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Reclassifying Social Work Degrees Will Harm Students, Communities, and the Profession


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NEWS

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*On Friday, January 30, the U.S. Department of Education released their final proposed rule defining what constitutes a "professional degree." Their definition does not include social work, which has historically been recognized as a professional degree. In response, the member organizations of the Social Work Leadership Roundtable released the statement below. **CSWE members will be provided with guidance during the week of February 1, 2026, on how to add their voice to this ongoing issue.***

Together, the organizations representing the Social Work Leadership Roundtable urge the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to include social work in its proposed definition of professional degrees. This reclassification is not a matter of semantics.  This decision is far more than a semantic distinction—it carries significant consequences for students, communities, and public systems nationwide.

Across the United States, social workers are vital to child welfare, behavioral health, schools, healthcare, and community systems—sectors already facing critical workforce shortages. In fact, professional social workers make up the largest segment of the mental health workforce in the United States. Reclassifying social work as a non-professional degree would further strain these systems through limiting students' access to the federal loans needed to pursue an education,

weaken public systems and increase taxpayer costs.

If fewer students can afford to earn a Master of Social Work (MSW), workforce shortages will deepen. Agencies will face higher recruitment and turnover costs, reduced continuity of care, and increased reliance on costly contract labor. Shortages of clinicians providing therapy, crisis intervention, school-based services, substance use treatment, and community-based care will grow—resulting in longer wait times and diminished access to culturally responsive services, particularly in rural, low-income, and underserved communities. To strengthen, not weaken, the behavioral health workforce, ED must include social work in the final definition of professional degrees. Maintaining appropriate federal loan access for MSW students and expanding federal funding opportunities that make social work education attainable are essential to upholding a strong and effective workforce.

Equally important is strengthening pathways into social work education, including expanding access to federal grants, training programs, and loan repayment opportunities, is essential to ensuring an equitable and diverse workforce. Access to essential funding streams such as Pell Grants, the Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training (BHWET) Program, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) scholarship and loan repayment initiatives, and other federal supports, must be strengthened and expanded, not constrained.

Signed by the Members of the Social Work Leadership Roundtable:

- Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Programs (BPD)
 - Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB)
 - Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)
 - Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE)
 - Grand Challenges of Social Work
 - National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (NADD)
 - National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW)
 - National Association of Social Workers (NASW)
 - Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR)
 - Social Work Collective to Advance Research (SCoAR)
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