

Professional Student Degree Act (H.R. 6718)

Student loan and financial aid policy has implications for meeting the workforce needs to address our nation's health care crisis. Recent federal loan changes may exclude nutrition and dietetics degree programs from higher federal loan limits allowable for "professional" degrees. This would increase financial strain, discourage entry into the field, and exacerbate workforce shortages in registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs), critical health professionals.

What is an RDN?

RDNs are credentialed nutrition practitioners who have completed:

- An accredited bachelor's degree (or higher) in dietetics
- 1,200+ hours of supervised practice
- The national Registration Examination for Dietitians

To maintain the credential, RDNs must also secure 75+ hours of continuing education every five years.

Becoming an RDN requires significant educational and financial investment. These requirements often make it difficult for aspiring RDNs to complete their education without financial support, frequently resulting in significant student loan debt which can create barriers to entering and remaining in the profession.

Recent federal changes to student loan and financial aid policy, particularly under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, have intensified concerns for dietetics students. The law introduces stricter borrowing caps for graduate education and ties higher loan limits to a narrow definition of "professional degree."

Under current policy:

- Programs that do not qualify as "professional degrees" are limited to lower federal loan caps (\$20,500/year and \$100,000 total).
- Dietetics-related graduate programs, including those required for RDN credentialing, are at risk of being excluded from the higher borrowing category.
- The elimination of Grad PLUS loans reduces access to funding that previously helped cover full educational costs.

These changes create substantial financial barriers to entering the dietetics workforce, particularly for students from lower-income backgrounds. Access to adequate financial aid is essential for sustaining and growing the RDN workforce. Without it, current financial challenges may:

- Shrink the pipeline of future RDNs.
- Reduce diversity within the profession.
- Worsen already significant RDN workforce shortages.

Insufficient financial support prevents many qualified students from entering the field, exacerbating competent nutrition care. This is not just a financial aid issue; it is a critical health care workforce issue.

Support the Professional Student Degree Act

The Professional Student Degree Act (H.R. 6718) is bipartisan legislation introduced by Representative Mike Lawler that aims to address gaps created by recent federal student loan reforms. The bill ensures that certain graduate programs, particularly in health professions, are properly classified as professional degrees for federal loan eligibility. **The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics supports H.R. 6718 and strongly urges that “Nutrition and Dietetics” be added to the bill.**

The Professional Student Degree Act:

- Expands the definition of “professional degree” to include additional health professions.
- Restores higher federal loan limits for students enrolled in qualifying programs.
- Ensures graduate programs required for licensure and credentialing are appropriately classified and funded.

Impact for RDNs and Other Health Professionals

Many RDNs and advanced-degree nutritionists rely on access to federal financial aid to complete their professional education and serve communities nationwide. For aspiring RDNs, this legislation is crucial because it would ensure access to federal loans for attaining a master’s degree, the minimum degree requirement to be an RDN. The bill would help ensure students complete the education necessary for licensure and contribute to a much needed workforce to improve public health outcomes.

About Us

Representing more than 112,000 credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners, the Academy is the world’s largest organization of food and nutrition professionals.

For more information from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, please contact govaffairs@eatright.org.

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