



Trends

By Steve Cronin

A Final Homecoming

Lots of people remember their time in college as the best years of their lives. Now, many are choosing their alma maters as the place where they want to spend eternity, too.

Colleges and universities across the country have long offered interment at school cemeteries to faculty and staff. Many of those schools are now adding additional facilities to allow the same option for alumni. Meanwhile, schools that never had cemeteries are getting into the interment business.

The reason: Alumni are asking for it.

“Given the global society in which we live today, families are scattered and ‘home’ is no longer a physical location where families are grounded,” said David A. Harr, associate vice president for auxiliary operations at

the University of Notre Dame in Notre Dame, Indiana.

The school has had an on-campus cemetery for faculty and staff since 1843. In recent years it has been adding mausoleum space to allow for alumni interments, too.

The sentiment is similar at colleges from Virginia to California and from warm campuses in Florida to the cold prairies of Minnesota.

Alumni, not as tied to churches or communities as previous generations, want meaningful spots in which to spend eternity. College officials see the trend as a way to respond to

alumni desires while also strengthening the college community and building strong bonds with former students.

Alumni interments not only bring in additional income but also increase the likelihood of former students contributing to other causes at their schools.

“We are always trying to build relationships throughout a person’s life and career, so there is certainly some of that,” said Warren Madden, senior vice president for business and finance at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa.

Creating Space, Meeting Needs

Iowa State’s cemetery opened in the 1880s, when a college custodian died and river flooding made it impossible to get his body to the local cemetery.



Left: Cedar Grove Cemetery has operated at the University of Notre Dame since 1843. Burial in the cemetery, above, had been limited to faculty and staff. Above right and right: The construction of the Our Lady of Sorrows Mausoleum Complex in 2007 allowed for the interment of alumni remains. (Photos courtesy of the University of Notre Dame)



The two-acre tract is for tenured faculty and staff who served for 20 years, their spouses and unmarried children. Many other school cemeteries have similar regulations. Spaces are sold on an at-need basis. Only university presidents can reserve spots, said Chris Strawhacker, cemetery coordinator.

There are approximately 900 burials in the cemetery, which does 12 to 15 interments annually, Strawhacker said. There are about 20 burial plots left and a similar number of spaces for cremation inurnments, he said. While space is getting tight, the burial spaces can be configured for multiple cremation inurnments, he said.

Still, Iowa State officials are planning for when space runs out.

“The university faced the decision: Do we basically cease operations (at the cemetery) or look at other

options,” Madden said.

Population shifts in Iowa have led many local cemeteries to close their gates. Because of this, many residents there are seeking new options for interment, Madden said.

The rise in cremations and the mobility of society also figured into the university’s calculations.

Iowa State plans to expand the faculty burial area while adding a cremation garden that includes columbaria walls that can serve as a resting place for the cremated remains of thousands of alumni.

The college recently entered into a five-year agreement with the California firm Fans4ever to design, construct and market the cremation garden and columbaria, Madden said. He estimates the project’s cost at \$1 million. Work will only advance if enough niches are presold to

cover costs. Each niche will sell for about \$6,000, Madden said. With approximately 190,000 living alumni, the university vice president thinks there is enough interest to warrant moving ahead.

“We are a major university,” he said. “People get their degrees and start careers ... that take them around the world. When they get to the end of their lives, people say, ‘The university is where I got my start, that is where I would like my remains.’”

Even without a formal space on campus for alumni remains, some former Iowa State students have already found ways to return to their old school forever. Over the years, former students have had their cremated remains scattered at a lake on campus. Some families sought the school’s permission before scattering, others didn’t.



The project's cremation garden will give families a place to conduct scatterings. It will also allow for the memorialization of students who die while attending Iowa State, even if their remains aren't interred on campus.

The plan will provide the university cemetery with an additional 50 to 75 years of capacity. The additional space won't significantly add to annual maintenance costs, Madden said.

"There certainly are costs, but we don't see this as a particular burden beside the things we normally do," he said.

Local Burial, National Interest

Madden's estimate of the additional capacity needed might not be enough given the experience of Harr, at Notre Dame.

Cedar Grove Cemetery was origi-

nally a public burial space, with the Holy Cross brothers establishing a mortuary in what is now the basement level of a women's residence hall.

The school eventually took over operations. In 1977, Notre Dame limited interment to faculty and staff to conserve space. In the late 1990s, requests from alumni and Holy Cross parishioners for interment led officials to begin studying their options.

The University opened the Our Lady of Sorrows mausoleum complex for aboveground interment and cremation inurnments in 2007. Demand was so great that two additional mausolea opened in 2013.

School officials began planning the second phase shortly after the first mausoleum opened, Harr said.

"We were not surprised by demand," he said. "Interments have

steadily grown, with the current yearly average of about 60."

The cemetery's rate of cremation inurnment is about 60 percent, which is above the national average for Catholic cemeteries.

While local cemeteries must keep abreast of local attitudes toward burial and cremation, university officials look to burial and cremation trends from around the country to take into account the geographic spread of alumni, Harr said.

"Our cemetery staff is committed to strong stewardship of resources and has detailed, long-range plans for future mausolea that respond to demand and make best use of the current cemetery boundaries, not only in the mausolea complex but throughout the entire cemetery," he said.

Clockwise from left: A mausoleum complex at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. (Photo courtesy of Eickhof Columbaria); A pair of columns at the Kokosing Nature Preserve, a green burial space at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. (Photo courtesy of the Kokosing Nature Preserve); A columbarium wall at St. John's Abbey Cemetery at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. (Photo courtesy of Eickhof Columbaria)



Options for Alumni

School officials are also looking to the future at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, where a cemetery expansion completed in 2008 is already filling up, said Brother Benedict Leuthner, the school's corporate treasurer.

The St. John's Abby Cemetery was founded in 1869. It initially served as

a monastery cemetery and for local parishioners. But, over the years, alumni at the university and the nearby College of St. Benedict began requesting burial at the two-acre site, too, Leuthner said.

In 2008, a new two-acre section was added, which included columbaria walls and allowed for burial of faculty, staff, employees and friends

and alumni of St. John's and St. Benedict's.

"We thought there was demand for it. We did initial research, and it came back very favorably," Leuthner said.

The cemetery offers in-ground burial, in-ground inurnment or placement in a columbarium wall. The last option is popular, with about 70 percent of spaces already purchased. Leuthner figures capacity will be reached within two or three years. He expects additional units will be added at that time.

Unlike regular cemeteries, college cemeteries like St. John's can use the school's alumni-outreach efforts to get the word out about burial options. This helps with presales, with the cemetery making about 50 of those per year.

Leuthner thinks the prospect of being buried at their old school gives alumni a sense of stability and community they don't find elsewhere in modern society.

"People like the idea of being buried here. It gives them a common space to come back to," he said.

Some cemetery patrons aren't waiting until they die to take advantage of their final resting place. People who have purchased space in St. John's cemetery hold regular events where they get together and socialize.

"They have a mini-party and meet the neighbors, so to speak," Leuthner said.

Education's Advantage

Colleges and universities are not only doing a good job at getting the word out about their cemetery facilities, they are also among the best at communicating memorialization options for those who choose cremation, said Brent Thorson, who works in sales and marketing for Eickhof Columbaria, which built the columbaria for St. John's, and did work at numerous other colleges and universities, including Gustavus Adolphus

College in St. Peter Minnesota.

“Cemeterians have a harder time getting the word out. A lot of these colleges and universities already have a built-in way to raise awareness,” he said.

Thorson has seen colleges’ and universities’ growing interest in columbarium projects, with his company installing about 10 in recent years and working on many more. Columbaria need not be limited to cemeteries, with some schools including interment vaults in other building projects. The Citadel, in Charleston, South Carolina, for example, has a 403-niche columbarium as part of the Thomas Dry Howie Memorial Carillon and Tower.

Even more schools are likely to consider installing a cemetery or columbarium for alumni as word about the trend gets out to the education community, he said.

In 2009, the Florida lawmakers approved regulations allowing the state’s 11 public universities to build columbaria on their campuses.

“If you talk to development professionals, they are always seeking different ways to engage alumni and make (the school) more meaningful to them,” Thorson said.

Preserving Open Space

Not all cemetery projects, though, are about adding facilities to the campus. At Kenyon College, in Gambier, Ohio, a cemetery project is being used to help reclaim part of a golf course and return it to its natural state.

The Kokosing Nature Preserve is a 22-acre site on what used to be nine holes of an 18-hole golf course. The Philander Chase Corp., a nonprofit land trust affiliated with Kenyon, purchased the 45-acre site.

The nature preserve is a 2,400-plot green burial area. It is allowing operators to restore the land to its natural state while also raising funds to support Philander Chase’s mission of land conservation, said Amy Henriksen, steward of the nature preserve and a project coordinator for Philander Chase.

Kokosing is the second burial

space affiliated with Kenyon. The college has operated a cemetery since the 1820s. The Kenyon College Cemetery is located between two of the school’s halls and holds the remains of students, staff and alumni.

Kokosing is open to anyone interested in burial there, but designers are making sure the preserve reminds alumni of Kenyon.

Landscape architect Stephen Christy is a 1971 graduate of Kenyon. One of the cemetery’s main features is a central path that is reminiscent of the college’s famed Middle Path. The path also has two stone columns similar to columns found on campus, Henriksen said.

“I do think there will be alumni who very much associate with the space and the rural setting. Part of (Kenyon’s) identity is it is set on a hill in a very rural area with surrounding green space, so I think folks will very much relate to Kokosing,” she said.

Henriksen is also working to tie the preserve into Kenyon’s curriculum. Plans include having a biology class work on restoration and having a religion professor use the preserve as part of his classroom instruction on death.

Overcoming Resistance

Education institutions’ embrace of new burial options is a relatively recent trend. Leigh B. Middleditch Jr. discovered this in the 1980s when he advanced the idea of building columbaria at his alma mater, the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville.

The university has had a cemetery on site since 1828; the first burial was for a victim of typhoid fever. In ensuing years, everyone from college presidents to Confederate soldiers were buried on the cemetery grounds, which also holds the graves of many students and a few school mascots. In the 1940s, with the cemetery filling up, burials were limited to full-time faculty, administrators and staff. The last ground plot was sold in 1966.

Middleditch is originally from Michigan. He’s a 1951 graduate of the university, a 1957 graduate of its

law school and has served as the university’s counsel. He’s also been a member of its board of visitors and taught at the law school and graduate business school.

But, by the time Middleditch decided he’d like to be buried at the school cemetery, all the plots were either occupied or reserved.

Undeterred, the attorney got himself appointed to the school cemetery committee and proposed building a columbarium that would provide additional space for faculty, staff and alumni interments.

But some worried that allowing others to be interred at the school would diminish the value of a perk awarded to university employees.

“The head of the committee was very negative, because the cemetery was for faculty and staff. So at that point I dropped it,” he said.

But Middleditch didn’t abandon the plan. When he became head of the cemetery committee, he proposed the idea again.

This time the roadblock was paying for construction. Middleditch and two other interested alumni fronted the money needed for the first 180-niche columbarium, which was completed in 1991.

That space sold out, and the university built a second 180-niche columbarium in 2003. Plans are in the works for additional phases.

Niches in the columbaria sell for about \$2,500, with 90 percent of the space reserved for faculty and staff. Ten percent of the space is available for distinguished alumni, “but I don’t think the alumni association has ever turned anyone down,” Middleditch said.

Now Middleditch has space reserved at the cemetery for himself and his wife, a University of Michigan alumnus.

For him, resting forever at his old school is a homecoming that has its own appeal.

“I think it’s the old school ties,” he said. “I’m 85 and I can walk through the old school cemetery and I probably know half the people who are buried in the plots – professors and such. So there is some camaraderie involved in this.” •