

ISSUE BRIEF

Student Loan Limits

BACKGROUND

In July 2025, President Trump signed into law the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (Public Law No. 119-21). It established federal student loan limits for professional and graduate programs. Loans for professional programs have an annual limit of \$50,000 and an aggregate limit of \$200,000. Graduate degrees have an annual limit of \$20,500 and an aggregate limit of \$100,000.

In its final rule for the Reimagining and Improving Student Education Committee, the Department of Education used a limited definition of professional degree programs to include only Pharmacy (Pharm.D.), Dentistry (D.D.S. or D.M.D.), Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.), Chiropractic (D.C. or D.C.M.), Law (L.L.B. or J.D.), Medicine (M.D.), Optometry (O.D.), Osteopathic Medicine (D.O.), Podiatry (D.P.M., D.P., or Pod.D.), Theology (M.Div. or M.H.L.), and Clinical Psychology (Psy.D. or Ph.D.). Social work is not included in the list of professional degree programs, so social work students are subject to lower federal student loan limits.

The average student loan debt for Master of Social Work (MSW's) in 2021 was \$68,000-76,000. Many social work students will have to resort to private loans to make up the difference between the annual limit and the cost of attendance. These private loans often have higher interest rates, do not afford the same protections as federal student loans, and do not qualify for loan forgiveness programs such as the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program.

LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS

As Capitol Hill addresses the issue of professional degrees, NASW is electing to approach the issue from multiple angles to codify a solution that ensures equitable access to student loans for all degrees and that social work is a profession.

Return to Student Loan Borrowing Equity

The Loan Equity for Advanced Professionals Act (H.R. 6574)

Establishes uniform borrowing limits for all graduate and professional students: \$50,000 annually and \$200,000 aggregate (beyond undergraduate borrowing), effective July 1, 2026. Applies limits uniformly across all programs.

» H.R. 6574 was introduced by Rep. Tim Kennedy (NY-26-D) on December 10, 2025.

Expanding the Definition of Professional Programs

Professional Student Degree Act (H.R. 6718)

This bi-partisan bill removes outdated regulatory references and establishes a statutory definition of “professional degree” as preparation for licensed professional practice requiring skills beyond a bachelor’s degree. It codifies specific degrees beyond those listed in 34 CFR 668.2 (Social Work, Audiology, Physician Assistant/Associate, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Nursing, Public Health, Business Administration and Management, General, Accounting, Architecture, Education, and Special Education), to be eligible for higher student loan limits, while allowing the Secretary to designate additional qualifying programs.

» H.R. 6718 was introduced by Rep. Mike Lawler (NY-17-R) on December 15, 2025.

Professional Degree Access Restoration Act (S. 4039/H.R. 6677)

This bicameral bill fully reverses graduate and professional student loan restrictions from Public Law No. 119-21. It removes provisions limiting Federal Direct Unsubsidized Loans for graduate and professional students effective July 1, 2026, and eliminates Graduate PLUS loan termination. Restores previous annual and aggregate loan limits.

» S. 4039 was introduced by Sen. Angela Alsobrooks (MD-D) on March 10, 2026. H.R. 6677 was introduced by Rep. Ritchie Torres (NY-15-D) on December 11, 2025.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

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