



SAMPLE OP-ED:

State Support for Professional Licensure

When entering the workforce, aspiring professionals often face a daunting last hurdle to practicing in their profession—a licensure examination.

The stakes are high, as performance on the exam determines whether individuals can enter their desired profession. The investment of time and money in a postsecondary degree may not fully pay off unless the individual can pass the licensing exam required for certain jobs. As a result, the exam not only determines the employment prospects for an individual, but also their financial security.

There are typically costs associated with preparing for and taking a licensure exam; but unfortunately, because these exams take place after graduation (and thus after students have access to student loans), there is usually only limited financial support available to help cover expenses, such as exam preparation services and living costs. And because in some fields, preparation for the licensure exam is a time-consuming exercise, employment may be inadvisable, if not impossible.

Financial support for individuals preparing for and taking licensure exams is needed, particularly for those with demonstrated financial need. This support could take the form of grant aid or affordable loans. The private loan market is not a viable source of financial support, given the low-wealth backgrounds of those most in need. And excessive employment and financial stress during the preparation period can increase the chances of exam failure among otherwise well-qualified individuals.

[State] could ease the barrier to entry for critical occupations and ensure important positions do not go unfilled by providing necessary financial support.

According to BLS, national labor force participation and employment rates are higher among individuals with a professional license than among those without one. This trend holds across all levels of educational attainment.

In addition, licensed professionals earn higher income, even within the same field. For example, at the national level, the median earnings of licensed members of the legal field (e.g., lawyers) are significantly higher than unlicensed members. Higher incomes lead to many positive outcomes, including higher tax revenue. [State] could see a direct (and rather fast) return on its investment in these aspiring professionals.

Lastly, support for professionals seeking licensure can help increase access to critical services. In the healthcare field, there is significant concern that there will not be enough practitioners to meet the future demands of care, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. The shortage of qualified practitioners can affect rural communities where access to care may be many miles away, as well as urban centers where patients may experience long wait-times for care.

Additionally, many of our fellow citizens are unable to gain adequate legal representation when they need it. According to the Legal Services Corporation, 86 percent of low-income Americans with civil legal issues in 2017 received inadequate or no legal representation, due largely to an overburdened legal aid system. In a nation governed by the rule of law, there must be robust access to justice.

For these reasons, [State] should provide financial support to individuals pursuing a professional license. This could be established, for example, through grant aid or an affordable state loan program with more favorable terms than the private market. These funds could be conditional on certain requirements, such as requiring recipients to demonstrate financial need or work in underserved communities for a specific length of time after licensure.

Investments in our workforce are investments in the future of [State], which will help spur economic growth, support working professionals in our state, and ensure everyone has access to critical services.