

Opinion: Demand for H-1B Visas High Among Program's Biggest Critics

by Neil G. Ruiz and Shyamali Choudhury

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In five years, the U.S. faces a shortfall of 230,000 advanced-degree workers in science, technology, engineer, and math since American students are not pursuing those fields in large enough numbers to fill the gap. Here Cyril Ramathal works in a Stanford stem cell lab.

Sens. **Chuck Grassley**, R-Iowa, and **Dick Durbin**, D-Ill., are among the harshest critics of the H-1B program, yet companies in their jurisdictions are among the highest requestors of H-1B workers in the United States, according to a [new Brookings study](#) released on Wednesday. The H-1B visa program is the largest, and one of the most contentious, temporary-worker programs for admitting high-skilled foreigners.

The states represented by these two senators contain 10 of the 106 high-demand metropolitan areas. Illinois and Iowa are ranked fifth and 26th among states for the number of requests for H-1B visas per 1,000 workers in 2010-11. Their metro areas are also ranked in the top four in the nation for having the highest demand for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics H-1B workers.

Despite this high demand, there is little nuanced understanding of demand for foreign high-skilled workers in their region. Much energy is focused on information-technology companies that use foreign temporary workers to supply high-skilled labor to large companies in need of project-specific work.

For example, Patni Americas hires H-1B workers to support State Farm in Bloomington, Ill. Critics of the H-1B program, including Grassley and Durbin, often accuse these companies of playing a role in outsourcing work abroad, while other positive elements of the program are often lost in the debate.

While IT services companies, such as Patni and IBM, are among the highest users of the program, many other types of companies are hiring foreign high-skilled workers—often significant anchors in their metropolitan economies.

For example, Iowa's largest employer, the University of Iowa, is driving the demand for foreign high-skilled workers, often requesting visas for researchers and professors in the School of Hydraulics and Engineering, one of the nation's top hydroscience research institutions. The university's Center for Computer-Aided Design in the College of Engineering also hires H-1B workers as computer scientists, engineers, and mathematicians to work on virtual soldier research.

In nearby Cedar Rapids, Rockwell Collins uses H-1B workers to help them develop and manufacture IT and aerospace systems. For these companies, H-1B workers are filling important research roles to help them develop leading innovations critical to America's national defense systems.

There is one more thing these employers must do to get an H-1B worker that is perhaps the least discussed part of the program: They pay visa fees, which are then dedicated to technical-skills training grants.

These competitive grants are not a quick or simple answer to the demand for these highly technical skills, because many of these employers cannot wait another two or 12 years for homegrown talent, but they are one element of a tougher long-term solution to developing a workforce that meets local employer needs.

Investment in education and workforce training for native workers is a critical component to addressing the demand for H-1B workers. To do this in a targeted and efficient manner, it is essential to begin with an accurate understanding what type of skills and occupations will be needed at the local level to match employer needs with existing workforce skills.

Grassley and Durbin have been fighting for H-1B reform for years by arguing for stricter regulation and greater oversight, a clear move to protect American jobs and wages. But with this tightened regulation, they may be making it harder for employers in their states to obtain the skilled workers needed to develop leading innovations.

Grassley just announced last week his removal of his hold on the Fairness of High-Skilled Immigrants Act that would remove per-country visa quotas for green cards, in exchange for reforming the H-1B visa program. Maybe Grassley, together with other Washington leaders, can now apply a more nuanced understanding of demand for high-skilled labor in their own regional economies so that the program can be reformed to work for their own regions and the entire nation in the long run.

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