



ADDRESSING NEW FEDERAL STUDENT LOAN CAPS ON ADVANCED NURSING DEGREES

WHAT ARE THE NEW FEDERAL STUDENT LOAN CAPS?

The Reimagining and Improving Student Education (“RISE”) Final Rule¹ released by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) defined several key healthcare degrees as either “Graduate Degrees” or “Professional Degrees.” This classification allows higher federal loan limits for “Professional Degree” programs that prepare students for licensed professions requiring significant upfront formal education.

Under the rule, Nurse Practitioner (NP), Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA), Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS), and master’s and doctoral programs in Nursing Education were reclassified as “Graduate Degrees.” As a result, students entering these programs will have reduced federal loan caps compared to previous years.

WHAT CHANGED?

	Before RISE Rule “Professional Degree” designation for advanced nursing programs	After RISE Rule “Graduate Degree” designation for advanced nursing programs
Annual Loan Limit	\$50,000	\$20,500
Lifetime Limit	\$200,000	\$100,000

Ascend Learning annually partners with more than 60% of the nation’s nursing programs, 300,000 nursing students, 250,000 allied health professionals, 150,000 first responders, 145,000 fitness professionals, and 100,000 medical students.



IMPACT ON THE NURSING PIPELINE

Because federal loans are the primary financing mechanism for graduate healthcare education, a lower borrowing cap increases out-of-pocket costs and reduces access to programs. The new loan caps could limit opportunities for nurses to advance their careers and help fill gaps in the workforce.

- **Impact on Students:** Reduced access to programs (especially in areas already facing provider shortages), higher financial barriers that deter qualified candidates from enrolling, and diminished program quality due to resource constraints.
- **Impact on Postsecondary Institutions:** Program closures, reduced faculty retention and instructional capacity, and incentives to prioritize applicants based on ability to pay rather than academic qualifications.
- **Impact on the Healthcare System:** Exacerbated shortages of advanced practice clinicians and nursing faculty, threatening the availability and quality of care nationwide.

SOLUTIONS INTRODUCED IN CONGRESS

Several bills address loan cap changes, generally aiming to restore or clarify eligibility for higher borrowing limits for advance nursing program students:

TARGETED FIX (NURSING-SPECIFIC)

- **S.4568 / H.R.8659 The Nursing is a Professional Degree Act** mandates the classification of post-baccalaureate nursing degrees (M.S.N., D.N.P., Ph.D.) as "professional degrees" under the Higher Education Act of 1965.

BROAD FIX (MULTIPLE PROFESSIONS)

- **H.R. 6739 The Clarity in Professional Degree Act** defines several health, education, and graduate credentials as "professional degrees" under the Higher Education Act of 1965, including Nursing (A.D.N., R.N., B.S.N.).
- **H.R. 6718 The Professional Student Degree Act** codifies the definition of "professional degree" and lists more programs eligible for higher federal borrowing limits including nursing and various other health degrees.



REFERENCES

- 1 Reimagining and Improving Student Education." *Federal Register*. January 30, 2026.
<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/01/30/2026-01912/reimagining-and-improving-student-education>.
- 2 Reimagining and Improving Student Education." *Federal Register*. January 30, 2026.
<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/01/30/2026-01912/reimagining-and-improving-student-education>.