

# The Big, Beautiful, and Befuddling Bill: What it Means to the Future of Academic Accessibility

**Hannah Oh** | Opinion

On July 4, 2025, President Donald Trump signed the *One Big Beautiful Bill Act*, outlining his goals to reshape federal spending policies during his second term. Among its many reforms are significant changes to federal student aid.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2021, approximately 18.6 million students were pursuing a degree in higher education.<sup>1</sup> Around 3.2 million of these students, or approximately 16%, were enrolled in a post-baccalaureate program.<sup>2</sup> Although borrowing limits for bachelor's students remain unchanged, the legislation introduces drastic federal loan reforms for post-baccalaureate students. Starting on July 1, 2026, post-baccalaureate students will no longer have access to Grad PLUS loans. This system provides federal loans covering the total annual tuition for all post-baccalaureate programs.

The new legislation separates post-baccalaureate students into two categories. These two categories are (1) graduate students, who are students enrolled in a program to obtain a specialization or expertise in a specific field, and (2) professional students, who are students enrolled in a program of study to receive a license for a specific career.

The legislation's new loan guidelines are that for an academic year, graduate students may borrow up to \$20,000, and professional students may borrow up to \$50,000. In addition to an annual limit, the guidelines include that graduate students may only borrow up to \$100,000, and professional students may only borrow up to \$200,000 during their lifetime. These changes raise concerns as both graduate and professional programs' tuition and fees can exceed \$120,000 *annually*.<sup>3 4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). Undergraduate Enrollment. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved [date], from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cha>.

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). Postbaccalaureate Enrollment. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved Sept 1, 2025, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/chb>.

<sup>3</sup> Harvard University. (2025). Annual Cost of Attendance | MBA. Retrieved from Harvard Business School website: <https://www.hbs.edu/mba/financial-aid/tuition-assistance/cost-of-attendance>

<sup>4</sup> Columbia University. (n.d.). J.D. and LL.M. Tuition and Fees. Retrieved from [www.law.columbia.edu](http://www.law.columbia.edu) website: <https://www.law.columbia.edu/about/departments/financial-aid/jd-and-llm-tuition-and-fees>

The new stringency of federal student loans may alter the future workforce, as it decreases accessibility for individuals from all backgrounds to pursue higher education. When examining former policies, however, federal student loan programs were created to promote access to institutions. For example, the Guaranteed Student Loan Program of 1965 responded to predictions that tuition would continue rising drastically.<sup>5 6</sup> Consequently, generous federal loans and forgiveness programs have contributed to the overall increase of national debt, providing reason for the One Big Beautiful Bill Act's strict federal loan policies.

Therefore, whether these reforms will be beneficial remains uncertain. Additional concerns include that while federal loan limits may reduce federal financial burdens, they increase personal financial burdens; this matters as increased stringency of federal student loans decreases the likelihood that professional and graduate students will pursue lower-income jobs—essential jobs that often center around social justice and advocacy. For example, many law students often find themselves debating whether to pursue a higher-paying corporate role or a lower-paying public interest role during their final year.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, the *One Big Beautiful Bill Act* underscores the policy dilemma of how much the federal government bears the responsibility of higher education while simultaneously managing other economic, political, and social obligations. The bill also questions how the government can best operate under the foundation that it exists to serve “We The People,”<sup>8</sup> or its citizens, sparking conversation on its responsibility and future.

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<sup>5</sup> Mumper, Michael. "The Affordability of Public Higher Education: 1970–90." *The Review of Higher Education*, vol. 16 no. 2, 1993

<sup>6</sup> Roger Roots, *The Student Loan Debt Crisis: A Lesson in Unintended Consequences*, 29 SW. U. L. REV. 501 (2000).

<sup>7</sup> Roger Roots, *The Student Loan Debt Crisis: A Lesson in Unintended Consequences*, 29 SW. U. L. REV. 501 (2000).

<sup>8</sup> Constitution of the United States, U.S. SENATE: CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES (2023), <https://www.senate.gov/about/origins-foundations/senate-and-constitution/constitution.htm> (last visited Aug 20, 2025).