Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen, right, are co-directors of AERN. At left are key members of the AERN team, business librarians Karen Chapman and Paul Brothers. Chapman is responsible for the AERN website. (Photo by Andrea Mabry)

Student reporter Hannah Seay sat down in December with Annette Watters for a review of 2008. Here is her Q&A.

What would you say were the major accomplishments of 2008?

Watters: In a year when we had many accomplishments throughout the network, I think adding two more sites stands out, one in Tallapoosa County and the other in Chambers County. This means two more places in Alabama have AERN resources, and this time they are in east Alabama where we do not have as many as we have in west Alabama, our original area.

Is there a formula for being eligible for membership?

Watters: Yes, we look for three criteria. One is the ruralness of a county. This is a rural, not an urban, program. Another is the economic condition of the county. We are especially interested in improving the economy in counties that might not be as prosperous as they would like to be. And the third condition is that the people where we are thinking of adding a site must be interested in partnering with us.

Most partners are associated with the local chamber of commerce or economic development center, right?

Watters: That’s right. The interested county must put forth an established institution to house our materials and help us set up programs, etc.

Are there any exceptions to that?

Watters: Yes, in Pickens County we are in the public library. But all of our partner agencies that we are associated with have, as part of their mission, improving the economic conditions of the clientele they serve.

How are the partnerships and network funded?

Watters: We have been very fortunate to get grants to fund our work. The University of Alabama’s administration is supportive and has from the beginning provided money as well as time and the extended resources of The University of Alabama, for example our libraries. But we have competed for and have won grants from many...
Annette Watters

Watters is an AERN co-director and manager of the Alabama State Data Center. One of her responsibilities is writing grants to support AERN. Watters, who has three degrees from The University of Alabama, is part of the first generation in her family not to live in a rural area. She can be reached at 205.348.6191 and awatters@cba.ua.edu.

Paavo Hanninen

Hanninen, AERN’s second co-director, is also director of the Small Business Development Center. Hanninen has helped hundreds of small business owners with a variety of business issues, particularly in getting started. He has two degrees from the University of Mississippi. He can be reached at 204.348.7011 and phaninen@cba.ua.edu.

Karen Chapman

Chapman, professor and business reference librarian at Bruno Business Library, holds degrees from the University of Memphis and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is active in research and with the American Library Association. Reach her at 205.348.1096 and kchapman@cba.ua.edu.

Paul Brothers

Brothers is assistant professor and business reference librarian at the Bruno Business Library. He holds two degrees from The University of Alabama. His specialties include electronic information sources and library instruction. He is active in the American Library Association. He can be reached at 205.348.1097 and pbrothers@cba.ua.edu.

Edward Mullins

Mullins, a retired journalism professor, directs student interns who report, write, and take pictures for AERN news releases, AERNews (the quarterly newsletter), and Annual Report to Partners. He also conducts workshops on news and public relations for AERN.

Sherry Lang

Lang received the BFA from Alabama in 1990. Best known to AERN partners as the designer of AERNews, our quarterly newsletter, Lang has created artwork and designs for many College of Commerce publications and presentations.
Accomplishments in 2008, Plans for 2009

Continued from Page 1

external agencies. This year we had one from the Small Business Administration’s Portable Assistance Program that specifically targeted Tallapoosa and Chambers counties. Because of problems in the textile industry, those two counties were specifically eligible for help from SBA, from whom we received a new award last year with strong support from Senator Richard Shelby.

Several times you’ve mentioned “helping the economy.” Could you give us some specifics on how AERN helps rural economies?

Watters: It has been so much fun to watch how every county that we go into has personalized and individualized this program for themselves. It is not something we direct from The University of Alabama. We don’t tell counties what they must do and they have to do it that way. In some counties they use our resources to target small business formation. In some counties they use our resources to attract larger industry. And in some counties they do both things. Both strategies have been successful.

Would you take a recent success story — one that added a lot to the economy of a county and promises more in the future.

Watters: One that comes to mind is a happy success that we reported in the newsletter this past year. We are gratified that the director in Greene County, Ms. Phillis Belcher, gives AERN credit for the work she did. The resources made available through AERN are the technologies that she used to recruit TEPPCO, a petroleum pipeline company. She says that if the University had not provided her the computer, the printer, and the research material she could not have attracted the attention of TEPPCO. After courting each other for, I think, a number of years there was a successful conclusion in 2008, and future expansion promises a number of high wage jobs and related businesses, such as trucking and barge companies. The long-term contribution to the county is projected to be in the millions of dollars.

Another example of success breeding more success is in Perry County, where a woman entrepreneur has bought a downtown building, remodeled it, and recruited tenants who are now opening businesses in it. The tenants have got to be successful small businesses. The owner courts tenants who have the idea “I want to start my own business,” and then she has led them to AERN to get them organized and lined up with a specific plan in place to be successful. That’s where our resource center comes in, in this case at the Chamber of Commerce, which is directed by John Martin.

One more example is the sign company in Monroeville, which came to town with the help of the Monroe County Chamber of Commerce several years ago, thanks to the data assistance we were able to provide through the chamber, and has since expanded several times.

How are these successes publicized and how does that help future developments?

Watters: Everybody wins in the partnership we have worked out with Dr. Ed Mullins and his journalism students. Journalism students at UA have been very much a part of the communications effort that we’ve had with AERN. We appreciate every reporter, every photographer, every student who has worked on this and done such a good job. The students’ stories and pictures help AERN and its partners, and we pay the students for their work. Also news stories go out to local media about the entrepreneurial activity we report. Feedback brings in new users of our resources and the local partners then tell us about other success stories. We’ve been doing this kind of communication activity for about four years and the process, we believe, is gaining momentum. So far we have not had to make a single retraction or correction from any of the students’ stories.

How do we decide what research and other resource materials are made available to the AERN centers?

Watters: The original decision about the core books was made by co-director Paavo Hanninen, based on his career’s experience with small businesses. The outstanding business library faculty here at the University also helps. They keep up with the latest and help us decide what information to furnish to the centers and what needs to be updated. And of course the Internet has become a major connection for small business. The collection of books and other resources has grown over the years, and the decisions about what additional resources to add come from the AERN staff, from business librarians, and from users in the field.

A big part of AERN is the workshops you offer in local areas. Tell me how that works and what are some of the workshops you have offered.

Watters: We have one a year on this campus to which all partners are invited, and the turnout has been very good. The content of the meeting is mostly my decision. Based on the experience in the past year and what is going on, what people have been doing, what has been happening, but maybe more of what has not been happening. We’ve covered communication heavily in our last few on-campus workshops and how to market the resources available to potential small business owners and developers. We also use these meetings as show-and-tell among our partners. An AERN agency that has found a useful strategy shares it with the others for possible implementation. The UA business librarians have given quite a bit of training to our partners on how to use the Internet, and specifically the AERN website, to answer business questions from their constituencies.

Our partners also host AERN events. For example, in 2008 we had a very big Retail Day event in Monroeville. Hanninen arranged for guest speakers from UAB and from elsewhere in Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, and Montgomery to speak to an auditorium full of people in Monroeville. They told the local business community that it is possible to succeed in a small town in a downtown economy, and they told the audience about specific strategies for small retailers in this climate and location.

As this was a big year for AERN, what do you do for an encore?

Watters: Continue to add members. This also means continuing to acquire funding. We expect to add a full-time member of our field staff this year, to complete a research project begun last September, and we can be sure that Paavo (Hanninen) will organize additional workshops. A federal grant we recently received allows us to hire a person who will be able to visit the AERN agencies more often than we can do now. We hope to have that person on board in February. As the network grows, we are grateful to have additional personnel to help nurture it. Paavo and I already had full-time jobs when the idea of AERN was born. That baby program is now an adolescent, and the bigger it gets, the more attention it deserves. Because we have a growing program that can point to actual jobs created and saved, we are optimistic about competing for grants to continue the support of AERN. We always hope that granting agencies want to support a program that is a proven success. And we have the numbers to show it: AERN works in rural areas.
**“WAY TO GO, AERN!”**

— A Message from Provost Judy Bonner

Please forgive my use of the vernacular, but I couldn’t help myself when I noted that AERN added two counties to its thriving network (and in east Alabama, no less) and saw that you had a great year in fund-raising, always important in an administrator’s eyes.

When we consider that small business accounts for half of the nation’s gross domestic product, it is without doubt that your work is extremely important to our economy and to our state’s and nation’s way of life.

My congratulations to you and your colleagues on completing your eighth year, another outstanding year of achievement for The University of Alabama and the citizens of our state.

Way to go, AERN!

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**NEW PARTNERS: Ribbon-Cuttings and Open Houses in Alexander City and Lanett Bring Two More Counties into the Network**

In the Report to Our Partners 2007, we forecast that two new members would be added to the network. Well, it happened in June, first in Alexander City, (Tallapoosa County), and later in Lanett (Chambers County). Others are expected in 2009, say co-directors Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen, as funds become available.

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LEFT: Ribbon-cutting for the new AERN center at the Chamber of Commerce in Alexander City. From left, AERN co-directors Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen; Lorenzo Grant, city councilman; Glen Thomas, city council president; Mayor Barbara Young; Brian Bice, chamber chairman; Sherry Rollins and Cheryl Cunningham of Representative Mike Rogers’ offices in Anniston and Opelika, respectively; and Marvin Wagoner, chamber president/CEO.

RIGHT: Ribbon-cutting for the new AERN center in Lanett. From left, Joel Holley, Lanett city manager; Robbie Nichols, Greater Valley Area Chamber of Commerce board member; Paavo Hanninen, AERN co-director; Carolyn Lott, GVACC board member; Annette Watters, AERN co-director; Richard Laird, state representative; Oscar Crowley, mayor of Lanett; DuWayne Bridges, state representative; Dr. Jackie DiPofi, SBDC director, Auburn University; Tim Bryan, Valley city administrator; Mike Densmore, pastor of Fairfax United Methodist Church and a chamber board member; Sheri Rollins, district director of Congressman Mike Rogers’ office. (Photo by Trey Wood, Valley Times-News)
Each year, AERN conducts a workshop for partners on the UA campus. Partners receive new reference books and other materials, hear a report on activities, including special meetings and workshops held during the year. This year’s special topic was on news and public relations.

LEFT: Dr. Ed Mullins and Annette Watters distribute informational materials (from left) to Felicia Pettis, Sandy Smith, Ann Alford, Candace Johnson, and Lauri Cothran at the AERN Partner meeting at The University of Alabama, August 19, 2008. In 2008, students in Dr. Mullins’ office wrote many news releases that were distributed to local media and produced the Annual Report to Our Partners.

LEFT: The new AERN Media Handbook covers such practical matters as conducting interviews, the No. 1 skill needed for reporting, principles of publicity, formats for news releases and public service announcements (broadcast), and tips for getting newsworthy photos. Copies are available. Write to AERN, University of Alabama, Box 870221, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487.

RIGHT: AERN held a contest with partners for a new name for the quarterly newsletter. AERNews debuted in 2008, with news, photos, and information that documents the work of the network.

BELOW: New AERN website with more news and information and easier navigation is pictured below. It is the work of Karen Chapman, who with Paul Brothers is part of the valuable UA staff who work with AERN (both shown below right).
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
1. Participants listen to David Carrington, president and chief executive officer of RacingUSA.com, at AERN’s Retailing Day seminar in Monroeville on March 12, 2008. 2. Karla Quesenberry and Ann Hamner at the AERN Partner meeting held on the University of Alabama campus on August 19, 2008. 3. Congressman Artur Davis and Monroeville/ Monroe County Chamber of Commerce Director Sandy Smith, left, talk with International Sign & Design (IDS) officials Dori Fry, manager, and Chris Jones, sales, at the Southwest Alabama Suppliers Conference in Thomasville in October 2007. 4. The current IDS facility in Monroeville saw 40 new jobs and a 30,000-square-foot addition in 2008. 5. Paavo Hanninen goes over handout material at the 2008 partners meeting on The University of Alabama campus.
Businesses, Expansions, Workshops

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: 1. June Buchanan stocks store shelves at Homespun Quilts, which she and her partners Jackie and Lisa Soper own in Butler. 2. Petroleum tanks situated near Boligee mark where TEPPCO is building facilities to connect its pipelines and barge operations with its Tennessee operations. 3. Parts are lifted by crane for the TEPPCO installation at its barge landing near Boligee that will be completed this summer. 4. Paavo Hanninen, far right, fields a question from Fayette Mayor Ray Nelson during a workshop, which also includes Guin Chamber of Commerce Chairman Stan Junkin, Guin Mayor Phil Segraves, Fayette Area Chamber of Commerce Director, AERN partner Anne Hamner, and Bevil State’s WIRED representative Thomas Burgett. 5. Scott and Robin Thames set themselves apart from most convenience stores by providing full-service and self-service at their renovated Fillin’ Station in Frisco City.
As State’s and Nation’s Economy Enters Tough Times, Small Business Owners Become Lifetime Students

By Dr. Ed Mullins, AERN Partner
Professor Emeritus of Journalism

All economic indicators point to difficult times for most business owners over the next few years. Where does a small business operator turn for advice in difficult times? Here at AERN we certainly don’t know all the answers, but we do know that small business, as you can see from the sidebar on the right, is critical to America’s business success, doubly so in rural areas. It also suffers proportionately in a downturn.

What’s a small business owner to do? Most have to work long hours nearly every day just to keep the business open. But even so, experts say you must still schedule time for your family and to continue to learn about your business while also keeping an eye on your competitors.

Getting involved in local business groups, such as the chamber and also attending AERN’s programs and workshops held in cooperation with local agencies are good ideas. While you can’t learn it all from a book, there are hundreds of books and other materials on the market today that can help you stay up to speed.

One that we came across recently summarizes many of the ideas that will help you keep your eye on the ball. Of course you still have to take the swings and hit the ball yourself. No book can do that for you, but they can help you stay in the game.

The book is entitled Small Business, an Entrepreneur’s Plan. It is now in its fifth edition, having first come on the market in 1985. There are numerous copies available from various used book vendors over the Internet. The original authors were Lee A. Eckert, J.D. Ryan, and Robert J. Gray, but Ryan is the sole author of the most recent edition.

Knowledge Is Power (p. 87)

Many business owners view market research as complex and confusing. It’s just common sense about how you plan to market a product or service. Questions you need answers for:
• Who are your customers?
• How can you best reach them?
• Who makes the buying decision?
• What do customers like in a new product or service?
• What do they like in a current one?
• What need will your product or service fill? Examples: Landscaping is not just mowing grass and trimming shrubs. It’s enhancing appearance and providing free time for the purchaser.
• What are your competitors’ strengths? What are their weaknesses? A periodic walk through your competitor’s store can generate ideas on how to improve your own business. During your visit, note the decor, product line, price ranges, quality, and service. This helps you properly position yourself in the market.

Effective market research can help you target rich niches and avoid stagnant ones. A visit to your local library, AERN center or industry trade association website brings a flood of statistics to help pinpoint your market.

Building a Better Business (p.105)

Customers always come first.
Your employees are valuable to your business.
Toot your own horn — free publicity is cheap.
Know when to do, and when to delegate.
Suppliers are your friends — treat them right and they will serve you better.
Make up your mind.
Do it today, not tomorrow.
Buy the best.
Consistency is key and makes for an organized, professional operation.
Dust off your goals.
Return phone calls.
Advance into high tech.

The temporary solution — consider temporary help.
Is anyone out there? Know your target market.
Remember your roots — keep your entrepreneurial spirit.
Complacency kills, so pay attention to what’s going on.
School is still in session — you can never know enough.
Tactics for time off — every entrepreneur needs a vacation.
Getting to know you — participate in your community.

(Published in Small Business, an Entrepreneur’s Plan, originally published as “Talking Shop,” in Entrepreneur, January 1991, 44-47, by Richard J. Maturi)

Top 10 Reasons Why Everybody Loves Small Business

10. Small businesses account for 97.3 percent of all Alabama employers.
9. Small businesses create more than 50 percent of America’s private nonfarm gross domestic product.
8. Small patenting firms produce 13 times more patents per employee than large patenting firms do.
7. The 368,500 small businesses in Alabama are located in every community and neighborhood.
6. Small businesses employ 50.7 percent of Alabama’s nonfarm private sector workers.
5. Home-based businesses account for 52 percent of all small businesses.
4. Small businesses are 97 percent of America’s exporters and produce 28.6 percent of all export value.
3. Alabama saw an estimated 10,096 new small employers start up in the most recent year these data were measured.
2. There are approximately 38,500 minority-owned businesses and 81,800 women-owned businesses in Alabama, and almost all of them are small businesses.
1. The latest figures show that small businesses create 60 to 80 percent of America’s net new jobs.

(Source: Small Business Administration)

Below, we have excerpted, with permission of the author, two selections we think are useful in their own right but that also show how practical the book is overall for small business people. By the way, we have published reviews written by partners in AERNews. We would be happy to publish reviews of books you have found helpful. Just send them to either of the co-directors (awatters@cba.ua.edu, phaninen@cba.ua.edu).
The Small Business Handbook, developed by the Small Business Development Center at The University of Alabama, is reproduced at http://aern.cba.ua.edu/handbook/index.html. Here’s a resource you can jump right into from home.

If you are a prospective business owner, take 45 minutes to go through it. It was assembled by one of the AERN co-directors, Paavo Hanninen, and those who know Paavo know he likes plain language.

This handbook is both comprehensive and clear. It demystifies many small business concepts and practices. For example, many people want to run and hide when they hear words like “planning,” “marketing,” and “research.” They think those things are only for government officials and academics.

Actually, they are for anyone who will dig into this clear guide to conducting local market research, writing a business plan, getting out a news release, balancing the ledger, and more.

Here are just a few examples of what you will find in Small Business Handbook:

- **Market research.** It’s not something you can do before lunch, but it is something that anyone can do. Simply put, market research helps you uncover who will buy your product or service, what price the buyer will pay, and how to reach the buyer.

- **Business plan.** With help from AERN’s resources at the centers and from Hanninen, dozens of Alabamians have launched successful businesses over the past eight years, and they all managed to produce the dreaded business plan. So can you. Make sure you set aside enough time to do it thoroughly and accurately, and seek help where needed.

- **Accounting.** With a little help, terms like “income statement” (also known as profit and loss statement) will become as familiar as “checking account balance.”

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One of the most attractive reasons for a county joining AERN is the world-class resources that are made available to the centers from The University of Alabama.

Some of these resources are shown in the picture at right. Each year, as funds permit, new books and other resources are added or updated when new editions are published.

“The value to each county of these resources is approaching $10,000,” said co-director Paavo Hanninen, whose duties include teaching the partners and users how to make the most effective use of these resources.

Popular hardcopy resources include:

- Bankable Business Plans
- Best Customers
- Business Plans Handbook
- Complete Small Business Guide
- Entrepreneur and Small Business Problem Solver
- Financing the Small Business
- From Kitchen to Market
- How to Set Up Your Own Small Business
- National Trade and Professional Associations
- One Hundred and One [101] Best Businesses to start
- Working from Home
- Your Credit Score

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Popular AERN Internet and Reference Resources

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- National Trade and Professional Associations
- One Hundred and One [101] Best Businesses to start
- Working from Home
- Your Credit Score
As AERN Enters Ninth Year, Focus Remains Same

For eight years, AERN's two passions—small towns and business enterprise—have been put to work throughout Alabama, and when Chambers and Tallapoosa counties became official partners in 2008, the network was up to 14 counties.

According to Annette Watters, one of AERN's two project directors, the network does three primary things to boost Alabama's economy:

"First, we provide computers, small business software and resource books to chambers of commerce and other strategically located agencies and nonprofits. We form partnerships with these organizations because they are convenient for people to visit for information about starting, expanding, or just improving a small business. It's a natural fit for our services."

AERN's second service is training. These duties fall mainly to Paavo Hanninen, AERN's other project director. "It's one thing just to put these resources in the field where people can get to them," Hanninen says, "but when they get comfortable using them, things really start to happen. Getting them comfortable with the tools of business is where our training comes in."

Using small business planning software and references, Hanninen works to "train the trainer," so member agency staffs will be prepared when citizens come in with their business ideas.

Because of the growth in this area, Watters says, "We plan to add a full-time staff member in 2009, who will be our community outreach coordinator. This person, who will be on the road much of the time, will help us expand the network and its services, such as workshops, increasing traffic in the centers, and consulting with entrepreneurs on their turf."

AERN's third service is its website. In easy-to-follow navigation, users can find many resources directly on the site or follow links to other sites. AERN's newsletter, AERNews, its Annual Report to Our Partners, and news releases on events and developments are published in partnership with the Center for Community-Based Partnerships and its student interns.

These materials, which document and promote our success stories while also disseminating best-practices ideas, are mailed to our partners and to area news media. The stories in the newsletter and news releases sent out from the AERN office help novice business men and women see that "they can do it too," Watters says.

Watters describes AERN as an illustration of how UA "interacts with citizens to help them reach their unique objectives."

It was in January 2001 that the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) at the University of Alabama received authorization to begin a new project in West Alabama that would create a resource partnership between the University and four West Alabama counties – Sumter, Marengo, Greene and Hale. The idea was to spread the entrepreneurial spirit throughout Alabama's traditional Black Belt, but now to rural counties in an expanding area of the state.

Special funds were made available by the Alabama State Legislature to launch the program. From the beginning, Hanninen, director of the Small Business Development Center, has been a co-director of the network with Watters, from the Alabama State Data Center.

In fall 2001, Wilcox and Dallas counties were added. First called the West Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network, the name was shortened to Alabama Entrepreneurial Network to start the second year.

Then UA President Andrew Sorensen took note of the progress in those early years. "We are especially pleased that we have participated in this effort at the request of the counties involved. Our role should be that of providing assistance, just as any good neighbor would," Sorensen said.

But these counties were just the beginning. Its contacts throughout the region brought to light emerging needs in other counties and so more resource centers in more counties were established.

In 2002, Perry County joined the network. Also in 2002, AERN joined forces with the Angelo Bruno Business Library. Karen Chapman of the library staff developed a new website for AERN (http://aern.cba.ua.edu).

This opened a wealth of databases and business intelligence revealing important factors like market competition factors.

By early 2003, the network consisted of Greene, Hale, Dallas, Marengo, Sumter, Wilcox, and Perry counties.

By 2005, Monroe and Choctaw had joined the network, and in 2006, three more came on board, Fayette, Pickens, and Macon.

Then in 2008, Chambers and Tallapoosa joined the network. Each time a new partner joins AERN, staffers work with a local agent to hold an open house for nearby communities. These events are usually well attended and get extensive local media coverage.

Hanninen stays in contact with the county partners and works with AERN staff and the Bruno Business Library staff to design new training as needs arise.

Along with Watters and Hanninen, current AERN team members are Ed Mullins, Phillip White, Lee Pike, Paul Brothers, Karen Chapman, Mark Siciliano, and Sherry Lang. Others are added on a temporary basis from time to time.

Principal funders of AERN have been the Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration, Alabama Legislature, the Delta Regional Authority, the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Alabama Institute of Commerce, the U.S. Small Business Administration, and the University of Alabama Provost's Office.
County B are similar in health infrastructure but have dissimilar

Alabama.

ships between health care services and the economy in rural

specialists on college campuses to help us gauge the relation-

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and better medical services.

have the means or opportunity move away to be closer to more

who feels good most of the time. Furthermore, families who

is chronically ill or even just “feeling peeked” is not as likely to

declining economy. It goes something like this: Someone who

these factors become systemic as they interact with each other.

Thus poor medical care becomes both a cause and an effect in a

reduced income. It goes something like this: Someone who

chotic ill or even just “feeling peeked” is not as likely to

have the energy and initiative to produce as much as someone

who feels good most of the time. Furthermore, families who

have the means or opportunity move away to be closer to more

and better medical services.

Taking that to another level, why would a large company or

industry that covers all or most of its employees’ health insurance

and drug costs want to locate in an area where there are

few doctors and even fewer well-equipped clinics, hospitals, and

drug stores?

In an exploratory research project, supported by a grant

from AERN’s parent, the UA College of Business, we will try to

sort out some of these concerns.

We’ll be doing this by old-fashioned reporting and by us-

ing our AERN partners to help us distribute and collect surveys

filled out by a cross section of people in each of the 14 counties

where we have centers. We will be interviewing adults from

all walks of life and we will be asking medical and economic

specialists on college campuses to help us gauge the relation-

ships between health care services and the economy in rural

Alabama.

What will we find? We might find that County A and

County B are similar in health infrastructure but have dissimilar

economies. We would look for reasons for this. We might find

that County C is having an economic boom but its medical

resources are subpar. We will look for explanations that might

explain both expected and unexpected results.

Researchers look for relationships. It stands to reason that a

county’s economy, the health of its people, and the availability

and actual use of good health care services would go hand in

hand. But it might not work that way. For example rural coun-

ties close to urban areas, e.g., highly rural Bibb County just half

an hour’s drive from medically rich Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, may not be as

dependent on hometown medical services as some others in our network with simi-

lar in-county medical resources. Some of these same location factors may also make

it difficult to isolate purely local economic factors.

We won’t know the answers to many of our questions until

we go to the field and gather the information, which we will do

in early 2009.

Ultimately, we plan to write up our results and publish

them in a research journal, but also in popular form as well, so

dat people other than specialists will also get the results.

Without question, health care has improved in all sectors of

our society, including Alabama, but as long as we have large sectors

that is trailing, or appears to be, we will all be affected. Alabama’s

Black Belt, about which it has been said if it were removed from

Alabama we would be in the top 10 in most of the positive lists

(income, education, health, and the economy for example), has

been a area that has attracted the attention of medical research-

ers.

But there are other counties in the AERN network that may

have some of the same conditions. Do they also have the same

medical and economic problems? Our research will help us sort

these things out.

Thanks to hard-working people and institutions, Alabama

has made dramatic progress in recent years. Our study will shed

light on how deeply that progress has reached into rural Ala-

bama, and the role of health care services in that progress.
Creating Partnerships for Progress in Rural Alabama

Shown above are some of the important people who make AERN work. This photo was taken at our annual meeting in August 2008. Not shown are the many students who help, including Hannah Seay, who was on the other end of the camera for this photo. Our partners in the counties and the many University of Alabama faculty and staff help to keep Alabama on the cutting edge of small business practice. All work hard to keep AERN active in the state, helping to build a better Alabama. AERN thanks the many individuals and groups that helped organize events, wrote stories and took photos, and supported AERN financially. Workshops, expert help, reference materials, Internet access to UA library, computing and communication resources have been keynotes of the partnership from the beginning.

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