean of Libraries at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Oshawa Ontario Canada. She had been the Director of the Library at KCKCC from 1989 to 2000.

Joseph Grasela, Jr. is the current Public Services Librarian at KCKCC and has been with the college since 2001.