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March 2, 2015

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To: The ASSHE STARS Review Committee

My name is David Noble. I have been a professional member of the funeral and cemetery services industries for nearly 42 years and consider myself qualified to comment upon the value and importance of Oregon State University's new course, "The Introduction to Sustainable Cemetery Management." For 20 years, I worked as a funeral director for various firms in Oregon, eventually working for Service Corporation International (SCI), the largest single operator of cemeteries in the United States, as Area Vice-President of operations for Oregon. I oversaw SCI's 15 Oregon cemeteries from 1993 to 2002 and for the past 13 years, I have served as the Executive Director of River View Cemetery and Funeral Home, in Portland, Oregon. River View Cemetery is the largest non-profit, endowment care cemetery in the state. Although relatively young as far as some US cemeteries go (133 years), River View has an operational profile similar to many municipal and institutionally-owned cemeteries in the US, particularly in New England and the Midwest. Throughout my working life, I have also served on a variety of industry-related boards, including, the Oregon Mortuary and Cemetery Board, the Cemetery Association of Oregon, the Oregon Funeral Directors Association and the Oregon Donor Program. For the past 12 years, I also owned and operated two small cemeteries of my own, giving me a solid understanding of the challenges facing both large and small cemeteries, independent and otherwise, and a keen sense of the need they have for qualified owners, managers, and employees in general.

Here is the problem as I see it. Whereas most states, including Oregon, have educational and licensing requirements for funeral home managers and directors, there is no such requirement for cemetery managers. As a result, there have never been any college or university courses created for cemetery operators to attend. Although 42 years ago, cemetery management was thought of as little more than mowing grass and digging graves, it is now far more complex, so there is a definite need for universities, such as Oregon State, to become involved in educating cemetery managers. In the next 15-20 years, the death rate is projected to rise exponentially, as the "Baby Boomers" continue to age, yet the cemetery industry is not well-positioned to handle this increase. There is a definite need for a comprehensive, in-depth, education course focusing on the economic, environmental and cultural sustainability of cemeteries and which creates a pool of competent cemetery managers who can face current industry challenges.

From my review of the "Introduction to Sustainable Cemetery Management" curriculum, it appears to be relevant to both mature professionals, as well as young aspiring students. The course takes advantage of innovations in online distance learning, gathering study materials from around the world in a manner that is both rare and unique. In fact, to my knowledge, there is no such course anywhere that covers these important areas of cemetery management.

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On January 1, 2016, the State of Oregon will begin requiring licensed cemetery managers to obtain a still-to-be-determined number of continuing education hours annually. I suspect other states are doing the same. Yet ironically, those cemetery managers have few, if any, options for obtaining those educational requirements. This course will help fill that void.

In closing, I would encourage you to give this course a STARS innovation credit. Your program's validation will increase the material's acceptance among my peers and ensure that cemetery managers and policy makers, as well as the general public, have the important information that this course contains. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David E. Noble". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

David E. Noble  
Executive Director