

**March 2, 2026**

Nicholas Kent  
Undersecretary  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office of Postsecondary Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20202

**Re: Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, Reimagining and Improving Student Education  
(ED-2025-OPE-0944)**

Dear Undersecretary Kent,

On behalf of the Advanced Professional Workforce Alliance (APWA), we appreciate the opportunity to comment on the *Reimagining and Improving Student Education (RISE)* Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM). We write to express serious concerns regarding the proposed definition of “professional degrees” in relation to other graduate degree programs. While the proposed change may appear technical, the consequences are anything but. The classification of degrees directly affects who can afford to enter the field and whether the nation can sustain the workforce required in a given area. While we support efforts to improve accountability and transparency in higher education, we are concerned that the proposed framework and definition of “professional degrees” does not encompass the range of programs that fit the professional designation.

**Definitions (§685.102)**

Many fields currently excluded from the definition require graduate-level education to realize the full range and scope of practice. As the proposed regulation notes, “OB BB establishes a three-part test” for the definition of the “professional degree.” However, many programs left off the list clearly meet aspects and facets of these tests including that they “signify completion of the academic requirements for beginning practice in a given profession;” “that the profession must require skill(s) that students who only have a bachelor’s degree (or training below a bachelor’s degree level) would not normally have;” and “the profession that a degree holder would enter after graduating generally requires professional licensure.” As the Department notes on several occasions in drafting its definition, the words “generally” and “normally” do “not rule out the possibility per se of some exception to the rule.” Many areas, such as architecture, behavioral health fields,

clinical social work, health administration, occupational and physical therapy, naturopathic medicine, athletic training, counseling, among other areas fit these criteria by requiring at least a bachelor's degree as well often requiring state licensure, however, are excluded from the professional category. By excluding many of these programs from the professional degree designation, the Department effectively increases financial barriers for students pursuing careers in licensed professions that are essential to public health, behavioral health, education, infrastructure, and public safety. These programs are often longer in duration and include mandatory clinical hours. Excluding these programs decreases accessibility for students and will ultimately cause shortages within high-need areas of the workforce. The Department's proposal to exclude certain degrees from the definition of "professional degrees" is contrary to law and arbitrary and capricious. APWA calls on the Department to formalize a method by which excluded programs that meet substantial aspects of the three-part test can petition for inclusion in the "professional degree" definition.

The Higher Education Act (HEA) also currently allows for the Secretary of Education to designate programs either professional or graduate. Continuing this discretion is crucial for an evolving workforce and is vital in accounting for changes in program areas, workforce shortages, as well as areas of high need. Preserving Secretarial designation authority ensures the Department can respond appropriately without requiring new statutory amendments each time professional practice standards change. We propose that the Department reaffirm and retain the Secretary's authority to designate programs as professional where the nature of the training, regulatory structure, and workforce function warrant such treatment.

APWA is also concerned that expediting the process of implementation of these proposed rules does not follow the master calendar requirements outlined for the Department's Negotiated Rulemaking in HEA. These changes are too significant to not have thorough discussion and feedback as well as enough time for institutions to prepare for these potential changes. Institutions have structured program offerings, enrollment management strategies, and student financial aid counseling around longstanding interpretations of the professional degree framework, and any changes to these structures will take time for adaptation.

Under the HEA's master calendar provisions, regulatory changes that materially affect institutional participation and student aid eligibility must provide sufficient lead time for institutions to implement compliance measures. The proposed changes would require updates to institutional systems and financial aid counseling practices; disrupt enrollment

planning cycles; and create inequities between currently enrolled students and incoming students. Implementing such changes on the accelerated timeline would affect institutional stability and student accessibility. We urge at a minimum that the Department delay implementation until July 1, 2027, to ensure full compliance and avoid potential disruption to current and future students at institutions, as well as not including currently enrolled students within these regulatory changes.

The undersigned organizations stand ready to work with the Department to ensure adequate and fair treatment of degree programs currently excluded from the “professional” degree definition.

Sincerely,

Association of Athletic Training Education

Association of University Programs in Health Administration

National Association of Social Workers

American Physical Therapy Association

International Certification & Reciprocity Consortium

Addiction Professionals of North Carolina

California Consortium of Addiction programs & Professionals

Council of Graduate Schools

Association of Schools Advancing Health Professions

Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health

American Occupational Therapy Association

American Council of Academic Physical Therapy

University of Minnesota Duluth

American Music Therapy Association

American Institute of Architects

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture

Coalition for Social Work and Health

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs

National Board for Certified Counselors, Inc.

American Health Care Association  
National Center for Assisted Living  
National Accrediting Agency for Clinical Laboratory Sciences  
National Athletic Trainers' Association  
Council of Colleges of Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine  
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy  
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners  
Association for Counselor Education & Supervision  
American Association of Naturopathic Physicians  
Genetic Counselor Educators Association  
MGH Institute of Health Professions  
Association of Accredited Naturopathic Medical Colleges  
National Association for the Education of Young Children  
Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education  
Wayne State University Occupational Therapy Program  
LeadingAge  
Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine (ACAHM)  
Council on Social Work Education  
American Association of Psychiatric Pharmacists  
National Society of Genetic Counselors  
American Geriatrics Society  
American Dance Therapy Association  
American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy  
Association of Academic Physiatrists