The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network has moved to a new location. On December 1 AERN relocated its office to The Edge Center for Entrepreneurship & Innovation at 800 22nd Avenue in Tuscaloosa on the corner of Eighth Street and 22nd Avenue in downtown Tuscaloosa.

“The Edge is Tuscaloosa’s first business incubator,” said AERN Director Mary Patterson. “It is a partnership between The University of Alabama and the West Alabama Chamber of Commerce, with the building being provided by Regions Bank.”

Not only did AERN relocate to The Edge, UA’s Alabama Entrepreneurship Institute and the Small Business Development Center also made the relocation. Additionally, The Edge is home to several business owners in town.

“The Edge offers affordable office space, shared services, hands-on management training, marketing support and networking opportunities to facilitate the exchange of expert knowledge and funding resources,” Patterson said.

The Edge offers five levels of monthly membership, ranging in cost from $25 per day to $250 per month. However, the services

(Continued on last page)
AERN provides entrepreneurial tools and training to 19 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’s UA partners include the Office of the Provost, Culverhouse College of Commerce’s Center for Business and Economic Research, the Center for Community-Based Partnerships, and the Bruno Library.

Financial support for AERN has been provided by:
Alabama State Legislature, UA Provost’s Office, U.S. Small Business Administration, Delta Regional Authority, Appalachian Regional Authority, as well as in-kind contributions from our local partners.

http://aern.cba.ua.edu
The 2012 Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network partners met on May 22 for a day-long meeting providing partners from the 19 counties an opportunity to learn about new resources, two new centers, and to say farewell to co-directors Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen, who retired during the service year. The meeting was held at the AIME Building on the campus of The University of Alabama.

During the morning the partners learned about ways they can develop websites for their local sites, as well as ways they can help other businesses in their area learn about developing websites.

“I thought that it was great, especially the segment about the Website that Reata (Strickland) did,” said Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce Director Sheryl Smedley, who has worked with AERN for the past three years. “That’s what I struggle with because I don’t have the money to build a website and get someone who can keep my site up the way it needs to be.”

AERN Outreach Coordinator Mary Patterson selected the website training because it was something that members had requested more information about.

“At our workshops, we usually have a round-table discussion and some of the members said that they need more information about websites and marketing on the Internet,” said Patterson, who will be coordinating the program until a new director is named.

During the presentation, UA Graphic Designer and Multimedia Artist Reata Strickland explained to the group low-cost ways in which they could develop, host and update their websites, enabling them to expand their reach.

“Seventy-eight percent of North Americans are Internet users,” Strickland said. “So, if you need to know why you need to be online, that’s the reason. It’s an essential tool for small businesses.”

Because most AERN satellite locations are housed in local chambers of commerce, the information provided to the partners can be redistributed throughout 19 counties and potentially impact thousands of business owners.

“I really more than anything enjoyed the demonstration on how to create your own website,” said Jenn-Tate, director of the Demopolis Area Chamber of Commerce. “I could do so much more at the chamber with a website.” After lunch, Watters gave a presentation on the specialized services offered by AERN to its clients, including county-by-county economic breakdowns by industry. “More than 700 different industry reports are available,” Watters said. Watters announced that there will be two new partners added to the network. “We have a grant that will enable Lamar and Hale counties to come in,” Watters said. “I’m glad to be leaving, knowing that this has been accomplished.”

One of the emphasis at the University of Alabama is to engage more community members though research conducted by students, faculty and staff members.

AERN is operated through the College of Business Administration and Dean Michael Hardin believes AERN is a great example of engaged scholarship.

Hardin said too often universities conduct “parachute” experiments where the come in, conduct research and leave. “This is really what community engagement research is. This could serve as a model,” Hardin said, praising Hanninen and Watters for their tireless efforts. “It has a great impact on the community. We come in and make the lives of the people in the community better.”

AERN provides entrepreneurial tools and training to 19 rural 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.

Financial support for AERN has been provided by the 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.

Watters and Hanninen are credited with building AERN to its current national recognition as one of the best examples of engaged scholarship in rural America. They had been the co-directors since the program began in 2001 with four counties.

An article about the program by Watters, Hanninen and C&BA Dean Mike Hardin appears in the Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship, Vol. 4, No. 2. Members at the annual meeting were given a copy of the journal containing the article, entitled “Developing a Community-Based Research Network for Interdisciplinary Science: The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network.”
AERN Adds Lamar, Hale To Network

AERN held the grand opening and ribbon cutting for its Lamar County Center on September 12, 2012 in the Mary Wallace Cobb Memorial Library next to Vernon City Hall. “This center brings resources and a University of Alabama presence to Lamar County because I now interact regularly with community leaders and entrepreneurs to help them grow businesses,” said AERN Director Mary Patterson.

During the ceremony Probate Judge Johnny Rogers and Cobb Memorial Library Director Amanda Glasgow welcomed community leaders and business owners to a reception in the auditorium.

Rogers commended The University of Alabama for bringing the valuable resources, training and research to the rural community of Vernon and Lamar County so that entrepreneurs in his area can access the help needed to be successful.

Having worked on the project for more than 18 months to make it a reality, Rogers told business leaders that he is optimistic that the resource center will have an impact on creating jobs in Lamar County. “Judge Johnny Rogers had heard about our centers through the C3 of Northwest Alabama Economic Development Alliance and contacted us about establishing an AERN center in Lamar County,” Patterson said. “We met with him and local officials to get a pledge of support from the county.”

The opening of the AERN center was made possible by a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission and support from the University of Alabama. Besides establishing a partnership in Lamar County, a new relationship was forged with Hale County.

“AERN is working with our partner, Pam Dorr of Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization (HERO), to provide research and business planning assistance to local entrepreneurs,” Patterson said. “We will provide a workshop in the upcoming year on website design and business plans or marketing for local business owners.”

Additionally, AERN will assist Dorr in helping aspiring entrepreneurs develop the skills they need to compete in a global economy. Kirsten J. Barnes
In October 2012 Mary Patterson, the former outreach coordinator for the University of Alabama’s Entrepreneurial Research Network, was named director of the program after the retirements of co-directors Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen in 2012.

Patterson is a certified public accountant who has worked with small business owners in accounting and insurance for over 30 years.

“As director, I oversee the funding and operation of AERN and provide reports to governmental funding agencies and the University of Alabama on the progress of the program,” said Patterson, who has owned and managed her own business, and continues to stay abreast of current developments relevant to small business including economics, accounting and taxation.

In her new capacity, she assists AERN partners in planning, implementing and administering strategies to grow and develop small business and serves on the boards of economic development agencies in rural Alabama to provide a link to the University’s resources and research. “I also network with community and governmental leaders to foster support of the research and services that The University provides to entrepreneurship and job creation in rural areas,” Patterson said. “This is in addition to speaking at Chamber functions, training Chamber staff and entrepreneurs on using AERN resources and planning meetings and workshops to assist entrepreneurs with business plans and business start-ups and expansions.”

Her specialty areas include business plans, accounting systems, budgeting, marketing, cash flow analysis, taxation, and insurance.

“My personal goals for the program are to expand to more counties as funding is secured and to serve as a catalyst for economic development by providing networks of research, training and innovation to rural Alabama that are available through The University,” Patterson said. “Currently, we are assisting rural communities with industry recruitment by providing data and research that promotes the advantages of locating manufacturing firms in rural areas, which in turn yields a larger capital investment and creates more jobs.” Kirsten J. Barnes
The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network conducted a presentation during the 13th Annual National Outreach Scholarship Conference on the campus of the University of Alabama.

AERN’s NOSC topic was “Inspiring Social and Economic Change Through Engaged Community Partners.”

“It was rewarding to participate in NOSC and share with colleagues from other colleges how AERN works,” said Mary Patterson, AERN director. “Our presentation provided a model that can be replicated at other Universities.”

The focus of their presentation highlighted that AERN is an example of a replicable program and can be used as a model for any business development project in rural areas. Additionally, the presentation described how AERN is an excellent platform for scholarly achievement.

“Our community partner Francine Wasden from Butler County helped me present the AERN model of engaged scholarship and told the audience of how the Greenville community had benefited from collaborations with University faculty and staff to teach and promote entrepreneurship resulting in new leaders, additional jobs and an improved quality of life,” Patterson said.

AERN is a collaborative effort of the University of Alabama with support from grants, government leaders and member partners.

Although AERN is not purely an academic endeavor, it has been able to develop students by providing them with hands-on community experiences. In addition, small business owners and would-be business owners receive training, along with Chamber directors and community leaders.

“I was able to interact with faculty, staff, students and community participants who are involved in engaged scholarship at other universities and see how broad the scope of these programs are,” Patterson said.

During her presentation Patterson said rural communities “buy in” to the university’s expertise and value, while community stakeholders and university researchers develop relationships that facilitate trust.

These relationships allow for scientific knowledge to be blended with community experiential knowledge, translating ideas from the ivory tower to the market square, and also in the other direction.

While the University benefits from the research conducted and the relationships that are established, the communities themselves receive more tangible rewards, such as job creation, industry recruitment, capital investment and improved prosperity. Additionally, when new businesses are created, leaders are developed, the quality of life is improved for those who live in these rural communities, and culture is enhanced through diversity.

This was not the first scholarly presentation or even the first NOSC presentation for AERN. “AERN presented at the NOSC conference at North Carolina State University in Raleigh and at the International Conference on Interdisciplinary Social Sciences at Cambridge University in Cambridge, England in 2010,” Patterson said.
In today’s electronic society, business owners know having a web presence is a must.

Research shows most web users spend only about 10 seconds deciding whether or not to visit your site, the look and feel of your homepage is essential to getting clicks and retaining viewers.

With this in mind, the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network put together a workshop to assist members and business owners. These kinds of tips and others were illustrated in an AERN workshop on “Website Design and Marketing” held August 14 on the campus of the University of Alabama.

“It is important to provide workshops like the one on website development to educate and inform entrepreneurs on the latest developments in technology and best practices to facilitate success in a lean economy,” said Mary Patterson, director of AERN.

Patterson, who was the outreach coordinator for AERN at the time, organized the training. She arranged the training in response to requests from AERN partners.

Reata Strickland, the creative director for Special Projects in UA’s Office of Academic Affairs, conducted the workshop.

Strickland educated the audience on common computer terminology such as domain name, server, host, secure passwords, social networks and URLs, before showing them how to design a completely free website using weebly.com.

“Your website should be continually updated with current and pertinent information, and Weebly makes this easy for users who wish to host their own site, and do not have time to be computer savvy,” Strickland said.

During her presentation, each participant followed the presentation on multi-media design using laptops to “create” a website in order to have a fully engaged understanding of the instruction.

Strickland emphasized simplicity and the importance of including pertinent information when adding content to the home page, and using pictures that will download quickly.

She told the participants that home pages should contain the company’s name, location or physical address, hours of operation, as well as services or products offered.

In addition, Strickland told them to complement these items with appealing images to influence the web user to remain on their pages and hopefully to spend money. Strickland pointed out the importance of making it easy for customers to buy with a simple “buy now” selection and a secure method of payment.

In addition to Reata Strickland, the owner of online shoe store Shoe Paparazzi, Amy Strickland also spoke to the participants.

Amy Strickland discussed cost-effective and cost-efficient ways to ship products and how to set up a secure payment method using Paypal.com. She shared tips and advice on marketing online that she learned through trial and error.

Amy Strickland said her business is now a global one and its online presence catapulted her business’ success.

The workshop was helpful to the AERN partners in attendance, as well as business owners.

“I felt (the workshop) to be very beneficial, and believe that I now can get a client initiated into the Weebly website, help them set up an account and show them how to add various features,” said Renee Shirley, director of marketing for C3 of Northwest Alabama Economic Development Alliance for Marion, Fayette and Lamar counties. “Reata does a wonderful job as always, and Amy left me quite motivated. Seems almost too easy.”

Entrepreneurs said they were impressed by The University of Alabama and AERN priorities of community outreach that provides resources and training for rural business owners.

Although this workshop was conducted at UA, others are held in the locations where the partners operate.

“We plan to have workshops on website development, marketing and business plan writing in all areas that we service,” Patterson said. “We are also excited to have the West Alabama Chamber of Commerce as a partner of The University of Alabama, and we are already utilizing additional resources and networks of entrepreneurs by having located the AERN office at The Edge.”

For more information, visit the AERN website and click the “Handbook” icon and then “Checklist for Taking Your Business Online” in the table of contents.
Top left: AERN assists entrepreneur Vesta Taylor of Greenville with a candle-signing event in March 2012 at the University Club. From left: First Lady Dianne Bentley, Annette Watters, Mary Patterson, Francine Wasden, director of the Greenville Area Chamber of Commerce, and Taylor.

Top right: Mrs. Bentley signs a signature candle. She told guests how much she enjoyed having her own signature scent, cotton linen, as well as scents representing Alabama.

Lower left: Mrs. Bentley and her staff converse with guests during the University Club event. A portion of the proceeds from this event went to support the 2011 Alabama tornado relief fund.

Lower right: Entrepreneur Vesta Taylor created this table using some promotional materials prepared by AERN.
Allison Tucker Brantley of Sumter County Alabama Chamber of Commerce, right, and Patterson present a workshop to entrepreneurs on using AERN resources in March.

Participants in the Sumter Chamber workshop held a roundtable discussion to explore ways in which AERN resources can be used to expand and grow a business.

Community leaders, Mary Patterson and Director Sheryl Smedley of the Selma/Dallas County Chamber of Commerce (at left) join entrepreneur Jackie Smith (third from left) at ribbon cutting for The Coffee Shop in Selma.

Patterson and Smedley discuss ways to promote AERN in Dallas County.

Patterson joins Greenville’s Rotary Club to explain AERN resources available at the Greenville Area Chamber of Commerce. Next to her are Francine Wasden, Chamber director, and Dr. Jim Krudop, Rotary president. Below: Attendees continue their discussion during the break.

Allison Tucker Brantley of Sumter County Alabama Chamber of Commerce, right, and Patterson present a workshop to entrepreneurs on using AERN resources in March.
Top: AERN partners, staff and special guests pose for a picture at the annual meeting on the UA campus in May 2012. Middle left: Attendees listen intently to one of the speakers at the annual meeting. Middle right: Veteran AERN leaders Annette Watters, Phillis Belcher, and Ann Alford talk about the “early days” of AERN, which go back to 2001. Below left: Elinor Crowder and Marvin Wagoner take notes during the annual meeting. Below right: Participants join in a roundtable discussion before lunch.
Members of the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce listen to Patterson present a program on the use of AERN resources in July 2012.

Mary Patterson shows Tracey Mitchell, of the Bibb County Chamber of Commerce, how to use BusinessPlanPro to write a business plan.

At left, Reata Strickland, creative director for Special Projects in UA’s Office of Academic Affairs, presents a workshop to Bibb County business owners at the Chamber’s Grow Your Business Luncheon.

At right, Patterson and Marvin Wagoner of the Alexander City Chamber of Commerce network with business owners and leaders at the Eighth Annual Professional Development and Business Summit in November 2012.

At left, Patterson and Fayette County Chamber Director Anne Hamner present a workshop on using AERN resources to Bevill State Junior College students interested in entrepreneurship in October 2012.

Aliceville entrepreneur Karen Long Upton, third from left, cuts the ribbon at the opening of The Shoppers Guide.
provided by the UA offices are free of charge. “It brings University resources and a committed staff together to help the entrepreneurs locating there,” Patterson said.

The goal of the partnership between the University of Alabama and the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama was to create a center for entrepreneurship and innovation where new businesses can develop and share resources to help them grow.

“I am enjoying the exposure to entrepreneurs in Tuscaloosa and sharing the AERN resources with them,” Patterson said. “The Edge is providing business alliances and networking opportunities that were never possible when we were located on campus.”

Although, Patterson misses being able to talk with on-campus staff members in person, she said the new location allows people in Tuscaloosa to have a better understanding of the resources available to them.

“We are getting more traffic, and we are participating in more workshops and strategic planning for economic development for the community and state as a whole, which is an integral part of our outreach,” Patterson said.  

Kirsten J. Barnes

---

Jobs Created and Saved with Help From AERN over the Past Seven Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Jobs Created/Saved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information provided by the local AERN partners.