Nursing as a Professional Degree

Contributing Author: Carol Roe, JD, MSN, RN

One of the most important discussions at the recent American Nurses Association (ANA) Membership Assembly focused on the future of nursing's political advocacy and why nurses must pay closer attention to policy decisions that directly affect the profession. An example of nurses and the professional nursing organizations paying attention is the response to the recent action of the United States Department of Education (ED) exclusion of advanced nursing degrees from the definition of "Professional Degree."

During the ANA Board of Directors Roundtable, leaders from several constituent and state nurses' associations shared perspectives on the current approach of the ANA Political Action Committee (ANA-PAC). Many emphasized that nurses' extraordinary public trust presents an opportunity to more visibly support candidates who champion nursing priorities and policies that improve patient care.

Building on those conversations, the Washington State Nurses Association (WSNA) led a coalition of 16 Constituent/State Nurses Associations (C/SNAs) (Including ANA-Ohio) in introducing a resolution on "Embracing Transparency and Engagement in ANA Political Action and Congressional Candidate Support" (Gill, 2026). The resolution called on ANA leadership to strengthen transparency, member engagement, and communication surrounding ANA-PAC activities while recognizing the value of political support and/or endorsement by the nursing profession.

The Issue

An example of nurses and the professional nursing organizations paying attention is the response to the recent action of the United States Department of Education (ED) exclusion of advanced nursing degrees from the definition of "Professional Degree." The Department of Education's (ED) final rule on graduate student loans was effective July 1, 2026, and it **excludes nursing from the definition of "professional degree" programs**.

What Exclusion Means for Nurses

Post-baccalaureate nursing students would have lower limits on the amount of federal loans they can borrow:

- $20,500 annually
- $100,000 lifetime

Meanwhile, degrees included in the definition of "professional degree" programs will have access to much higher loan caps.

According to the American Nurses Association – "Excluding post-baccalaureate nursing degrees, as proposed, fails to recognize the critical and distinct role of advanced practice registered nurses, (APRNs) and the importance of the nursing profession for our nation's physical and economic health. Completion of post-baccalaureate nursing degrees-Master of Science in Nursing (MSN), Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP), Doctor of Nurse Anesthesia Practice (DNAP), and Doctor in Philosophy in Nursing (PhD)- is the required first step for nurses to step into advanced practice registered nursing professions as well as academic roles necessary to prepare future generations of nurses. ANA is concerned that continued exclusion from the proposed professional student definition will limit the ability of the next generation of advanced practice nursing students to enter these roles without adequate federal loan support (Brusie, 2026).

Background

The United States Department of Education officially excluded nursing from the definition of "professional degree" programs as part of the implementation of President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act (H.R. 1) signed on July 4, 2025.

A brief summary of the evolution of the issue:

- June 2015- Department of Education (ED) proposed rule officially excluding nursing from its lists of professional degree programs.
- December 2025- 140 lawmakers from both parties sent a letter urging ED to add nursing to the list of professional degrees and ANA urged nurses to submit comments (ANA, 2026).
- April 2026- ED finalized rule to take effect July 1, 2026. This is despite 245,000 petition signatures, thousands of public comments, bipartisan Congressional pushback and ANA denouncing decision.
- May 2026- 25 states and Washington D.C. filed a federal lawsuit challenging the exclusion with ANA and 10 other nursing organizations filing a separate lawsuit.
- May 2026- Nursing as a Professional Degree Act was introduced as S 4568 by a bi-partisan group of US Senators. A companion bill H.R. 8691 was introduced by a bi-partisan group of US House members.
- June 2026- the United States House Appropriations Committee advanced a bi-partisan amendment that would classify nursing as a professional degree; (Brusie, 2026).
- June 2026- a federal judge blocked implementation of new ED rule (WSNA, 2026).
- June 2026- ED responded with "in-

terim guidance" which designates MSN, DNP or DNAP programs as "professional degrees" but omits Nursing PhD programs.

Questions for Nurses to Consider and Suggested Actions

This action by a federal agency and the subsequent response of our federal legislators is only one example of many in which "politics" impacts our practice. Do you know how your United States Senators and Representatives voted on the "Big Beautiful Bill?" Resources to review the voting records of federal elected officials voting records include **https://clerk.house.gov/** (2) **www.congress.gov**; (3) **www.Ballotpedia.org**. All of these sites offer comprehensive summaries of legislation and voting records. Nursing professional organizations are also helpful resources. The American Nurses Association site provides a wealth of information of interest to nurses about both federal legislation and federal agencies at **www.nursingworld.org/practice-policy/advocacy**. You can also sign up for RN Action Alerts on the site. Following legislators and advocacy groups on social media is also another source of information.

Nurses are also urged to contact your United States Representative and urge them to co-sponsor H.R. 8691 as referenced above. You can find your U. S. Representative at **www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member**. Additionally, contact Ohio Senators Jon Husted, **www.husted.senate.gov** and Bernie Moreno, www.moreno.senate.gov and urge them to sign on to S 4568. Keep in mind that any proposed legislation at the current time that does not pass by the end of this year needs to be re-introduced in the next legislative session. So, keep monitoring this issue. ■

References

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Uncovering the Hidden Harm: Recognizing and Reducing Implicit Bias in Nursing Practice

Contributing Author: Shanell Murphy, MBA-HM, MSN-LM, RN, CPHQ, CLSSYB: Chair, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee

Nurses enter the profession to heal, advocate, and protect. Yet good intentions do not make us immune to implicit bias. Greenwald et al. (2022) describe implicit bias as mental associations that can influence judgment and behavior without a person recognizing their effect. Explicit bias, in contrast, involves attitudes or stereotypes of which a person is aware. Because bias-influenced judgments can feel reasonable in the moment, their effects may remain hidden. The hidden harm emerges when unrecognized assumptions shape communication, clinical decisions, or whether a patient's concerns are heard and acted upon. Recognizing this risk is not an accusation of intentional prejudice; it is a necessary step toward safer, more equitable nursing practice.

When Good Intentions Are Not Enough

Implicit bias can be related to age, race or ethnicity, gender, disability, body size, language, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics. During busy clinical encounters, quick interpretations may feel objective even when an irrelevant characteristic has influenced them.

Groves et al. (2021) reviewed 215 reports involving registered nurses or recipients of nursing care. Twenty-nine studies identified a potential relationship between nurse bias and nursing care, with 27 of those suggesting a negative impact. Reported differences involved respectful communication, interaction time, pain management, documentation and triage. Only 12 reports evaluated an intervention. Not every difference in care results from bias. These findings show why nurses and organizations should examine clinical decisions rather than assume good intentions guarantee fair and equitable care.

Move From Awareness To Practice

Educational awareness alone is not the finish line. Hagiwara et al. (2024)