



MERKLEY, WICKER LAUNCH BIPARTISAN EFFORT TO OVERTURN NEW LIMITS ON STUDENT LOANS FOR NURSES

May 19, 2026

Washington, D.C. – Today, U.S. Senators Jeff Merkley (D-OR) and Roger Wicker (R-MS) introduced a new bill in response to a decision by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) that fails to classify post-baccalaureate nursing degrees as “professional degrees,” imposing stricter limits on federal student loans for nurses.

The bipartisan *Nursing is a Professional Degree Act* provides a simple fix and guarantees nursing students pursuing post-baccalaureate nursing programs can access affordable student loans. More specifically, this bill classifies post-baccalaureate nursing degrees as “professional degrees,” which would entitle nurses taking out federal student loans to a cap of \$50,000 annually and \$200,000 in the aggregate. The most recent rule from ED subjects nurses pursuing post-baccalaureate degrees to federal loan caps of \$20,500 annually and \$100,000 in the aggregate, which pushes them towards higher-interest private loans to complete their education.

“Nurses save lives, one bedside at a time. We should be doing everything we can to make it easier to recruit the next generation of these heroes, not make it harder,” said Merkley. **“Republicans and Democrats alike have sounded the alarm over changes that make student loans for nurses more expensive, which threaten the future of the nursing workforce. Our simple and straightforward bill corrects this wrong, ensuring nursing students can continue to access the support they need to achieve their dreams and save lives.”**



“It is imperative that Congress address the nursing shortage across the United States. This legislation would make nursing a more achievable profession by expanding the loan limits for nursing students. Classifying post-baccalaureate nursing degrees as professional degrees would give these students more financial freedom after graduation,” said Wicker.

As leaders of the Senate Nursing Caucus, Merkley and Wicker have led **bipartisan efforts** (<https://www.merkley.senate.gov/merkley-wicker-kiggans-bonamici-150-lawmakers-changes-to-nursing-student-loans-threaten-profession/>) to oppose changes to federal student loans for nurses, support the more than 5 million registered nurses nationwide, and address the challenges facing the nursing workforce.

Merkley and Wicker’s *Nursing is a Professional Degree Act* is supported by 250 organizations, including the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, American Association of Nurse Anesthesiology (AANA), American Association of Nurse Practitioners (AANP), American Nurses Association, American College of Nurse-Midwives, Association of Women’s Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses, National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN), and National League for Nursing. A full list of supporting organizations can be found by clicking **here** (<https://www.merkley.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/Endorsing-Orgs-for-Nursing-is-a-Professional-Degree-Act.pdf>).

“On behalf of America’s nurse educators and nursing students, I applaud Senator Merkley for leading this bipartisan effort to advance a congressional solution to recognize post-baccalaureate nursing programs as professional degrees,” said Dr. Deborah Trautman, President and Chief Executive Officer for the American Association of Colleges of Nursing. **“Maintaining access to critical healthcare services rests on having a robust supply of nurses prepared to serve as advanced practice nurses, faculty, researchers, and in other expert roles. Passing this legislation will help schools of nursing meet this need and mitigate the shortage of both clinicians and the faculty who teach them.”**

“It’s ironic that we find ourselves here just after National Nurses Week, a time when we are meant to celebrate and honor the very people who keep our health system running. And yet, this Department of Education has chosen to make it harder for nurses to advance their education and their careers,” said Jennifer Mensik Kennedy, PhD, MBA, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN, President of the American Nurses Association. **“I want to thank Senators Merkley and Wicker for their commitment to writing legislation that will fix this easily avoidable disaster for the nursing profession and patients. Make no mistake, this is not a technicality or a footnote. This rule will be felt in real communities, for example, in rural areas where nurse practitioners, midwives, and nurse anesthesiologists are often the only providers of core care services.”**

“On behalf of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners (AANP), we thank Senate Nursing Caucus Co-Chairs Senators Merkley and Wicker for their introduction of the *Nursing is a Professional Degree Act*, which would include post-baccalaureate nursing as a professional degree for federal student loans,” said AANP President Valerie Fuller, PhD, DNP. **“The Department of Education’s decision to exclude post-baccalaureate nursing programs will make it harder for future students to become nurse practitioners (NPs), which will ultimately reduce patient access to care in communities across the nation. On behalf of the over 461,000 NPs nationwide, we urge Congress to pass this legislation and send it to the President for his signature.”**

“Advanced practice nurses and midwives are essential to addressing our nation’s worsening maternity care crisis, particularly in rural, underserved, and low-resource communities where too many families already struggle to access perinatal care,” said Peter Johnson, CNM, PhD, FACNM, FAAN, President of the American College of Nurse-Midwives. **“The *Nursing is a Professional Degree Act* is critical to ensuring current and future nursing and midwifery students can continue accessing the federal loan support necessary to complete rigorous graduate education programs that are required for entry to practice in the profession. At a time when hospitals are closing labor and delivery units and maternity care deserts are expanding across America, Congress must invest in the workforce that delivers the lion’s share of health care to vulnerable communities. We applaud the bipartisan efforts of Senator Merkley and Senator Wicker for their leadership to protect educational pathways for the next generation of advanced practice nurses and midwives.”**

“On behalf of the American Association of Nurse Anesthesiology (AANA), we thank Sens. Merkley and Wicker for introducing this critical legislation to fix the Education Department’s harmful and misinformed student loan rulemaking that will threaten advanced nursing education,” said AANA President Jeff Molter, MSN, MBA, CRNA. **“The Department’s refusal to rightfully classify Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA) and other Advanced Practice Registered Nursing (APRN) degrees as professional degrees, despite meeting all the statutory criteria, will unnecessarily harm the healthcare workforce pipeline by putting graduate education out of reach for many qualified nurses, and will worsen provider shortages.**

“The Department of Education’s federal student loan regulations fail to treat nursing as the professional discipline it is, putting the financial futures of pediatric advanced practice nurses at risk and jeopardizing the specialized care that children and families across the country depend on,” said National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners President Dr. Felesia Bowen. **“NAPNAP strongly supports congressional action to correct this harmful rule, and we commend Senators Merkley and Wicker for their bipartisan commitment to advancing this bill and protecting the next generation of pediatric nursing professionals.”**

“We thank Senators Merkley and Wicker for their leadership in introducing the *Nursing is a Professional Degree Act*,” said Phyllis Polk Johnson, DNP, APRN, FNP-BC, FNAP, NCSBN Board of Directors President. **“Boards of nursing are charged with a mandate to protect the public, which includes ensuring patients have access to safe nursing care and that the future nursing workforce is prepared with quality nursing education. By restricting access to federal student loan support for advanced nursing education, the Department’s policy is misaligned with that mandate. We urge Congress to act promptly to correct this misalignment and ensure federal student loan programs fully support the advanced nursing clinicians and nurse faculty essential to meeting the nation’s health care needs.”**

“The Department of Education’s regulations threaten to undermine the pipeline of nursing talent that our health care system depends on, making it harder for nursing students to become the advanced practitioners, educators, and researchers America needs. These rules must not stand,” said National League for Nursing President and CEO Dr. Beverly Malone. **“The NLN is grateful for the bipartisan leadership of Senators Merkley and Wicker in championing nursing education and working to guarantee that nursing students have access to the funding they need to build successful careers and meet the health care needs of our nation.”**

In addition to Merkley and Wicker, the bipartisan *Nursing is a Professional Degree Act* is co-sponsored by U.S. Senators Cynthia Lummis (R-WY), Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), and Susan Collins (R-ME).

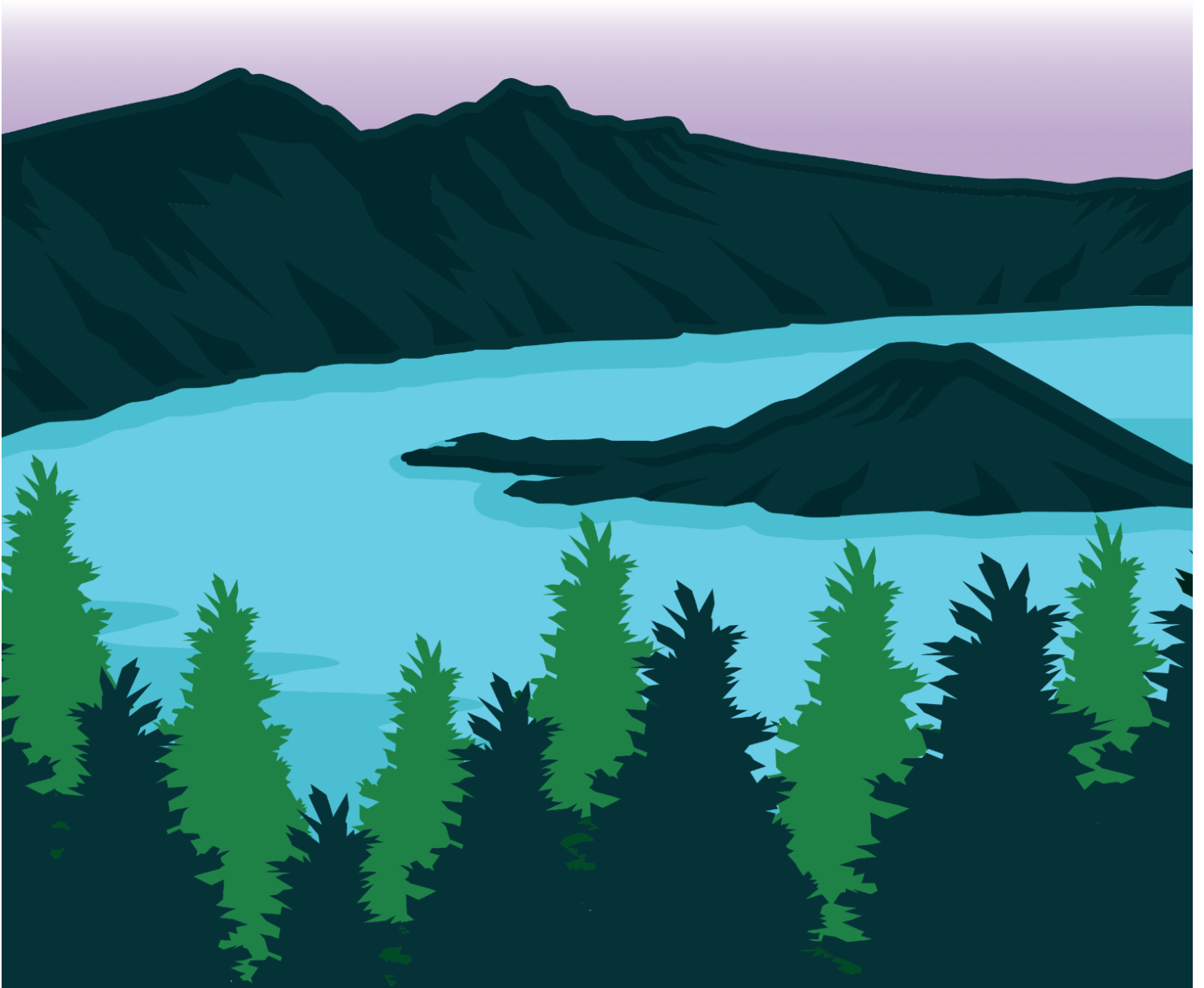
A bipartisan companion bill was introduced in the House of Representatives.

Full text of the *Nursing is a Professional Degree Act* as introduced in the Senate can be found by clicking **here** (<https://www.merkley.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/Nursing-is-a-Professional-Degree-Act.pdf>).

 **English**

This press release has been updated.

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