



## Highlights from the AANP/AANMC Town Hall on Federal Education Policies that Imperil the Future of Naturopathic Medicine

In a recent Town Hall held on January 13, 2026, leadership from the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians (AANP) and the [Association of Accredited Naturopathic Medical Colleges](#) (AANMC) gathered to address urgent federal policy changes threatening the naturopathic medical profession. The following is a summary of the critical updates regarding student loans, professional degree definitions, and workforce pipelines discussed during the event.

### **The Landscape: Fast-Moving Federal Changes**

The current challenges facing the profession arose from a rapid shift in federal priorities. The Administration is moving quickly to cut the federal budget by dramatically reducing government spending on student loans, academic research, and healthcare.

The Department of Education is currently focused on "tough love" measures, prioritizing shorter degrees perceived as having high "return on investment" while accepting that some schools and degrees may disappear as "collateral damage." Consequently, the profession is navigating multiple overlapping policy threats simultaneously, including changes to GradPLUS loans, degree definitions, accreditation reform, tariffs and accountability metrics.

### **Timeline of Key Threats: OBBB, RISE, and AHEAD**

The Town Hall outlined the progression of these policy disruptions through several key phases:

#### 1. The "One Big Beautiful Bill" (OBBB) and Loan Caps

When the reconciliation bill passed, it eliminated GradPLUS loans (with grandfathering for students who have active GradPlus loans as of 6/30/26) and established loan caps for graduate and professional degrees. While the statutory language for "professional degrees" in the bill was broad enough to include Naturopathic Doctors (NDs), the implementation of this law by the Department of Education has created significant risks.

#### 2. The RISE Negotiated Rulemaking

Confusion has surrounded the "RISE" committee process, which was tasked with defining which programs qualify as a "professional degree" for purposes of student loan caps. Despite NDs being recognized as a professional degree by the Department of Education for over 20 years, the negotiated rulemaking committee—which lacked representation from health professions—reached consensus on a draft rule that narrows this definition, and drew from a definition from the 1990's. This draft language currently excludes NDs and many other licensed health professions (PA, PT, NP, social work, OT, public health and other professions) from the "professional degree" designation.

### 3. The AHEAD Negotiated Rulemaking

Perhaps most concerning is the newly convened "AHEAD" committee, which is establishing accountability metrics. The Department of Education presented data projecting a 98.1% failure rate for all master's degree integrative medicine programs under the proposed metrics. These metrics disadvantage small, prevention-focused professions with high numbers of self-employed practitioners and female demographics. If implemented unchanged, these rules could restrict federal student loan access and potentially decimate the ND pipeline within three years.

## Strategic Response and Coalition Building

Leadership emphasized that AANMC and AANP have been engaged in proactive advocacy since October 2024, well before the administration change. This strategy has been multi-layered:

- **Legal & Agency Engagement:** Formal letters were submitted to the Department of Education and the HHS Secretary.
- **Broad Coalitions:** The organizations are working with the Federation of Associations of Schools for the Health Professions (FASHP), the American Council on Education (ACE), the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) and an informal coalition of nearly 70 organizations excluded from the professional degree definition.
- **Congressional Pressure:** As a parallel strategy, advocacy has shifted to Congress to clarify legislative intent and introduce legislation that would 'fix' this issue. There are currently five pieces of legislation and the interprofessional coalition is reviewing the best possible solution. Seven thousand (7,000) emails have already been sent through the AANP to Congressional offices to ensure NDs remain on the radar.

## Proactive Profession-wide Efforts to Decrease Cost of Education

AANMC explained that their committees of school deans and presidents have been working on proactive ways to reduce the cost of education for years before the Trump Administration was inaugurated, and before these changes at the Department of Education began. Proposed changes to curriculum and time to practice are not just school decisions, but require negotiations with CNME and NABNE/NPLEX boards for authorization. Over the last two years, AANMC has proposed the following to lower education costs:

- **CNME standards proposals:** Five have been submitted, with two accepted and three in public comment period. Proposals currently under consideration would allow for greater curricular flexibility while maintaining educational rigor, including opportunities to reduce overall time-to-degree and living expense costs where appropriate.
- **NABNE proposal** to allow earlier eligibility to take NPLEX (i.e., before graduation), enabling more rapid licensure eligibility and graduates to enter supervised practice or residency sooner. The proposal included information regarding how this ask is consistent with existing practices in other professions, inclusive of guard rails and feasibility considerations. (NABNE has thus far declined the proposal, which will need to be appealed).
- Exploration of accelerated and alternative educational pathways that preserve outcomes while reducing total cost of attendance (i.e., accelerated three-year tracks similar to [MD accelerated curriculum](#)).
- Ongoing collaboration with deans and academic leaders to identify efficiencies in curriculum and clinical education that reduce redundancy without compromising competencies.

## When Would Student Access Be Affected?

If the definition of Professional Degree is not revised to be more inclusive or stalled through litigation, it would impact student loan accessibility beginning June 2026. *Current and prospective students are advised to speak regularly with the Financial Aid departments at the schools they are considering, as student loan caps are highly dependent on your unique situation (loans you took out for undergraduate, how much you've taken out since undergraduate, etc).*

If the AHEAD committee accountability measures are not revised or paused, it could impact student loan accessibility beginning in 2028 for programs that fail the accountability metrics.

## Do These Changes Impact Current Doctors?

No. The Department of Education released an [FAQ](#) which stated “definition of a ‘professional degree’ is an internal definition used by the Department to distinguish among programs that qualify for higher loan limits, not a value judgement about the importance of programs. It has no bearing on whether a program is professional in nature or not.” It is not anticipated at this time that these education-related changes would impact licensure, tax liability, malpractice or business insurance, or health insurance coverage of NDs.

## Is It Too Late?

**No.** The Town Hall speakers clarified that **no final rule has been issued**. We are currently in the most influential phase of the process. The Department of Education is legally required to respond to substantive public comments before finalizing rules, and Congressional oversight remains a powerful leverage point.

## Immediate Call to Action

The profession must move with unity and speed. Visit the AANP's [Protect ND Education](#) page for more information and updates.

### 1. Prepare for the Public Comment Period (Anticipated January 2026)

This is the most critical step. The Department will soon post the proposed draft language for public comment.

- **Action:** When the alert is issued, encourage patients, colleagues, and friends to submit comments. Stay on message. Volume matters.

### 2. Contact Congress

Congressional pressure is creating momentum for a legislative fix. We need to ensure federal policy supports access to accredited, licensed healthcare professions.

- **Action:** Participate in [AANP Action Alerts](#) to email your representatives.

### 3. Unify the Message

Assumptions or speculation can harm the effort. Please use the unified talking points provided by the AANP and AANMC when action alerts are issued. If you don't know, ask. \*Key messages will be updated when final rule language is released.

- **Key Message:** "Federal student loan and accountability policies must not restrict access to licensed, accredited healthcare professions that meet professional degree standards and serve critical public health needs."

### 4. Support the Defense

- **Action:** [Become an AANP member](#) or ensure your colleagues join. Membership dues fund the advocacy required to fight this battle.
- **Action:** Donate to the [AANP Foundation Education Advocacy fund](#).

**Stay engaged.** This is a rapidly evolving and shifting discussion, and the future of the naturopathic workforce depends on our collective action in the coming weeks.