

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

January 12, 2026

The Honorable Linda E. McMahon
Secretary of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary McMahon:

As the Department of Education and the Reimagining and Improving Student Education (RISE) Committee work to redefine the definition of a “professional degree,” we urge you to consider the explicit inclusion of mental health, behavioral health, and substance use disorder professionals within the definition of “professional degree” for the purposes of the new federal student loan limits. We believe it is essential that mental health, behavioral health, and substance use disorder professionals be recognized alongside other health professionals to ensure that communities across the nation have access to timely and quality mental and behavioral health care services from qualified providers.

The United States is in the midst of a mental health crisis, and we currently do not have enough providers to meet the needs of our communities. In fact, more than 163 million Americans currently live in a Mental Health Professional Shortage area.¹ By 2037, the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis (NCHWA) projects a shortage of over 400,000 mental, behavioral, and addiction treatment providers.²

Excluding graduate degrees in social work, mental health counseling, addiction counseling, marriage and family therapy, nursing, school counseling, and other mental and behavioral health professions from the “professional degree” category could limit access to loans and funding for students pursuing these vital careers and further exacerbate workforce shortages and wait times for those seeking mental and behavioral health services.

Given the current and projected workforce shortages of mental health and behavioral health providers—and the potential implications for access to care if students cannot secure higher federal loan limits—we respectfully urge the Department and the RISE Committee to reconsider the classification of mental and behavioral health graduate programs, recognizing them as professional degree programs and essential health and human services pathways.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

¹ <https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/shortage-areas/dashboard>

² <https://www.csg.org/2024/10/10/mental-health-matters-addressing-behavioral-health-workforce-shortages/>

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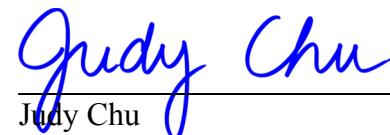
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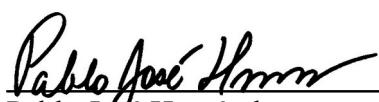
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