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The Upstate and H-1B Visa Applications

Labor markets are constantly evolving as technological innovation reshapes the skills required by employers. According to the World Economic Forum, approximately 39 percent of workers' core skills are expected to change by 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2025). Likewise, Lightcast reports that the average U.S. occupation experienced a 32 percent change in required skills between 2021 and 2024, while occupations in the top quartile of skill disruption experienced a 75 percent skills shift during that same period (Lightcast, 2025). These findings illustrate the rapid pace of workforce transformation and the challenges employers face in recruiting workers with current, in-demand skills.

As a result, employers may find that the domestic labor market does not provide a sufficient supply of workers with the specialized knowledge or technical expertise needed to fill critical positions. In these circumstances, employers may recruit qualified international talent through the H-1B visa program. To do so, employers must first file a Labor Condition Application (LCA) with the U.S. Department of Labor. After the LCA is certified, the employer may petition U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for H-1B classification on behalf of a prospective employee. Through the LCA, employers certify that they will:

- Pay the H-1B worker at least the prevailing wage (or the actual wage paid to similarly employed workers, whichever is higher)
- Provide working conditions that will not adversely affect similarly employed U.S. workers
- Notify employees of the filing of the Labor Condition Application
- Certify that no strike or lockout exists in the relevant occupational classification at the place of employment

The H-1B program is currently the subject of considerable debate in both Congress and the Executive Branch. Policymakers have proposed a variety of reforms, including increasing filing fees, raising wage requirements for H-1B workers, modifying the visa allocation process, and strengthening oversight of employer participation. At the same time, several proposed administrative changes have been challenged in federal court, leaving the future direction of the program uncertain. As a result, the H-1B program continues to evolve through both legislative and judicial action — see “Policy Note” below for the specific initiatives currently under consideration.

Against this backdrop, this Upstate Talent Brief examines how employers across the Upstate region utilize the H-1B program. By analyzing employer petitions, occupations, and industry trends, the brief provides insight into the role international talent plays in addressing regional workforce needs.

In the year spanning April 2025 to March 2026, 281 firms across the Upstate filed Labor Condition Applications seeking approval to hire 897 employees through the H-1B program (Lightcast, Labor Conditions Report, April 2025 – March 2026). The average of the median proposed salaries listed in these applications was $113,070, with a high salary of $341,000 and a low salary of $26,690.

The chart to the right shows the number of workers requested by the ten organizations with the largest H-1B demand across all sectors of the Upstate economy.



Higher education warrants separate attention given the data presented in the table below. Clemson University and other Upstate institutions are frequently a significant factor in Upstate demand for H-1B workers. In total, higher education accounted for 95 workers requested. In most cases, the proposed median salary at these institutions is below the minimum wage levels currently under discussion in Congress (see below). Prisma Health University Medical Group, although included and highlighted in the table, is not a university. It is a physician practice that supports an academic medicine mission in the Upstate by serving as faculty for residency fellowships and medical education. Removing Prisma Health University Medical Group, a clear outlier at $340,486, yields an average proposed median salary of $67,657 across the remaining ten institutions.

Institution	Workers Requested	Proposed Median Salary
Clemson University	68	$72,600
Prisma Health University Medical Group	6	$340,486
Wofford College	5	$72,141
University of South Carolina	4	$90,785
Furman University	3	$100,000
Presbyterian College	3	$64,000
Lander University	2	$79,500
Limestone University	1	$26,690
Anderson University	1	$71,807
Erskine College	1	$40,000
Spartanburg Community College	1	$59,051
Source: Lightcast, Labor Conditions Report, April 2025 – March 2026		

Turning to industry sector analysis, Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services led the Upstate with 249 requested H-1B workers, accounting for nearly 28 percent of all workers requested during the April 2025–March 2026 period. Together, Professional, Scientific and Technical Services, Manufacturing, Educational Services, and Finance and Insurance accounted for 594 requested workers, approximately 66 percent of the regional total,

demonstrating that H-1B demand in the Upstate is concentrated in a relatively small number of knowledge-intensive industries.

The table below presents the six largest industry sectors, which together account for 640 requested workers (71 percent of the regional total). The remaining industry sectors, not shown here, account for the other 257 workers requested (29 percent). With the exception of Educational Services and Health Care and Social Assistance, proposed median salaries across these leading sectors cluster within a relatively narrow range of approximately $100,000 to $103,000. Construction reported a somewhat higher proposed median salary of $130,000, while Health Care and Social Assistance stood apart at $239,200, reflecting the prevalence of highly compensated physician and specialty medical positions. Most remaining two-digit NAICS sectors generated relatively few H-1B requests. One notable exception was the "Unclassified Industry" category, which accounted for 179 requests (approximately 20 percent of the total) with a proposed median salary of $100,000.

Industry	Workers Requested	Proposed Median Salary
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	249	$100,877
Manufacturing	155	$103,094
Educational Services	98	$71,784
Finance and Insurance	92	$102,618
Construction	23	$130,000
Health Care and Social Assistance	23	$239,200
Source: Lightcast, Labor Conditions Report, April 2025 – March 2026		

Examining H-1B requests by occupation provides a clearer picture of the specialized talent sought by Upstate employers. Computer and Mathematical Occupations accounted for the largest share of the workers requested, followed by Architecture and Engineering Occupations. Together, these two STEM occupation groups represented approximately 55 percent of all H-1B requests during the April 2025–March 2026 period, underscoring the region's demand for highly skilled technical talent. Although beyond the scope of this brief, continued advances in artificial intelligence are likely to reshape demand for many computer and software-related occupations over time.

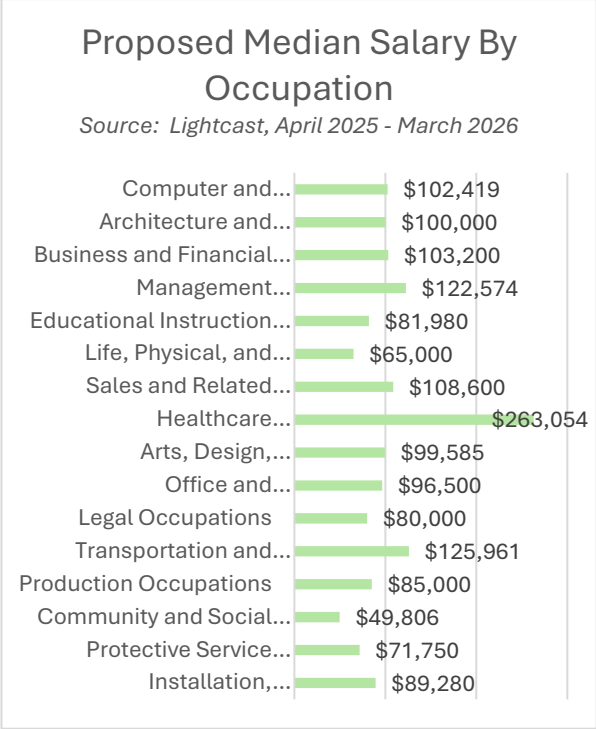
Currently, demand is concentrated among occupations that support software development, engineering, advanced manufacturing, information technology, and data-driven business operations. Additional requests were distributed across Management, Business and Financial Operations, Health Care Practitioners, Postsecondary Education, and selected Life, Physical, and Social Science occupations. Collectively, these patterns suggest that employers are using the H-1B program primarily to recruit specialized professional talent rather than to address broad-based labor shortages.

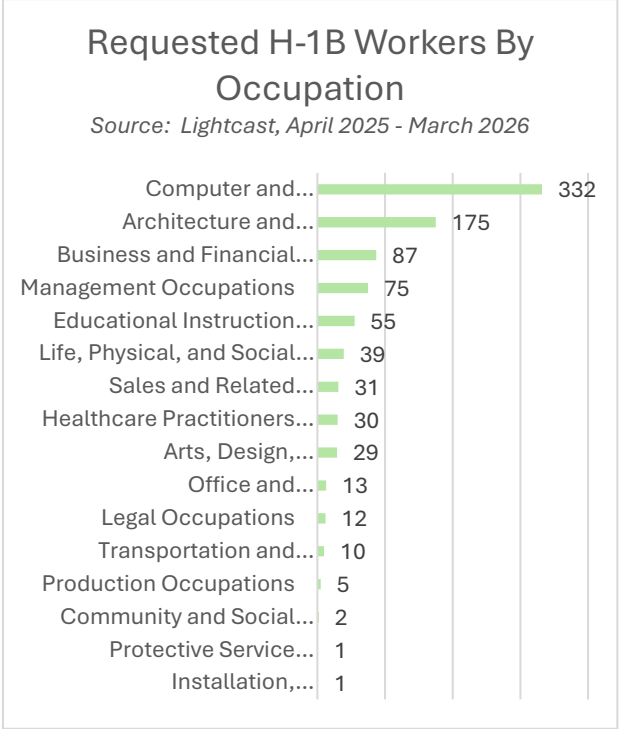
STEM Occupations Dominate

Nearly three out of every five H-1B workers requested by Upstate employers were concentrated in just two occupational groups—Computer and Mathematical Occupations and Architecture and Engineering Occupations.

The accompanying figures also illustrate meaningful differences in proposed median salaries across occupational groups. Health Care Practitioners reported the highest median salaries, reflecting the prevalence of physician and other specialty medical positions, while Computer and Mathematical Occupations and Architecture and Engineering Occupations combined relatively high salaries with the largest number of requested workers. This combination highlights the

importance of these occupations to the Upstate's innovation economy and their continued role in supporting advanced manufacturing, technology, engineering, and research-intensive industries.





Policy Note: Washington, H-1B Reform, and Upstate Talent Pipelines

The policy environment surrounding the H-1B program has become considerably more dynamic over the past year. Administrative rule changes, federal court decisions, increased enforcement activity, and multiple congressional reform proposals all have the potential to affect how employers recruit highly skilled international talent. Several of these changes have already taken effect, while others remain under judicial review or are still being considered by Congress.

As of August 2026, a federal district court has vacated the $100,000 fee on new H-1B petitions established by presidential proclamation, leaving the fee unenforceable while the case remains under appeal (PBS News, Littler). At the same time, the Department of Homeland Security has replaced the traditional random H-1B lottery with a wage-weighted selection process (Federal Register/DHS), and the U.S. Department of Labor has expanded enforcement efforts targeting Labor Condition Application violations, including employer debarments (U.S. Department of Labor, OIG).

Congress is also considering several proposals that could significantly reshape the H-1B program, although none has advanced beyond the committee process or been brought to a vote as of this writing. The bipartisan Grassley–Durbin *H-1B and L-1 Visa Reform Act* (S. 2928) includes several provisions affecting the H-1B program, including greater emphasis on higher-wage positions in visa allocation and expanded Department of Labor oversight and enforcement. Several House proposals, including H.R. 8443, would take a more restrictive approach by temporarily suspending new H-1B visas, substantially reducing the annual visa cap, eliminating the current master's degree exemption, and establishing significantly higher minimum wage requirements for certain petitions. While these

proposals differ in their specific approaches, they reflect a broader policy debate over the future size, structure, and oversight of the H-1B program.

Several of these policy proposals could have important implications for the Upstate. The region's largest sources of H-1B demand—Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services, Manufacturing, Higher Education, and Finance & Insurance—report proposed median salaries well below those in industries such as Health Care and Social Assistance. As a result, the new wage-weighted H-1B selection process could reduce the likelihood that many Upstate employers are selected relative to higher-paying employers nationally. The proposed House legislation would have an even greater impact. Among the employers highlighted in this brief, Prisma Health University Medical Group is the only organization reporting a proposed median salary above the potential $200,000 wage threshold. Likewise, Health Care and Social Assistance is the only industry profiled whose proposed median salary exceeds that level.

Lastly, the new 25,000 national cap – if approved – will likely bind talent pools significantly. During the 2025 – 2026 period evaluated in this report, the Upstate alone accounted for approximately 3.6% of that proposed total. Further, the 3-year pause may have substantial impact on the Upstate. If H-1B visa requests hold at current levels, the Upstate may face additional challenges staffing many high-skill occupations. Across the 3-year pause period, the Upstate could lose access to approximately 2,700 potential H-1B workers. This magnifies the negative impact of increasing retirements and demographic concerns around low birthrates.

- 897 H-1B Workers requests across Upstate (April 2025 – March 2026

- Approximately 2,700 Upstate skilled workers are at risk over a 3-year period.

- Equal to 3.6% of proposed 25,000 cap (H.R. 8443)

While the future of the H-1B program remains uncertain, these proposals illustrate how changes in federal policy could significantly influence the Upstate's ability to recruit highly skilled international talent. Accordingly, the findings presented in this brief should be viewed as a snapshot of the Upstate during a period of significant policy transition rather than as a long-term baseline.

Concluding Point

While the H-1B program may continue to play an important role in helping employers recruit specialized talent, it represents only one component of a broader regional workforce strategy. The Upstate already has many of the foundational elements needed to respond to evolving talent needs, including research and regional universities, technical colleges, K–12 career pathways, apprenticeship programs, workforce development organizations, and strong industry partnerships. Annual initiatives such as the USC Upstate Talent Forum further strengthen this ecosystem by bringing together business, education, workforce, and government leaders to identify emerging workforce challenges, share promising practices, and promote collaborative solutions. As federal H-1B policies continue to evolve, continued investment in regional partnerships, incumbent worker upskilling and reskilling, and flexible, industry-aligned education and training programs may prove to be among the most effective long-term strategies for strengthening the Upstate's skilled talent pipeline.

Ultimately, and regardless of the direction of future federal policy, the long-term competitiveness of the Upstate depends not only on its ability to attract specialized talent from outside the region, but also on its continued success in developing, retaining, and upskilling the talent already living and working here (Upstate Talent Forum).

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