

Association of Nurses in AIDS Care (ANAC) Responds to Federal Decision Excluding Nursing from Professional Degree Classification

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The Association of Nurses in AIDS Care (ANAC) expresses profound concern and unequivocal opposition to the decision by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) to exclude nursing from the definition of “professional degree” programs in its forthcoming federal student-loan eligibility rulemaking (One Big Beautiful Bill Act, 2025, § 81001). Section 81001 of the *One Big Beautiful Bill Act (2025)* restructures federal student-loan programs for graduate and professional students. The section eliminates Graduate PLUS loans and replaces them with new, lower annual and lifetime borrowing caps. Importantly, the law ties these loan limits to whether a program is classified as a “professional degree,” but it does not define which fields qualify. That responsibility is delegated to the Department of Education through regulation. As a result, graduate nursing programs, including Advanced Practice Registered Nurse (APRN) preparation, fall under the lower “graduate student” loan cap rather than the higher “professional” cap, significantly restricting the financial aid available to future nurse practitioners, clinical specialists, and nurse leaders. In effect, this decision by the federal Department of Education declassifies advanced practice nursing as a professional degree.

Nurses comprise the largest component of the healthcare workforce and are essential to advancing public health, including in HIV care, underserved and rural communities. Nurses are critical to expanding access to quality and affordable healthcare (Bono, et al., 2020; Kueakomoldej, et al., 2022; O'Reilly-Jacob, et al., 2025). By limiting access to the full range of federal student-loan programs, the DOE's exclusion erects a financial barrier to a pipeline of nurses critical to primary care, HIV prevention and treatment, health equity research, and community-engaged interventions. This new policy largely limits or completely precludes most nurses from pursuing graduate education. This new position imperils nurses' capacity to serve in roles such as advanced practice registered nurses and nurse educators, thereby undermining the foundation of nursing's contribution to health care, HIV care, and community-based care delivery to advance health equity (Armstrong, 2020).

The potential consequences for patient access, quality of care, and health equity are substantial. The exclusion is inconsistent with the rigorous educational preparation, licensure requirements, and commitment to direct patient care that characterize modern nursing. Although the DOE maintains that its historic regulatory definition has, for decades, explicitly omitted nursing, nursing education has evolved to include clinically intensive, licensure-based graduate preparation, and nursing professionals now fill roles as primary care providers, clinical investigators, educators, and systems leaders. To exclude nursing from the “professional degree” classification disregards this reality and threatens the future of the nursing workforce.

In the context of our national nursing shortage, an acute challenge in HIV care settings and underserved populations, this decision is a major setback. It creates the risk of reduced enrollment in graduate nursing programs, diminished capacity in nursing education and faculty production, and ultimately fewer highly prepared nurses to lead and deliver care among populations disproportionately affected by HIV (Weiser, et al., 2019). The potential consequences for patient access, quality of care, and health equity are substantial. This shift also threatens the provision of all in-patient healthcare as the downstream effect likely will worsen the current nurse staff

shortages in hospitals and facilities across the country. In recent years, more than 80,000 qualified nursing school applicants were turned away due to nursing school faculty vacancies (McElroy, 2025). Without access to loans to support the advanced nursing degrees required to teach the next generation of nurses, this faculty shortage will only increase, further eroding the pipeline of new nurses entering the profession as more and more experienced nurses near retirement.

Therefore, ANAC calls on the DOE to:

1. Immediately eliminate its proposed rule to explicitly include nursing at all required graduate levels (Master's, Doctor of Nursing Practice, PhD) within the "professional degree" classification for purposes of federal student-loan eligibility and borrowing limits.
2. Engage in transparent consultation with nursing stakeholders, including nursing specialty associations, nursing education programs, and frontline nursing practitioners in HIV care, to assess the workforce implications of loan eligibility changes.
3. Ensure that the policy environment supports nurses' contributions to HIV prevention, treatment, and health equity outcomes, and does not erect additional hurdles for nurses advancing their education and leadership.
4. Safeguard the continuity and viability of nursing education pipelines, including pathways for nurse faculty development, advanced practice preparation, and community-based nursing research.

ANAC stands ready to collaborate with federal agencies, Congress, nursing education organizations, and community partners to ensure that nursing retains its rightful place as a profession and that federal policy aligns with the realities of nursing's role in addressing HIV, health disparities, and the nation's health-care needs. ANAC urges all nurses to stand up for nursing graduate education, a vital element in maintaining the nursing workforce, by adding your name to the American Nurses Association petition, linked, here, which advocates for revising the proposed definition of professional degrees to explicitly include advanced practice nursing: <https://ana.quorum.us/campaign/professionaldegreepetition/>.

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The Association of Nurses in AIDS Care (ANAC) is the leading nursing organization responding to HIV/AIDS and related co-morbidities and co-occurring conditions globally. Founded in 1987, our mission is to promote the education and development of nurses and others involved in the delivery of health care to persons living with, or affected by, HIV and to promote the health and welfare of people living with HIV/AIDS around the world.

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