

# First Jobs Institute

By Chris Pierce, Ed.D.

"First Jobs Institute" is a statewide grant conducted by the University of West Florida to research and market best practices for assisting youth (age 14-21) in obtaining their first job. The primary emphasis is on youth experiencing barriers to employment. Sponsored by Workforce Florida, this research specifically addresses four separate deliverables. The first requirement was to research and compile best practices by developing a comprehensive listing of all available literature and known best practices. Secondly, the Haas Center sponsored five major business association seminars as well as presented a workshop at the University of West Florida's Fort Walton Beach Campus on June 18<sup>th</sup> as the "learning laboratory" to demonstrate best practices. Third, the Haas Center has designed and administered an "Employer Survey" to over 3,700 employers throughout the State of Florida in an effort to identify barriers, attitudes, and success stories relating to youth and first time employment. Finally, the Haas Center developed a measurement system to evaluate the success of the program and "customer" satisfaction.

Why are youth important to Florida? Looking at the changing demographics of Florida, the Census 2000 figures show an aging workforce with the "baby boomers" preparing for retirement within the next few years. In addition, the number of possible workers that are now between the ages of 14-21 is significantly less than those currently in the workforce between 25-55 years of age (Figure 1). Where will Florida's future workforce come from?

Florida's Employment Age Population  
Census 2000

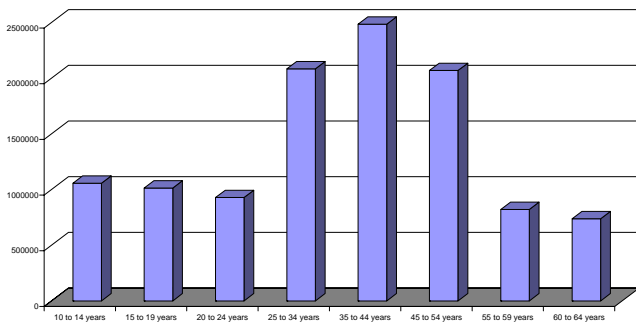


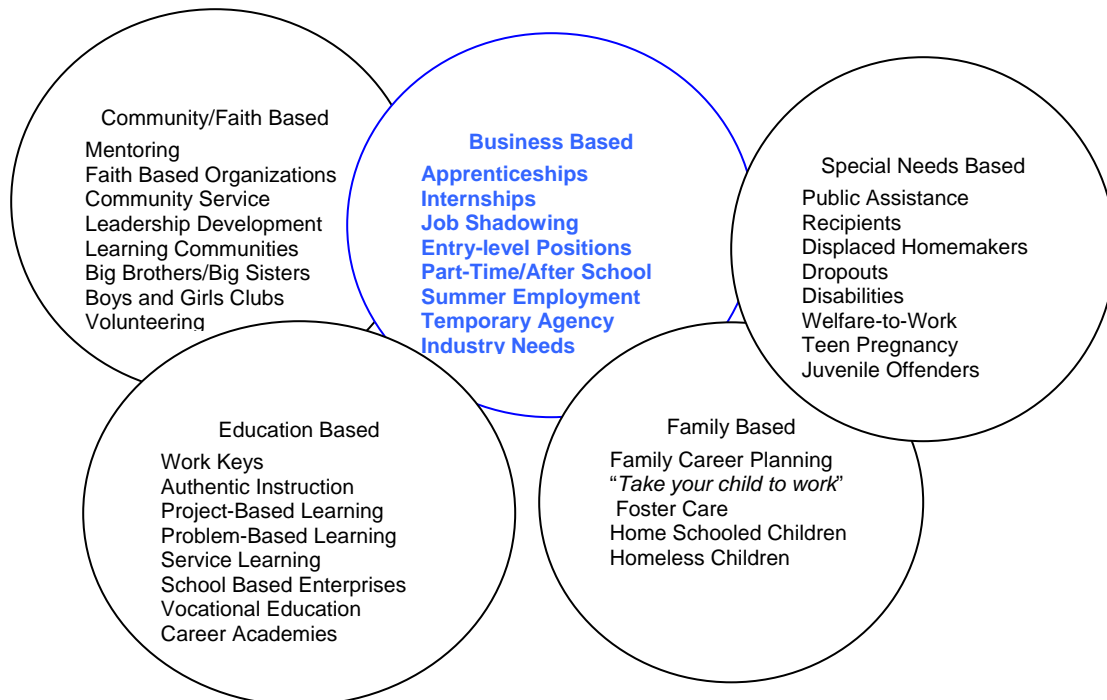
Figure 1. Florida's Employment Age Population

Research shows many youth enter the labor market in either casual or "freelancing" employment such as babysitting or lawn mowing services. In contrast, this study focused on meaningful employment opportunities characterized by on-going relationships between the employer and the youth/first-time employee. Studies researched have documented existing issues such as access to transportation, the intensity of working during the school year and hours during the school day that can be limiting factors in youth employment. According to the national "Report on the Youth Labor Force" (Nov 2000), in 1996-1998, over 2.9 million employees between the ages of 15-17 were employed during the school months while over 4 million were employed during the summertime. The child labor law provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act are designed to protect educational opportunities of youth and prohibit their employment in jobs, under conditions detrimental to their health and well-being (USDOL Child Labor FLSA, 2001). Development of strategies for expanding basic workplace skills and experiences of young people and first-time working adults through Florida (Workforce Florida, 2001) is the task for the First Jobs/First Wages Council in the State of Florida and a major focus of Frieda Sheffield, the new 1<sup>st</sup> Jobs/1<sup>st</sup> Wages Program Specialist.

Average wages of \$5.57/hr (1998 dollars) were reported for traditional youth employment primarily in the retail, wholesale, services, banking, and health care industries. "School-to-work programs" indicate four in every ten young persons participate in some type of program including job shadowing, school sponsored enterprise, tech prep, cooperative education, mentoring, internships, and apprenticeships. The Best Practices Framework (Figure 2) developed by the Haas Center is the research framework for identifying how these practices relate to different parts of our community such as the family, educational institutions, business, community/faith-based organizations, and special needs populations.



Figure 2.  
First Jobs  
Institute  
Framework for  
Best Practices



**What do Employers Say are the Barriers?**

Results from the Employer Survey indicate there are numerous barriers to employment for youth seeking first time employment. The most reported barriers were youth availability, dependability, attendance, work ethics, appearance, and experience as depicted in Figure 3. Comments from employers point out first-time youth job seekers are not as dependable as established employees, do not take responsibility for their actions and involvement in seeking positions, and do not have the work ethics employers demand. Lack of training in the high school system for life skills such as ethics, interviewing, first impressions, and hands-on training are some employer's recommendations as contributors to barriers experienced by youth seeking first time employment. Although more employers would like to participate in preparing students for first time jobs, involvement is limited for many reasons. These reasons include lack of funds to support positions, individuals deficient in minimum job qualifications, businesses needing individuals with "specialized" skills such as RNs, and businesses with limited opportunities for first time employees.

**Barriers To First Time Employment**

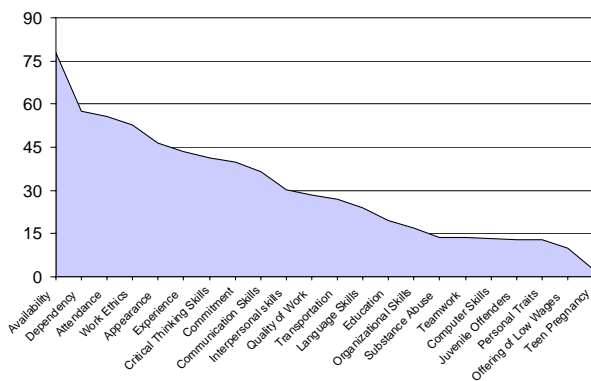


Figure 3. Barrier to First Time Employment

**What are the Advantages to Employees and Employers?**

Research has shown that employees benefit by learning and developing good customer relations skills, balancing their enthusiasm with reality and sustaining a positive attitude while on the job. Teamwork, multi-tasking skills, and even an awareness of good money management skills are critical in today's workplace.

On the other hand, employers gain numerous advantages by working with youth to develop their future human capital. They gain employees with the desired skills and expertise necessary for their organizations, provide youth with developing high levels of responsibility, and overall they develop a more qualified workforce.

In conclusion, certain key themes were prevalent not only in the literature but reported in the employer survey results and focus groups discussions. Overall, the more those employers provide time and commitment to youth programs, the more they can build the capacity of their future workforce. Youth have to understand the workplace, starting with small steps; once they gain confidence in these steps, then youth will take more responsibility. Employers who cannot provide the time intensive programs, such as internships and part-time work, can help by providing opportunities such as scholarships or tuition reimbursement so that these future quality employees can gain the skills along with required work experience. Employers will benefit when there is an investment in quality time and/or financial support to youth, with a positive return to their company bottom line along with building capacity of a skilled future workforce.

**What do Employers Say are the Most Supported and Effective Practices?**

While there are numerous barriers to first time employment for youth, many employers have developed and implemented effective practices that provide opportunities for entry into the work place with better prospects of succeeding at their first job. The top supported practices were on-the job training, part-time work and providing entry-level position. Consistent with this finding were the results of the most effective practices identified from employer survey. In addition, internships and mentoring were also considered effective practices although not as often implemented (Figure 4). On-the-job training not only provides an opportunity for the first time job seeker, but also allows the employer to recruit, educate, and retain those individuals who make their company the employer of choice for the community. The State of Florida currently endorses the practice of mentoring beginning with elementary school students through graduation from high school. A spectrum of practices, ranging from minimal involvement such as job fairs and job shadowing through more intensive programs such as internships and apprenticeships, are available to employers, depending on the financial resources, time, and commitment an employer chooses to provide.

**Top 10 Supported Practices**

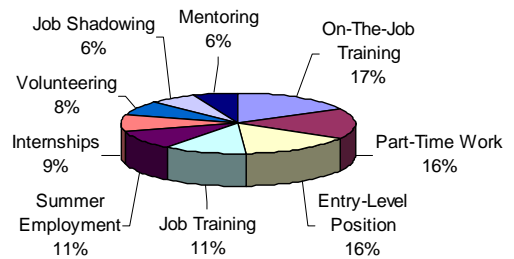


Figure 4. Most Supported Practices by Employers

**Where do we go from here?**

The First Jobs Institute research project provides businesses and employers, youth, and educators with additional information and tools to address and eliminate some of the barriers currently experienced and provides best and promising practices as business people look to the future for the workforce of tomorrow. If you have a promising or best practice for youth employment, email us at [fristjobs@uwf.edu](mailto:fristjobs@uwf.edu) or [cpierce@uwf.edu](mailto:cpierce@uwf.edu) to contact us with your comments. For more information about the State of Florida's First Jobs/First Wage Council, log on to [www.workforceflorida.com](http://www.workforceflorida.com).

