Through the Lens of Equality:
How Redefinition Creates Exclusion in American Democracy

The Equal Protection Clause is not decorative language. It is one of the few constitutional barriers between democracy and legalized hierarchy. When the Fourteenth Amendment declares that no state shall "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws," it demands that government power never be used to build caste systems under the cover of policy (US Const., amend. XIV, sec. 1). That is why recent federal efforts to narrow what counts as a professional degree should alarm anyone who believes democracy requires more than voting. The Equal Protection Clause remains a cornerstone of American democracy because it protects against a quieter danger: hierarchy constructed through language that only pretends to be neutral or equal. From Reconstruction to the present, its promise has been that the state may not sort people, or the work they do, into ranks of worth. The fight over which degrees count as *professional* is the newest test of whether that promise still holds.

Beginning July 1, 2026, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act allows students in designated professional degree programs to borrow more than twice as much as other graduate students. To determine who qualifies, the Department of Education limited the category to eleven fields, excluding advanced practice nurses, physician assistants, and physical therapists. The American Hospital Association warns that this change in language could worsen workforce shortages and "result in longer wait times for patients, delayed diagnoses and increased emergency visits, ultimately raising costs and straining health systems" (American Hospital Association). This change in language is a political act of devaluation that limits access to opportunity and care. Historically, women-centered professions have been treated as less prestigious, even while society depends on them to function. Nursing is the clearest example. Nurses are indispensable to

patient care and form a vital backbone of the American health care system. Excluding nursing from the professional category is dangerous. The consequences will be felt most acutely in rural and underserved communities where health care provider shortages already limit access to care. In places such as Yakima and across rural Washington, these professionals are often the first and sometimes only point of contact for patients seeking health services. The violence lies in the consequences: fewer providers, fewer opportunities, and fewer pathways into the professions society needs most.

The Equal Protection Clause is significant here because discrimination often hides inside definitions. In *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, the Supreme Court struck down a San Francisco ordinance that was neutral on paper but was enforced almost exclusively against Chinese laundry owners and warned that even a fair law becomes unconstitutional when it is "administered…with an evil eye and an unequal hand" (Yick Wo v. Hopkins, 373). A law does not need to announce hostility to produce unequal harm. The most enduring forms of inequality persist through definitions that determine whose work is valued and who is excluded. The threat of inequality disguised as neutrality remains with us today, particularly when government classifications elevate traditionally male-dominated or historically elite professions while diminishing fields associated with women and caregiving. The result is structural inequality masquerading as fiscal restraint.

Justice William O. Douglas understood this danger. In *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections*, he wrote that "wealth, like race, creed, or color, is not germane to one's ability to participate intelligently in the [democratic] process" (Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections, 668). A student's access to advanced health training should not depend on whether their family has money, whether private lenders approve them, or whether their chosen profession has been

politically ranked as worthy. When public financing is restricted, the burden falls hardest on first-generation students, working-class students, students of color, and women entering essential care professions.

As a first-generation Mexican American and the first in my family to pursue a professional degree, I understand what these barriers mean. Professional education is a tangible pathway into economic mobility and representation in fields where our communities are still underserved. I am pursuing dentistry, a field still recognized as professional, but I cannot accept a definition of professionalism that protects my path while diminishing the other providers my future patients will also need.

A functioning society is not just sustained by physicians, lawyers, and dentists. It is held together by the people who deliver babies, rehabilitate injuries, care for our elders, respond to crises, and sit beside patients when institutions feel cold and unreachable. To cut off access to these professions is to weaken the civic body itself. *Brown v. Board of Education* teaches that education cannot be separated from equal citizenship (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). When access to education is narrowed by wealth, status, gendered assumptions, or political definitions, democracy becomes smaller. It begins to serve only those already positioned to enter power.

The Equal Protection Clause remains a cornerstone of contemporary American democracy because it forces the country to answer one question again and again: who is being excluded by the rules we pretend are neutral? The answer today is clear. Redefining essential health care degrees as less than professional is an attack on students, workers, patients, and the communities most dependent on accessible care. In rural communities like Yakima, where provider shortages already strain the health care system, the effects of this exclusion will extend

beyond students and into society at large. It is an attack on working-class mobility. Democracy cannot survive on symbolic equality while policy engineers unequal access. Equal protection must mean that government cannot arbitrarily sort professions, students, and communities into ranks of worth. A society that devalues care, devalues life. A democracy that restricts who may enter the professions that sustain the public has already begun to betray the public.

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