Advanced Professional Workforce Alliance

Updated September 2026

Advancing Graduate Education Through Federal Policy

THE ISSUE

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) eliminated the Graduate PLUS loan program and set new federal loan caps effective July 1, 2026: $20,500 annual / $100,000 aggregate for graduate programs, and a higher $50,000 annual / $200,000 aggregate limit reserved for programs the Department of Education designates as "professional."

The Department's Reimagining and Improving Student Education (RISE) final rule narrowed that designation to a closed list of degrees, excluding fields such as architecture, public health, health administration, occupational and physical therapy, naturopathic medicine, athletic training, and mental health counseling, among others. The Advanced Professional Workforce Alliance (APWA) was formed to advocate for the graduate and postsecondary programs left out of that definition.



APWA is focused on federal policies that directly impact access to graduate education and the ability to sustain a highly skilled workforce across critical sectors.

This legislative strategy includes bipartisan engagement.

WHERE THINGS STAND

On June 24, 2026, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia preliminarily stayed the RISE rule's added requirements.

Acting on the ruling, ED published an interim list on June 29 extending eligibility for the higher professional loan limits to additional programs. The stay is preliminary and pending further proceedings; ED has said the list may change as litigation continues, and the government retains the right to appeal. APWA urges Congress to pursue legislative action to make an expanded definition permanent.

IN THE FY2027 APPROPRIATIONS PROCESS

On April 16, 2026, APWA submitted written testimony to the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies for Fiscal Year 2027:

> "APWA urges Congress to direct the Department of Education and the Department of Labor to produce reports of the impacts of the student loan limits specifically on programs and professions not designated 'professional' … on institutional programs as well as workforce impacts."

APWA requested that ED include these updates in their fiscal year 2028 Congressional Justifications, and that Department recommend a process to preserve the Secretary's authority to designate additional programs as professional.

COALITION STRUCTURE

APWA membership consists of three tiers — Steering, Voting, and Non-voting — each with a different role in shaping the coalition's advocacy and legislative strategy, which includes bipartisan Congressional engagement. The coalition brings together 34 member organizations spanning architecture, behavioral and mental health, physical and occupational therapy, athletic training, public health, naturopathic medicine, and allied health professions.

STEERING COMMITTEE

Strategic leadership and governance

◆ American Institute of Architects ◆ Association of University Programs in Health Administration ◆ American Occupational Therapy Association ◆ American Physical Therapy Association ◆ National Board for Certified Counselors ◆ National Athletic Trainers' Association ◆ Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health ◆ American Association of Naturopathic Physicians ◆ Association of Accredited Naturopathic Medical Colleges ◆ Association for Athletic Training Education

VOTING MEMBERSHIP

Full participation in coalition activities with voting rights on sign-on letters, comments, and advocacy positions.

◆ American Council of Academic Physical Therapy ◆ American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges ◆ The American Health Care Association and the National Center for Assisted Living ◆ Association of Schools Advancing Health Professions ◆ Council of Colleges of Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine ◆ American Association of Nurse Practitioners ◆ Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine ◆ American Academy of Physician Associates

NON-VOTING MEMBERSHIP

Participation in coalition activities and shared resources, with flexibility on advocacy positions.

◆ American Speech-Language-Hearing Association ◆ Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education ◆ Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics ◆ Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture ◆ National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy ◆ National Society of Genetic Counselors ◆ PA Education Association ◆ Genetic Counselor Educators Association ◆ ADVION ◆ National Association of Social Workers ◆ American Geriatrics Society ◆ American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy ◆ American Music Therapy Association ◆ National Association of Rehab Providers & Agencies ◆ American Nutrition Association ◆ Association of International Certified Professional Accountants

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

APWA Comments on the RISE Proposed Rule
Submitted to the Department of Education, March 2, 2026. Read PDF →

APWA FY 2027 Labor-HHS-Education Testimony
Submitted to the House Appropriations Committee, April 16, 2026. Read PDF →

ED Guidance on the Professional Degree Designation
Analysis of the June 24 court stay and ED's interim program list. Read more →

Inside Higher Ed: Advocates Call to Expand the Definition
Coverage of the coalition's push on Capitol Hill. Read article →