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The Upjohn Institute Celebrates 60 Years

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This year marks the Institute’s 60th anniversary. The Institute has pursued its mission of researching and publicizing practical solutions to the hardships of unemployment since 1945. The fact that the Institute can celebrate 60 years of researching and informing policymakers about employment-related issues underscores the enduring importance of labor market issues on the national and international agenda.

The Institute grew out of one man’s concern for the precarious fate of workers in his community. The year was 1932 and the nation was plunged into a deep economic depression. Upwards of 25 percent of the nation’s workforce were without jobs, leaving countless families destitute. Dr. W.E. Upjohn, founder and head of the Upjohn Company, employed a good share of the workforce within the Kalamazoo area, and he was concerned about the prospect of laying off his own workers as well as the broader problem of the hardships of the unemployed in the community. At this time in the nation’s history, no government-supported safety net for the jobless existed. Social Security had not yet been established, and neither had the unemployment insurance (UI) system.

To address this void, Dr. Upjohn established the W.E. Upjohn Unemployment Trustee Corporation, which as stated in his will, was “...for the purpose of establishing a benevolent and charitable institution for research into the causes and effects of unemployment and to study and investigate the feasibility and methods of insuring against unemployment and devise ways and means of preventing and alleviating the distress and hardship caused by unemployment.”

The trust also provided for experimenting with innovative solutions to employment problems. To address the immediate issue of the joblessness around him, Dr. Upjohn purchased a large tract of farmland northeast of Kalamazoo. As a physician who started his career practicing in rural Michigan, he saw farming as a way of providing the social safety net that could protect workers from the vagaries of an industrial economy. On this piece of land, he envisioned laid-off workers growing enough food for their families and some extra to sell for other essential items.

The farm program did not last long, however. Economic conditions began to improve and, fortunately, the company was not forced to lay off workers. It is reported that a few displaced workers
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from other companies availed themselves of the free land to provide for their families. In 1935, the federal government stepped in with Social Security pensions, the UI system, which provided short-term cash support, and an extensive public works program, which offered work opportunities. The grand experiment of setting aside land outside of America’s cities was replaced with other programs. Yet, the concern about unemployment and its flip side, sustainable full employment, remained a top national priority.

In fulfilling the mission of the trust to research employment issues, the trustees established the Institute in 1945. They consulted with many experts from around the country. The trustees had few models to guide their decision. Some experts whom the trustees consulted had floated the idea of funding an entity associated with a university or other larger organization. Yet, the trustee were concerned that such affiliations, while offering benefits, could also create distractions from pursuing its central purpose. They decided that an independent organization was the best way to ensure the pursuit of its unique mission.

During its early years, the Institute focused on local employment issues. Its first program centered on a plan for a closely coordinated comprehensive community manpower service system. It included vocational guidance, testing, counseling, training, placement, and job analysis. Central to this program was a strong research function, dedicated to understanding the local labor market and to evaluating the effectiveness of various programs. The Institute also solicited input from local business leaders on their employment needs. In retrospect, these elements were precursors to the system that is governing the federal and state workforce development programs today—locally administered reemployment and training services guided by input from the local business community.

As the federal government continued to assume an increasing role in addressing workforce issues, the Institute also expanded its scope to include national issues of job separation, unemployment and income maintenance, hiring practices throughout the business cycle, the job-seeking of youth, and UI program design. The Institute sought to provide insight into the issues confronting policymakers and to better understand the policies devised to address these issues. For instance, the Institute commissioned the first comprehensive description and analysis of the UI system, which became the “bible” of academics, policymakers, and practitioners for several decades. The Institute established a Washington, D.C., office so it could be a major participant in designing and evaluating federal programs and in informing lawmakers. Later as these government programs were scaled back and responsibilities for workforce programs were increasingly devolved to state and local governments, the Institute consolidated its activities in Kalamazoo.

Today, the Upjohn Institute numbers nearly 60 employees divided between two divisions. The research division, with nine Ph.D. economists and a strong support staff, continues the mission of conducting research on practical solutions to employment-related problems. It also publishes books on these topics and gives out grants to researchers around the world. As a modern-day equivalent of the “farm” experiment, the Institute, through its Employment Management Services

The Institute’s facilities from 1945 to the present.

Dr. W.E. Upjohn saw farming as a way of providing the social safety net that could protect workers from the vagaries of an industrial economy.

Dr. W.E. Upjohn.
Division, also administers the federal and state employment job training and welfare-to-work programs for the local area. These programs provide job training and job search assistance to thousands of local residents annually.

The marriage of research and operations provides a unique opportunity for the Institute to pursue innovative projects. During the past decade, the Institute has partnered with federal, state, and local agencies to use research findings and techniques to develop systems and management tools that help to improve the delivery of employment services, which in turn enhance the employment and earnings outcomes of workers. These initiatives include a system of management tools that use statistical analysis of administrative data and wage records to provide customized information to job seekers and frontline staff in one-stop career centers; a performance adjustment model for states and local workforce development areas that accounts for factors outside the local administrators’ control, so that they can focus on what matters for improving the delivery of services; a pilot program that uses a statistical model to target resources to welfare-to-work participants; plus many others.

The Institute has also recently unveiled a “model program” for the delivery of workforce development services that its Employment and Management Services Division is implementing with the active participation of local employers and social service agencies. Besides being the “model program” for delivering services, the Employment and Management Services Division is also one of three pilot sites in the state for a new prisoner reentry program.

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Groundbreaking ceremony at 300 S. Westnedge in June of 1964.

The Institute continues to strive to better understand the effectiveness of workforce programs through rigorous evaluation at all levels. Members of the staff have engaged in evaluations of the national UI system, state workforce programs, and local initiatives. The Institute’s research agenda also includes studies on the effect of education and job training on employment outcomes, efforts to expand our understanding of local labor market and employer workforce needs, and assessments of the administration of workers’ compensation programs. Staff members have also devoted considerable attention to the disadvantaged. Major projects include exploring the importance of creating additional jobs for low-wage workers and the long-run effectiveness of using alternative job search arrangements, such as temporary help agencies, in securing and retaining employment and in career advancement. Our staff also pioneered research into the measures employers can take to reduce accidents and workers’ compensation claims.

The Institute has also expanded its scope to include international issues, recognizing the global nature of the economy and the lessons that can be shared across different institutions and cultures. Projects include examining job reallocations in transitioning eastern European countries, explaining the factors behind entrepreneurship and new firm startups, and developing and evaluating active labor market programs in these countries. In pursuing these issues, the Institute has worked closely with organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the International Labor Organization, and the European Union.

Throughout its 60 years, the Institute has benefited from a unique perspective on employment issues. As an organization, we have grown up with the nation’s attempts to address the consequences and hardships...
of unemployment, dating from the establishment of the public employment service in 1933 and the passage of the Social Security Act and the creation of the UI system in 1935, to the Workforce Investment Act, which was enacted in 1998 and currently governs our nation’s workforce development programs. All of these programs began when the trusteeship was established and have matured during the years when the Institute was engaged in research on these issues.

Throughout this evolution of programs, we have seen a need to be the unbiased evaluator of the issues before us; to help determine what works and doesn’t work in meeting these social needs. We pride ourselves in offering that service and in providing accessible information to all those who are concerned and engaged in these issues—academics, policymakers, and practitioners—as evidenced in part by the more than 200 books we have published.

At the same time, our perspective on employment issues has always included the well-being of the individual and the local community, both of which were the focus of Dr. Upjohn’s compassion and concern. We began with a local focus and it continues to drive the research and other activities of the Institute. Undoubtedly, the issues that the Institute has addressed during its first 60 years will continue to dominate local, national, and international agendas. While specific issues move up and down the priority list as political agendas change, the Institute will maintain a store of knowledge to help inform the policy discussion, regardless of the topic. We plan to continue to pursue our mission of providing rigorous research on these matters, and to be a resource and catalyst for devising innovative ways to improve the circumstances of those lacking employment opportunities and experiencing the hardships of unemployment.