

## NEW GUIDELINES IN SLEEP EDUCATION: MORE INITIALS AND CONFUSING ACRONYMS

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Unless you have been living under a rock lately, you are probably aware that there are several important changes scheduled to take effect in July of 2008 in the eligibility requirements for candidates who wish to take the Board of Registered Polysomnographic Technologists (BRPT) examination. Candidates wishing to take the BRPT exam to obtain the Registered Polysomnographic Technologist (RPSGT) designation will be required to submit proof of completion of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine's (AASM) Accredited Sleep Technologist Education Program (A-STEP) self-learning modules or complete a comprehensive training program accredited by the Commission of Accreditation of Allied Health Educational Programs (CAAHEP) under the CoA-PSG or an add-on sleep technology program within the CoA-END or CoA-RC programs. In order to understand these programs and perhaps make a decision about which program best fits your needs or the needs of your colleagues, it will first be necessary to explain the features of each program and contrast the differences between them. Both programs are a welcome advancement to the field of sleep technology in that they provide a formalized standard approach to the training and education of technologists working in the field of sleep and its disorders.

Both the A-STEP and CAAHEP (pronounced kay-hep) programs are accredited and must adhere to minimum accepted standards and guidelines to which the program is held accountable. The A-STEP program was developed by the AASM and is offered

through an AASM accredited sleep center or affiliated post-secondary school that has been awarded A-STEP provider status by the AASM. A CAAHEP program must be a post-secondary academic institution accredited by an institutional accrediting agency that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. For programs in sleep technology, this governmental agency provides accreditation based upon the recommendation of the Committee on Accreditation for Polysomnographic Technology (CoA-PSG). Within these different accrediting bodies lie most of the qualitative differences in the way these programs are structured.

While A-STEP programs must ensure that applicants are high school graduates and meet minimum standards for employment as a polysomnographic trainee, a CoA-PSG program accredited by CAAHEP also accepts students that are high school graduates but graduates are awarded a minimum of a certificate/diploma in polysomnographic technology. The CoA-PSG programs can also be structured to provide an associates degree or higher upon completion of the program. This important difference between the two programs usually provides the necessary information for prospective technologists to make an informed decision about which program to choose.

Successful completion of the 80-hour A-STEP program allows most technologists to enter the workforce as trainees to complete their training on the job and, after 18 months of clinical experience, take the BRPT examination. Technologists who have previously obtained credentials in another allied health profession such as Respiratory Care, Nursing or Electroneurodiagnostic Technology can sit for the RPSGT exam after 6 months of sleep technology experience and, after July of 2008, successful completion of the A-STEP modules. The A-STEP program includes a mixture of didactic lectures and hands-on practical instruction.

The successful completion of a CoA-PSG program or its add-on equivalent allows the technologist to immediately sit for the BRPT examination without additional clinical experience since this requirement is met within the program in the form of formal laboratory courses and evaluated clinical site experience. The length of the CoA-PSG program varies with the type of award once the student graduates. In programs lasting two semesters, generally September through May, the graduate receives a certificate/diploma. In the two-year, four-semester program, the graduate receives an associate's degree and becomes, perhaps arguably, more marketable because of the extended class work and structure of the program.

Both the A-STEP and CAAHEP programs offer similar formalized course work in the form of lectures on sleep technology and sleep disorders. However, the curriculum and structure of a CAAHEP program is by design more extensive in several areas. A CAAHEP program provides a more extensive standardized pathway for practical technical experience, more content areas that can transfer to alternate schools and degree programs, more available resources, key personnel differences, and a required formalized assessment of the student.

While the CAAHEP program is more extensive in content and practical experience pathways, both programs cover the

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areas identified as necessary for a Polysomnographic Trainee as set forth in the BRPT Job Analysis. Within the CAAHEP program, the student must not only progress through an appropriate sequence of classroom and laboratory activities but must also perform an unpaid clinical rotation through an affiliated clinical site. A student in the CoA-PSG program can, of course, take a paid position in addition to their clinical rotation. After successfully completing an 80-hour A-STEP program however, the new trainee can complete their 6- or 18-month clinical experience on the job as a paid trainee technologist.

A CAAHEP program such as the CoA-PSG program offers additional coursework that is often transferable to other institutions or degree programs. Additional coursework might include domains such as general education competencies, basic sciences and specific respiratory care content areas that may be applicable to other schools or degree programs. Further, within a CAAHEP program, more specific attention can be devoted to the 18 standard sleep-specific domains currently being taught in both programs. These might include separate courses or sections on pediatric polysomnography, in-depth study of neuroanatomy and electroneurodiagnostics, coping with night-shift work and CPR courses to name a few. The student can structure their own programs and course work according to specific career goals. The A-STEP program provides the specific course content needed to perform a polysomnographic technologist's duties in a streamlined manner, usually about 8 days, thereby allowing the student to begin their required clinical experience as a Polysomnographic Trainee.

Since any A-STEP participant must be affiliated with an accredited sleep program, it is expected that the A-STEP program will also meet high quality standards. These standards include available resources necessary for the student to become familiar with the knowledge base relevant to sleep medicine and the sleep laboratory environment. Both A-STEP and CoA-PSG programs are expected to provide students access to the equipment required for polysomnography and positive airway pressure titration. However, as of the writing of this article, A-STEP programs are only required to have a library that includes, at a minimum, 5 reference texts. Since CoA-PSG programs are affiliated with an accredited post-secondary institution, the library resources are only limited by the knowledge base of the Program Director and instructors. Additionally, CoA-PSG programs must, at least annually, assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of the resources described in the CAAHEP standards. If deficiencies are identified, an action plan must be developed and the results measured and documented. This requirement assures that any deficiencies are addressed appropriately. When considering any A-STEP program, it is advisable to assure that the program you are interested in can provide access to multiple reference sources on sleep medicine and other related topics as well such as computer science or medical terminology for example.

Both accredited programs require key personnel to occupy the positions of a Program Director, Director of Clinical Education and a Medical Director. These individuals perform specific functions within the program. In addition to these required individuals, there is also faculty and clerical/support staff. Any post-secondary institution offering a CoA-PSG or similar program will also have financial personnel, computer support staff, laboratory facilitators, ancillary student facilities, clin-

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ical site affiliations, equipment suppliers that also provide instructional services, continuing education courses for the students and the faculty and physician instructional involvement. The level of expertise or credentialing is not specifically defined for A-STEP program instructors but are assigned by the Program Director who must be BRPT registered. Instructors in polysomnographic technology courses are expected to be experienced and ideally BRPT registered to provide insight into the role of a technologist in a sleep disorders program, the knowledge base necessary to successfully pass the registry examination and provide a model for the participant. Instructors should be effective in teaching their assigned subjects and exhibit professional behavior in the workplace.

Finally, differences in A-STEP and CoA-PSG programs exist in formalized assessment of the student. In both programs, evaluation of the participant and program performance is required and adequate records of learning progress and achievements must be maintained. However, in the CoA-PSG program, required assessment is more frequent and the methods are more formal and sophisticated. Students enrolled in A-STEP programs are assessed through their rate of passage on a standardized trainee examination given at the completion of the program, reports from students on their feelings of preparedness to begin work and reports from employers that the students were adequately prepared to be effective in the workplace. While midpoint student assessment is an A-STEP requirement this should be confirmed by the student prior to enrollment.

Within the CoA-PSG program, student evaluations must be conducted on a recurrent basis and with sufficient frequency to provide both the students and program faculty with valid and timely indications of the student's progress toward and achievement of the competencies and learning domains stated in the curriculum. Within this standard the word valid is used to specify that the evaluation methods chosen are consistent with the competencies and objectives being tested, and are designed to measure stated objectives at the appropriate level of difficulty. This methodology gives students adequate time to correct identified deficiencies in knowledge and/or performance. If there are identified deficiencies, a CoA-PSG program is required to help students understand course content; to comply with program practices and policies; to provide counseling or referral for problems that may interfere with their progress through the program. The students are eligible for all services offered by the educational institution. In this manner, students have the resources available to them to address deficiencies while still in the program.

More minor differences exist between both the A-STEP and CoA-PSG accredited sleep education programs. The prospective student is encouraged to investigate each program thoroughly in order to understand them and make an informed decision about which program best fits their needs. Nevertheless, the major differences and similarities listed above should make clear the main programs now available to those who are interested in starting a career in the exciting field of polysomnographic technology. It is encouraging and exciting to see more formalized training programs for polysomnographic technologists being developed and expected for sleep professionals. The AASM and BRPT should be applauded for their insight and courage to enact these requirements for the betterment of the profession and ultimately the patients we serve.

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