



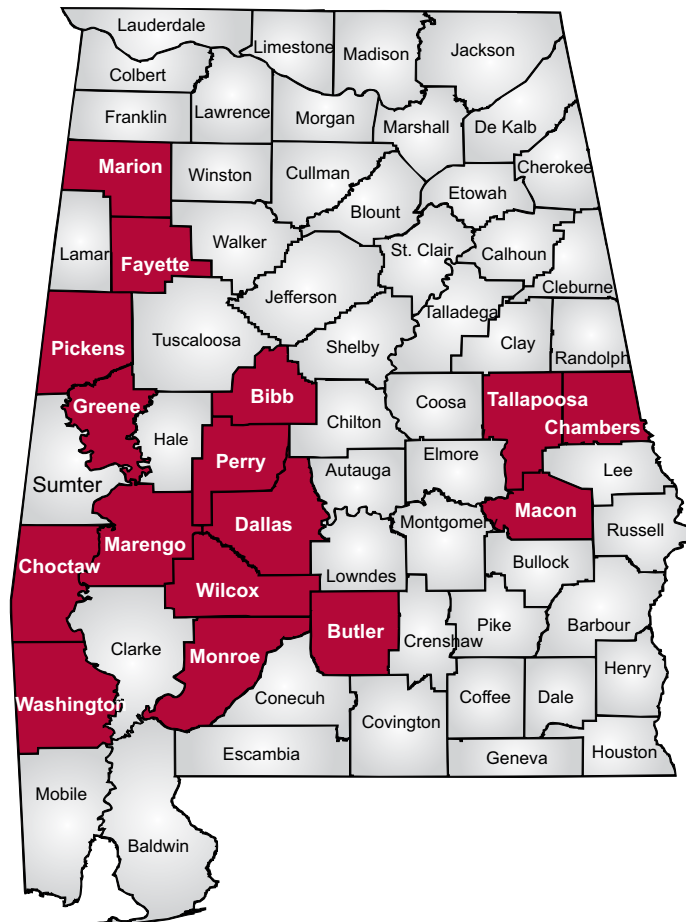
ANNUAL REPORT TO OUR PARTNERS

Celebrating 10 Years of Connecting
Entrepreneurs to Resources

| January – December 2010 |

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WHEN THEY JOINED

Throughout 2011, AERN will celebrate 10 years of contributing to the economic development of rural Alabama. The partnership, which began with four counties in 2001, included 16 by the end of 2010. They are all listed below according to the year in which they joined.

- 2001 – Dallas**
- 2001 – Greene**
- 2001 – Marengo**
- 2001 – Wilcox**
- 2002 – Perry**
- 2005 – Choctaw**
- 2005 – Monroe**
- 2006 – Fayette**
- 2007 – Bibb**
- 2007 – Macon**
- 2007 – Pickens**
- 2008 – Chambers**
- 2008 – Tallapoosa**
- 2009 – Butler**
- 2009 – Marion**
- 2010 – Washington**

AERN PROJECT DIRECTORS



Annette Watters



Paavo Hanninen

WHAT IS AERN?

AERN PROVIDES entrepreneurial tools and training to 16 rural Alabama counties, working in partnership with local agencies to provide entrepreneurs with research and business planning resources. Each partner agency is provided a toolkit of resources to encourage and assist potential and existing local entrepreneurs. The package of resources includes business reference materials, business planning software and computer technology. On-site training for agency partners, local economic specialists, and entrepreneurs are integral to the program. AERN partners include UA's Office of the Provost, Culverhouse College of Commerce's Small Business Development Center and Center for Business and Economic Research, the Center for Community-Based Partnerships, and the Alabama Small Business Development Center Network.

PARTNER CONTACT INFORMATION

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Through AERN, the Scholarship of Engagement Has Become a Reality in Rural Alabama

Dr. Ed Mullins, director of research and communication for the Center for Community-Based Partnerships at the University of Alabama, defines engagement scholarship like this:

“Engaged scholarship is a collaborative approach to teaching, research, and service that equitably involves all partners in the process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings.”

AERN has embraced the idea of engagement scholarship while continuing to serve its original service base and needs. In the past year alone, the AERN staff has written two academic papers and presented findings at two academic conferences, all framed within the idea and goals of engagement scholarship.

Dr. Mike Hardin, senior associate dean in the Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration, joined Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen, co-directors of AERN, in writing a new academic paper on the successes of the network.

“AERN has a wonderful research methodology that you don’t get in other ways – and it helps communities see what science is and it shows that research can help communities,” Hardin said.

The findings and conclusions of the paper were presented at two conferences in 2010, the National Outreach Scholarship Conference (NOSC) at North Carolina State University in Raleigh on October 4-6 and at the International Conference on Interdisciplinary Social Sciences at Cambridge University in Cambridge, England, on August 2-5.

“Engagement scholarship does not seem to be a common idea in social science research in countries other than the United States,” Watters said. “The international scholars in Cambridge seemed to be a bit stunned by my presentation – not having much familiarity with this kind of activity.”

While the scholars at NOSC were more familiar with engagement scholarship than their international counterparts,



Annette Watters explains to delegates at the National Outreach Scholarship Conference in Raleigh, N.C., how the AERN partnership benefits both campus and community members.

none had a program quite like AERN.

“We don’t have a built-in administrative structure to support outreach and engagement scholarship to the extent that land grant institutions do; nevertheless, we have found a sustainable way to do engagement scholarship through AERN,” Watters said.

Even though AERN has been able to overcome some of the infrastructural hurdles that other institutions face, reaching out to communities and developing meaningful relationships that are beneficial to both parties isn’t always easy.

“Communities often feel researchers come in and use them and then leave without making any positive long-term changes,”

Hardin said. “AERN builds good-will and relationships through service activity and then the research can naturally follow from that.”

Lee Pike, Karen Chapman, Paul Brothers, and Todd Hines (who is now at Princeton University), members of the Angelo Bruno Business Library at UA, wrote an article on their collaborative work with AERN. The article was published in the summer of 2010 in the *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship*, which is considered the premier journal that addresses business librarians.

The article, titled “Library Outreach to the Alabama Black Belt: The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network,” speaks to the success AERN has had with the support of the Bruno library team since the partnership first formed in 2001. The librarians are responsible for selecting what information resources will

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be provided to the AERN partner libraries, including both print and electronic materials.

The librarians also provide training at AERN partner sites for staff and occasionally hold presentations for the public, which may include local city officials, bankers, and would-be entrepreneurs.

The difference in AERN and other outreach programs, Chapman said, is in the details. "The way in which AERN combines University research, libraries, and constituents together in a coherent and progressive way is unique," she said.

The librarians also maintain the AERN website, originally created when the library joined AERN in 2002. The website offers descriptions of resources provided at the local AERN sites, training materials, a small business handbook, archives of the AERN newsletter, monthly tips and recommended web sites, a complete list of AERN partners and a calendar of upcoming events.

The website also has the "Ask a Business Librarian" feature, where AERN partners and clients can send questions to the librarians online and receive feedback via e-mail. Many partners prefer face to face or over the phone contact, and the Bruno library team is very aware and sensitive to that preference.

For some clients, "the in-person assistance seems to be more helpful than the online materials, and our staff continues to be creative and offer services to the partners in as many ways as we can," Chapman said.

"I hope [the program's success] serves as an example," Hardin said, "that these kinds of projects that provide tangible benefits to the community have value in an academic research setting, as it is important to our overall values and mission at the University of Alabama. We can involve all people – not just faculty – in this kind of writing. Having these articles is just the beginning, and will help lay the foundation for more projects and academic papers in the future."

GETTING TO WHERE WE ARE TODAY



Communities in the AERN network see ongoing, positive benefits, such as additional businesses, more and better jobs, access to university resources, and positive reactions from political leaders and the press.



The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network, which became operational in mid-2001, working in just four counties, will celebrate its 10th anniversary throughout 2011 with an expanded network of 16 counties.

AERN began with no permanent staff, no identifiable home base, and no budget guaranteed beyond the end of the first fiscal year. Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen, the AERN co-directors, had other full-time jobs within the University of Alabama. Yet AERN has been able to succeed and become sustainable because it was developed in partnership with community leaders.

"When we started we just wanted to create a natural network to help people in rural areas, and we found over time that the best way to do that was to focus on the partners," Hanninen said. "Our work helps support our partners, which improves their communities and makes the overall network stronger."

AERN is a partnership that runs in both directions – from the university to the community and from the community back to the university. "We've had consistent and strong support from UA, which sends a message to the partners that UA cares," Hanninen said.

The socioeconomic situation throughout Alabama and the rest of the country seems dire, but local response to the AERN initiative throughout the 16 counties has been great and the program has met with success.

"We believe this is a portable, easily replicable model for other places with low income, rural, isolated communities," Watters said. "This model succeeds in local

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business development and also succeeds as a community-based research network for academic investigations.”

These 16 counties comprise 12,809 square miles, fully one-fourth of the state, and the collective population is about 335,460, about 7 percent of the state.

“People think all of these rural counties are the same, but they have different cultures, perspectives, and pressures placed upon them. Every place has its own needs and methods, and the AERN network works with each partner to meet specific needs,” Hanninen said.

Communities in the AERN network see ongoing, positive benefits such as additional businesses, access to university resources, networking opportunities with other communities, and positive reactions from political leaders and the press.

The University of Alabama is not a rural institution and has always had strong attachments to the state’s urban centers.

AERN’s, however, gives the University a strong presence in rural Alabama, opening the door to engagement throughout the state that is beneficial and sustainable for the communities, while also enriching the university and its students because of real-world interactions through the partnerships.

“We didn’t want to deliver something that was just another study; we wanted to give them something practical and tangible that they could use day-to-day to produce economic development, and that’s been our goal since day one: be practical and flexible,” Hanninen said.

AERN has been able to create a range of success stories in different fields, and the program will continue to grow beyond its 10-year anniversary as it finds new ways to help communities and build strong relationships with its partners throughout the state of Alabama.

Continuing Education, New Members, Facility Upgrades Mark AERN’s History



ABOVE Partners display 10-year plaques given out during the Annual Meeting in Tuscaloosa in July. **BOTTOM LEFT** New work space for partners in Fayette County is seen. **BOTTOM RIGHT** Francine Wasden, our partner in Butler County, stands outside AERN offices in historic downtown Greenville.



Success Stories Add Up for Communities

There have been scores of individual success stories, hundreds of jobs saved, and hundreds more added during AERN's 10-year history. To help celebrate, AERN takes another look at some of the program's recent success stories.

Smokin' Jack's Bar-B-Que

Jacky Poole was featured on the Food Network's "Recipe for Success" television series in 2004 shortly after opening Smokin' Jack's Bar-B-Que in Demopolis. He credited AERN in helping him open the restaurant. He used the resources offered by AERN through the Demopolis Chamber of Commerce.

"We're still here," Poole said. "With the economy and everything, we're still here."

Poole estimated that 700 people came through the restaurant during annual Christmas on the River, a popular event in Demopolis for many years..

"We were featured in *RV Magazine* – good article. A fleet of RVs came out of Alabama and Georgia and drove down highway 80 for 2,000 miles. They stopped at just four restaurants along the way and Smokin' Jack's was one of them," Poole said.

Gene Chizik, head coach of the Auburn Tigers football team, stopped by Jack's recently and ate lunch.

"He was super nice," Poole said. "He sat and ate lunch, signed autographs, and talked to everyone."

Although Smokin' Jack's Bar-B-Que is certainly no stranger



Jacky Poole, left, owner of Smokin' Jack's Bar-B-Que, tells his entrepreneurial story at a workshop in Demopolis in 2010.

to the spotlight, from their beginnings on the Food Network to drop-ins from football celebrities, Poole stays extremely humble.

"Everything at Smokin' Jack's is still handmade, hand-battered, and done the old fashioned way," he said.

Selma Good Company

Robert Armstrong, a graduate of The University of Alabama, opened the Selma Good Company microbakery in Selma after using AERN resources at the Selma-Dallas Chamber of Commerce to formulate a business plan.

The microbakery donates 10 percent of its profit to Integrity Worldwide, an international Christian ministry. Armstrong, a



The new owner of Selma Good Company, Robert Armstrong, was inspired by "Gammys" recipes.

Selma native, was inspired by his grandmother's cookie recipes and his love for the town of Selma.

"I'm not going to give up on this town. I want Selma to be an attractive place to live and it's got to have young people. I lived in Birmingham for a while getting my feet wet, but I always knew I would be back," Armstrong said.

McKnight's Liquidation

McKnight's Liquidation, formerly McKnight Shoe Repair, expanded with the help of AERN resources at the Monroeville/Monroe County Chamber of Commerce.

Husband and wife business owners Jack and Jane McKnight operated McKnight's Shoe Repair in Monroeville for some time before deciding to expand their business. They now sell a much wider variety of quality products at lower prices.

The AERN materials helped the McKnights determine how many areas they would cater to with their business. Chamber Director Sandy Smith said, "We provided up-to-date demographics and did research on competitive products in the area and it showed the new store will serve clients in a larger area than just Monroeville."

C & G Waldrop

Glen and Cheryl Waldrop opened their computer service business, C & G Waldrop Computers, in Demopolis after attending an AERN training session at the Demopolis Chamber of Commerce in 2002. They were one of the earliest businesses to utilize AERN resources, which began working in just four Alabama counties in 2001. They are still there.

"The computer business is slowing down but we started doing wireless internet in July of 2008, covering north Marengo

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county and getting into Hale and Sumter counties,” said Glen, who worked as a computer technician for schools in Marengo county for five years before opening C & G Waldrop Computers.

“Our focus is on getting internet out to those people that can’t get it in rural areas and don’t have service and aren’t being covered by anyone,” Glen said.

The Waldrops’ current internet service covers about 300 square miles and has over 100 current subscribers, and it’s growing every day.

Volunteer fire departments throughout the area are letting the Waldrops use their towers in exchange for free internet service. The fire departments are using the internet to teach classes remotely.

“These buildings end up being a sort of community center with free wi-fi and educational opportunities through the remote classrooms,” Glen said.

The Waldrops found a way to expand their business in a struggling economy. Not only are they providing a service to their community by helping people in rural areas get access to the internet, their collaboration with volunteer fire departments has led to community building and educational opportunities.

Jake’s Restaurant

Jake and Trisse Mixon used AERN resources at the Alexander City Chamber of Commerce to open Jake’s Restaurant in the historical downtown.

Jake worked at Russell Corporation and would have been forced to relocate to Bowling Green, Kentucky, to keep his job. The Mixons weren’t willing to leave the town they had lived their whole lives and used this unfortunate turn of events as an opportunity to open Jake’s and fully commit to Alexander City.

“We are hometown people, born and raised in Alex City, and we wanted to bring employment opportunities to this city,” said Trisse.

Maw’s One Stop Shop

When Brent passed an ordinance allowing alcohol sales, Kandi Murphy and Keith Crocker worked with the Bibb County Chamber of Commerce and AERN on drafting their business plan.

Maw’s One Stop Shop held its grand opening on Thursday, October 21, 2010, and the Chamber was on hand to provide support at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Chamber Director Tracey Mitchell said, “They wanted to absorb as much information as they could. They were very



Jake’s Restaurant owners, Jake and Trisse Mixon, celebrate their opening with friends and family.

business minded.”

“We want to keep things local and support local business, because that’s where our business comes from, too,” Crocker said.

Washington County Library Is Home for AERN’s Newest Partner

AERN has a new partner: Washington County. The offices, which opened in 2010, are located in the Washington County



Public Library in Chatom. Jessica Ross, library director, says she is excited about the opportunities that AERN resources and training will bring to Washington County’s local businesses and citizens.

“The library takes an active role in the overall development of Washington County,” Ross said, “providing residents a place to learn, read, or just relax in a beautiful and comforting atmosphere.”

Resources supplied by AERN include a library of essential business start-up and practice books, a computer with Microsoft Office and other key software programs related to starting, maintaining, and expanding a business. AERN also conducts workshops on business matters that will be of interest to Washington County residents.

More information about the new Washington County office will be provided in the next newsletter.

Watters and Hanninen Take AERN Research on the Road

AERN presented at two conferences in 2010: the National Outreach Scholarship Conference (NOSC) at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, October 4-6; and the International Conference on Interdisciplinary Social Sciences at Cambridge University in Cambridge, England, August 2-5.

Annette Watters, associate director of the Alabama Entrepreneurship Institute as well as AERN co-director, presented at both conferences, while Paavo Hanninen, director of the Small Business Development Center, also an AERN co-director, joined Watters to present at NOSC.

The Social Sciences Conference in Cambridge addressed interdisciplinary practices across the social sciences, but the conference didn't include much in the way of engagement scholarship. AERN paved the way and opened some eyes about the positive and beneficial possibilities engagement scholarship can bring to both communities and institutions.

"Engagement scholarship is not a common idea in social science research in countries other than the United States," Watters said. "The international scholars in Cambridge were a bit stunned by our presentation, not having much familiarity with this kind of activity."

NOSC 2010 addressed how authenticity and sustainability are critical components of engagement scholarship, whose home has traditionally been at land-grant universities in the United States. While the scholars at NOSC were more



Paavo Hanninen, seen above, presented details of the AERN partnership research program at the National Outreach Scholarship Conference in Raleigh, N.C., in October. In August, Annette Watters spread news of the AERN research program in Cambridge, England.

familiar with engagement scholarship than their international counterparts, none had a program quite like AERN.

"Although UA lacks the built-in administrative structure for outreach that land-grant institutions have," Watters said, "It has increased its engaged scholarship activity over the past decades through specific programs like AERN."

The University of Alabama has overcome those hurdles to turn AERN into a sustainable and long-term outreach partnership that benefits all parties.

"AERN is a win-win-win program. Our partners and their communities benefit; The University, its students, and faculty benefit; and the entrepreneurs who are working in rural areas benefit," Watters said.

The success story of AERN could be a potential roadmap for other communities and institutions to follow in the future, both nationally and internationally.

"I think it was important for AERN to be seen at both conferences to tell the participants that what we are doing in Alabama is unique, but also something replicable by others who might be interested," Watters said.

AERN's presentation closed by stating: A sustained partnership runs both ways – from the university to the community and from the community to the university, which leads to innovation, positive benefits, and additional opportunities for everyone involved.



Vice Chancellor Art Dunning of the UA System Office, a staunch AERN supporter, talks with Sheryl Smedley during the annual meeting in Tuscaloosa in July.



A large crowd attended the 2010 retailing workshop in Demopolis. Here, Dr. Ken Tucker, dean of the School of Business at the University of West Alabama, delivers opening remarks.

Library Journal Article Explains Bruno Library's Role in AERN's Success

Lee Pike, Karen Chapman, and Paul Brothers, all members of the Angelo Bruno Business Library staff, and Todd Hines, formerly of the University and now at Princeton University, are co-authors of "Library Outreach to the Alabama Black Belt: The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network," published in the *Journal of Business and Finance Librarianship*.

The article describes the key role of the Bruno Library in AERN's development over the past 10 years, explaining the major collaboration that brings an array of services to rural entrepreneurs that would otherwise not be available to them.

A major role is maintaining the AERN website, but the Bruno partners also train county staff members in the use of the resources so they can assist members of the public who come into the various centers around the state. Training sessions are also held at the annual meeting each summer at the University of Alabama.

The mission of The University of Alabama is "to advance the intellectual and social condition of the people of the State through quality programs of teaching, research and service. AERN is one of many service programs at the university that focuses on improving the quality of life for Alabama citizens in the Black Belt region and other rural areas," according to the article.

Seeing the early results, other counties sought AERN membership. Although the network began in 2001, Bruno librarians did not join the project until 2002.

From the outset, AERN became a collaborative effort of several contributors from different areas within the University. For example, both The College of Communication and Information Sciences and later the Center for Community-Based Partnerships assisted with news and publication projects

Another important contribution of the Bruno Business librarians is to assist with selection of resources to place in the partner locations, training partners, and answering questions submitted by partners and clients.

In most cases AERN works with the county's chamber of commerce or industrial development board. But in Pickens and Washington counties, the work is coordinated by the local libraries.

AERN funding, according to the article, is from a variety of sources. Initially funding came from the Alabama State Legislature. Then in 2005 AERN was funded by a grant from the Delta Regional Authority administered through the USDA's Rural Development Program. In 2007 AERN received a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission, and in 2008 the network received a Portable Assistance Project grant from the U.S. Small Business Administration. Each grant proposal has included funding to add counties to the network.

New materials are added to the sites as Bruno librarians, the UA staff, and local county staffs come across useful additions. There is no prescriptive formula for the selection of books and other resources. According to the article the most popular businesses pertain to food service, lodging, auto repair, beauty and hair salons, and retail operations. Resources are selected that will support these interests. New books are typically distributed at the annual partners meeting or shipped to the partner locations.

Another important function involving the librarians is training. In 2008, they delivered six on-site training sessions for partners, including "train-the-trainer" sessions that enable local staffs to assist clients in using AERN center resources.

Training events are publicized in

local media, and attendees may include local officials and bankers in addition to would-be entrepreneurs, which helps spread the AERN message throughout the community.



One of the main resources the librarians have introduced is the Alabama Virtual Library (AVL), a large collection of databases funded by the state and available free to Alabama citizens. AVL access is obtainable at local public libraries by showing proof of residency.

The AVL includes *Business Source Premier and Business & Company Resource Center*, which resources that help clients research companies, find trade associations, and learn about different types of businesses.

The article points out that AERN faces challenges as it attempts to fulfill its mission, including finding viable partners to offer space for the resources and support for public use of the AERN center. Staff turnover at partner organizations tends to be high, requiring that new staff be informed of the benefits of belonging to AERN and trained in using the resources.

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Maintaining enthusiasm in the partnership is accomplished through regular training and retraining in formalized sessions.

The library also faces challenges in its participation. Since Bruno Library is an academic library, the partner staff and clients are quite different from the usual patron groups and the librarians must adjust to meet their particular needs.

But problems and adjustments aside, the data show that the centers are working, according to the article. Twenty-seven workshops were attended by 352 potential entrepreneurs, partner staff, local bankers, lawyers, accountants and politicians. Based on reports from partner agencies, the AERN project directors estimate that 156.2 jobs were created or saved within the past five years.

The University of Alabama also benefits. Quoting from the article:

“The centers demonstrate the University’s presence and interest in rural Alabama. The training and support activities contribute to the transfer of UA knowledge and expertise to small rural communities. AERN activities improve relationships between the University and the communities and support region-wide economic development. All of these benefits serve to fulfill the university’s mission to improve the quality of life for Alabama citizens.

“Participating in AERN is consistent with the mission and goals of the University Libraries and is fully supported by the library administration. Specifically, it provides an opportunity for the library to support an outreach program of the university, and it allows the library to work in partnership with other units on campus. For the Bruno Library there are also tangible benefits in the form of grant funding for the activities performed. More important, AERN has been an avenue for the business library to make a significant contribution to an area of concern for The University of Alabama – support for the Black Belt region.”

Interesting Facts from the Article:

- Paavo Hanninen, director of the University of Alabama’s Small Business Development Center, conceived the idea for an entrepreneurial partnership.
- UA business students helped some AERN partner agencies develop websites.
- UA lends computing equipment, software, and reference materials and helps the members install and update it.
- AERN access provides agencies with online resources that would otherwise be too expensive.

Rededication of AERN Offices in 2010



TOP LEFT Annette Watters (5th from left) is joined by librarian Nelda Hudgins (next to Annette), officials, members of the library staff, and the architectural team for a ribbon-cutting on April 9, 2010, at AERN’s new offices in the new Pickens County Library.

ABOVE The Choctaw County AERN center is part of the Choctaw County Chamber of Commerce, which moved on March 26, 2010, to a beautiful new suite of offices inside a downtown Butler bank building. City and county officials joined local business owners, chamber officials, and the AERN team to celebrate the relocation.

BOTTOM LEFT The Chambers County AERN also made a positive move in 2010, relocating on November 17 to a specially dedicated niche of the Bradshaw Chambers County Library. The ribbon-cutting was attended by local, state, and Congressional representatives, as well as members of the library and educational communities.

More Scenes from 2010



LEFT University of Alabama Bruno Professor of Marketing Dr. Kristy Reynolds speaks at the 2010 Retail Workshop in Demopolis.



ABOVE The Annual Partners Meeting in Tuscaloosa gives members of the network the opportunity to share ways of spreading the AERN message and to hear from UA and other business experts.



LEFT Residents observe and try out the equipment during the grand opening of the new AERN center in Butler County.



ABOVE The interior of the AERN center in the Pickens County Library is seen. It was rededicated in 2010.

LEFT Annette Watters speaks to the partners attending the annual meeting in June. At this meeting Watters announced that the network would celebrate 10 years of service to rural Alabama with a number of special programs and announcements after the first of the year.

Financial
support for

AERN has been
provided by:

Alabama State Legislature

University of Alabama Provost's Office

U.S. Small Business Administration

Delta Regional Authority

Appalachian Regional Authority

As well as in-kind contributions from our local partners

Jobs Created and Saved with Help from AERN over the Past Five Years*

2006	226
2007	182
2008	102
2009	89
2010	182
TOTAL	781
YEARLY AVERAGE	156.2

*Information for this chart was provided by the local AERN partners.



Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network

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Our partners, working with UA faculty, staff, and students, keep rural Alabama on the cutting edge of small business practice. AERN thanks the many individuals and groups that helped organize events and supported AERN financially in 2010. Workshops, expert help, reference materials, Internet access, library services, computing, communication and media resources have been keynotes of the partnership since the beginning and remain so today. As always, a special thanks to The University of Alabama leadership, which understands how important these activities are to our University and to the people of Alabama.