

# A PONSI SCHEME WORTH INVESTING IN

by Steven Grenard RRT, RPSGT



In 1920, a man named Carlo Ponzi promised investors to double their money every 90 days. It was a pyramid scam that used the money newcomers were paying in to pay off earlier investors. Today, Ponzi schemes are all but illegal, but continue to operate so it pays to be wary of any investment offers that are too good to be true.

The Board of Regents of the State of New York, however, have come up with a different kind of PONSI scheme that is definitely worth investing in. Their PONSI scheme is an acronym for a National Program on Non-Collegiate Sponsored Instruction which is why it is called "PONSI." In short it allows employers who provide training of any kind to their staff to allow that staff to earn college credits for their successful participation in such programs. Everyday in hospital departments around the country employees are being trained in some-

thing or other. And in the nascent new accreditation of non-collegiate based sleep tech training programs, folks are being trained and awarded certificates and the right to sit for the BRPT exam. However, scant if any attention was paid to the acquisition of college credits because (a) these programs for the most part are not based in colleges and (b) college credits or degrees are not required at this time to become qualified as a registered polysomnographer. PONSI can also help RTs who are required to finish just 2-years of college (AAS degrees) move forward to obtain bachelor's degrees which are entries for graduate level work.

According to Sheila A. Morroni, Director of the National PONSI program, the answers to 3 simple questions helps determine if your organization is eligible to be evaluated and then to participate in PONSI: (1) Does your organization offer documentable, formalized learning experiences without granting accredited college degrees? (2) Does your organization have administrative control over the courses to be Evaluated? Essentially this means attendance and grade records and/or performance of participants. The content or curricula can be self developed or based on outside sources such as the core competencies developed by the APT for sleep techs or instructional materials developed by equipment vendors. (3) Can your organization demonstrate that it retains official "student" records in a secure manner and can they be retrieved and furnished to colleges in the form of transcripts upon request? One strategy for this is to make such records a permanent separate part of an employee's personnel folder as well as kept as a separate record accessible to personnel responsible for maintaining such records and sending out transcript verifications.

Such formalized employer sponsored education can take the form of traditional classroom work, laboratory or clinical work including rounds, computer based instruction and testing, interactive video, Internet supported instruction, correspondence courses, programmed instruction as well as examination preparation for both professional certification and licensure. All stuff which RTs and PSGTs do now. PONSI would also like to know if the work being done is on a post-secondary or college level. Since none of this occurs at the high school level the answer to this is a definite yes, it is a given. And the evaluation process also wants to assure that the student's performance which means the student has achieved the learning

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objective pre-set for the particular course work. Written assessments of attaining objectives must be obtained in the form of appraisals, exams and grades, written assignments, output from computer programs such as inter-scorer reliabilities for sleep techs. Subject matter should also be documented through the availability of instructional materials such as hand outs, lesson plans, detailed outlines. Finally, has the course or material been offered at least once in the past two years? Even if you answered no to any of the above considerations, it may still be possible for organizations to obtain college credit for the educational experiences they offer their employees because there are so many variables in an open-door university without walls.

The PONSI program has also determined the cost savings in tuition costs by participating in their program versus paying an employee's tuition at a theoretical \$225 per college credit and the savings are enormous although there are up front costs for the evaluation process and ongoing administration of the program. For example the savings for 10 students over 5 years is \$28,450.00 for 1 course. For five courses per year and ten students each (50 students) that savings quickly escalates to \$172,450.00!

Students can obtain a degree directly from Excelsior College operated by the Board of Regents of the State of NY or have Excelsior transfer their credits to another college where they will be applied toward a degree from elsewhere. All credits may also be banked in the Credit Bank originally operated by the University of the State of NY and now operated by Excelsior College and the Board of Regents and used down the road to complete degree requirements anywhere. I banked my credits there years ago after earning them at 3 different institutions.

Sleep Medicine technology is now somewhere on the same curve followed by Respiratory Therapy and other allied health

fields. Through the technologists organization (APT) we have a fairly substantial set of written core competencies to aspire to. Through our testing organization (BRPT) we now have a nationally recognized certification, the RPSGT credential, together with a thorough outline of the subject matter that needs to be learned and tested. Through the umbrella of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine we now have a process that accredits educational programs for the purpose of sitting for the BRPT examination. This probably sounds familiar to RTs who have been in the field for 20 years or more. A lot of dedicated sleep medicine people have worked very hard to reach this point but it is predictably a matter of time before college credits and then degrees will be on the table... which is exactly what happened in the field of respiratory care. And as there is an increasing call for state licensure of PSGTs (because of some of the functions they perform on patients), the RPSGT credential will be tied to the licensure just as the RRT is tied to the state licensure in respiratory care. No doubt this is an evolutionary process that will proceed quickly over the upcoming years. Those of us ready to retire, should be imploring our younger colleagues to pursue their credential and education as if their jobs depend on it. At some point down the road it will.

For an information package on participating in the National PONSI, you can send an e-mail to Sheila A. Morrone, Director of the Program at: smorrone@mail.nysed.gov or call 518-486-2070 or write by snail mail to: Sheila A. Morrone, National Program on Noncollegiate Sponsored Instruction, Board of Regents, University of the State of New York, 89 Washington Avenue-Room 975, Albany, NY 12234. Remember this is a national program and is not just open to organizations or students residing or working in the State of New York.