AERN held its annual meeting of the partners on December 19 at Bryant Conference Center. Mary Patterson, director of AERN welcomed the partners and special guests and discussed the importance of collaborating to achieve a greater result.

Dean Kay Palan of the Culverhouse College of Commerce was introduced to the audience, and she shared some of the many accomplishments of the College, such as the Culverhouse School of Accountancy being ranked eighth in the nation (2016), Culverhouse ranked third in the nation for online bachelor’s in business (2015), the Master’s of Marketing ranked 18th (2016) and the Manderson Graduate School of Business ranked 27th among public institutions, fourth in the SEC and 53rd overall.

Dean Palan commented that the rankings are indicative of the College’s rigorous curriculum, top-notch faculty and real-world opportunities provided to its students.

Ahmad Ijaz, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research, discussed the valuable information to be found on the CBER website, http://cber.cba.ua.edu/ as well as the services provided by the CBER team including national, regional, state and county level economic forecasting and analysis, financial and industry analysis and economic impact modeling and estimation.

See 2016 Annual Meeting, Page 2
Neal Wade, director of the University of Alabama’s Economic Development Academy, shared the Academy’s “Striving Communities, Thriving State” initiative which focuses on the state’s communities by creating community teams to create and implement a realistic growth plan that includes a strategy process to grow the economy. Ben Bickerstaff of the University of Alabama’s Office for Technology Transfer presented education on intellectual property and examined the difference between a patent, copyright, trademark, service mark and trade secret.

Bickerstaff used real-life examples to test the audience’s knowledge of these differences. He explained that a patent is an intangible property right to exclude others from making, using, selling, offering to sell or importing a claimed invention.

Lisa Riley of LiftFund discussed the process of obtaining a business loan from the application process, credit score implications and the need for collateral, and covered interest rates and SBA loans available to small business owners. Paul Brothers, Bruno Business Reference Librarian, discussed navigating the AERN website and research resources available through the Angelo Bruno Business Library’s website including the Alabama Virtual Library, and he shared how these free resources can help an entrepreneur evaluate a business idea.

Greg Sheek, Director of Launchpad Programs at the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama provided information to AERN partners on pitching a business idea at Alabama Launchpad and shared the benefits to entrepreneurs of perfecting their pitch and receiving feedback from the judges, as well as the opportunity to win cash awards to launch a business idea.

AERN partners, local leaders and special guests shared success stories from their respective communities during round-table discussions at lunch. Francine Wasden of the Greenville Chamber of Commerce commented, “This was a great meeting to get new ideas to take back to Greenville, as well as much needed information to share with our business owners.
Winston County AERN Center Celebrates Grand Opening

The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network (AERN), in partnership with the Haleyville Area Chamber of Commerce and the Haleyville Neighborhood Facilities Building, held the grand opening and ribbon cutting for the Winston County AERN Entrepreneurial Center on Sept. 27, 2016 at 11:30 a.m. in the Neighborhood Facilities Building at 1205 10th Avenue in Haleyville.

State, county and local officials joined together to celebrate the opportunity of having this valuable resource for the creation of jobs located locally for all the citizens of Winston County. Paul Housel of U.S. Congressman Robert Aderholt’s office commented that small businesses are the backbone of our economy and that the center would provide a place for those with a business idea to come in and set up a business plan.

Mary Patterson of AERN explained to those in attendance that AERN is an outreach program in the Culverhouse College of Commerce at The University of Alabama that provides access to business resources including computers, printers, business software such as Business Plan Pro, and business resource books to assist the residents of Winston County in starting or expanding a business. Additionally, AERN provides workshops and seminars locally as needed and connects entrepreneurs to resources at the Angelo Bruno Business Library.

Prior to the grand opening, Patterson had provided training to Joel Sherrill, Director of Haleyville Parks and Recreation (also housed in the Neighborhood Facilities Building), and to other Chamber members on using the resources so that they can assist local entrepreneurs. Will Walker, President of the Haleyville Area Chamber of Commerce and President of Traders and Farmers Bank in Haleyville said, “It’s just a wonderful resource that is available to all of the businesses in our county for looking at designing websites to marketing their products online to building a business plan.”

Haleyville’s mayor, Ken Sunseri, was on hand to cut the ribbon for the Center and expressed his appreciation to everyone who had worked hard to make the grand opening a reality. He said, “It’s critical for businesses to have a game plan and goals set for what they are trying to achieve and this will give them an opportunity to have resources that have not been available to them before. We certainly appreciate the University of Alabama for having confidence in us to set up their facility here.”

According to the SBA’s Office of Advocacy, Alabama’s small businesses created 24,890 net new jobs in 2012, with the largest gain being in firms that employ one to four employees. The opening of the Winston County AERN Center was made possible by a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission administered through ADECA and by support from The University of Alabama.
AERN partnered with UA’s School of Accountancy LIFT Program to bring a workshop to Centreville on computer skills, which included Microsoft Office and Quickbooks training, June 15, 2016.
AERN On the Road … Vernon

The Mary Wallace Cobb Memorial Library hosted a workshop on computer skills training provided by AERN and UA’s School of Accountancy Lift Program on June 16, 2016.
A large crowd (top photo) responded with enthusiasm as Patricia Barnes, AKA Sister Schubert, (second from top) shares her inspiring story of entrepreneurship with the Lead Forward Business Summit sponsored by the Alexander City Chamber of Commerce. At right, Ann Rye, outgoing Chamber President introduces Mary Patterson to Ed Collari, incoming President.

**Entrepreneurial Insights from the Road to Success**

After working with many entrepreneurs in 2016 through workshops on Website Design, Pitching a Business Idea, Computer Skills and Using AERN Resources, as well as face-to-face consultation, AERN decided to ask some of these business owners to share thoughts about their road to success and the lessons learned.

They were quick to explain the time involved in starting a business and how to spot a great idea, and also gave tips on handling success and failure. Amelia Thomas of Entrelinc expressed the importance of learning the lean method of entrepreneurship.

She said, “Once I learned the lean method, which teaches how to test the market and validate a business idea before spending time, energy, money and resources, I can find out if what I’m thinking is something the market really wants. I have built a great team of advisors that help me to validate the idea.” Winfield Ezell Jr. of Obsidian Creative Studios shared his advice on dealing with success and failure in starting a business, “Just be confident in your plan and be diligent in understanding that your plan or vision is organic and things change. Don’t let those things you can’t change affect your mood towards your idea. I’ve said that I never had a bad idea, just a lot of bad timing. It’s important to keep yourself on path, kind of like in the film ‘Moneyball’.”

GMomma’s Cookies’ entrepreneur Robert Armstrong talked with AERN about never giving up. He said, “It’s hard to build a brand when you’re not solving a problem because it’s harder to find your customer and it’s so competitive. You have to just keep going, and you can’t quit … like my grandmother used to say ‘you have to keep sawing wood’. You have to be smart, and you can’t be afraid to fail.”

Charlie Morgan of Charlie’s Place American Grill reflected on the challenges of starting a restaurant business, “It definitely takes up all of your time, and it’s a learning experience. I always seek out people who know what they are doing, from the cooks to the graphic artists who design the sign. We throw ideas back and forth at each other and try them out before giving them to the customer.”
AERN Entrepreneurial Centers Receive Updated Computer Resources

Innovation is growing in rural Alabama, and 2016 brought improved access to the technology needed by local entrepreneurs to develop business plans. With funding provided by a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission and support from The University of Alabama, AERN purchased new computers, software and additional print resources to update seven entrepreneurial centers in Bibb, Chambers, Fayette, Pickens, Macon, Marion and Tallapoosa Counties. These new resources will allow local entrepreneurs to use Business Plan Pro software to design and/or improve their business plan and print it while working in the local entrepreneurial centers in these counties.

In addition to the computer resources, the centers received additional volumes of Business Plans Handbook to add to their collection of printed resources. Additionally, Import/Export Kit for Dummies by John J. Capela was added to provide a hands-on, friendly guide to small business owners interested in importing and exporting goods. This resource offers a valuable way to expand a business and take part in the global economy.

Another resource added to the print collection was The Food Truck Handbook by David Weber which introduces budding entrepreneurs to the food truck business. This business model has a relatively low cost of entry as compared to starting a restaurant and has free and low-cost ways to market to the masses via platforms like social media. Food truck businesses have become increasingly popular in 2016, and the book includes profiles of successful food trucks. This valuable resource details food truck operations and offers best practices on achieving profitability and scaling the business.

Ed Collari, President and CEO of the Alexander City Chamber of Commerce, commented on the value of the AERN resources, “It’s a wonderful tool and asset to the Lake Martin Innovation Center. Our goal is to provide resources to help local businesses succeed, and the AERN (center) is a key feature in that initiative.”

When asked about future plans for using these updated resources, Frances Lewis of the Aliceville Public Library explained, “We plan to offer a series of computer skills workshops and job-search skills training for our local residents.”

Valerie Cook, Director of the Bibb County Chamber of Commerce, expressed her appreciation to the University of Alabama and the Appalachian Regional Commission for updating the AERN Center and commented, “It is a wonderful tool for outreach to local businesses and Chamber contacts.”

Clockwise from top: AERN director Mary Patterson with (1) C3 of Northwest Alabama Economic Development Alliance staff Chris Bontrager, Katie Crump, and David Thornell; (2) Bibb County Chamber Director Valerie Cook; (3) Aliceville Public Library Director Frances Lewis; (4) Alexander City Chamber official Jacob Meacham; (5) Tuskegee-Macon County CDC Director Vicky Grice; and (6) Greater Valley Area Chamber Director Ashley Crane.
AERN participated in the Delta Challenge held in Livingston on the campus of the University of West Alabama on October 11, 2016. Entrepreneurs from Alabama gathered to pitch their business ideas in front of a panel of judges in order to win a chance to attend New Orleans Entrepreneurship Week, held at the Idea Village in the spring.

Three entrepreneurs and one alternate from Alabama’s Black Belt were chosen as the winners: Amelia Thomas of Entrelinc (a technology driven platform that matches and connects large businesses that are seeking to deepen their diversity spend by focusing on doing more business with small, locally-owned, minority and women-owned businesses in the communities in which they have locations); Moses Weaver of Carol’s Artesian H2O Energy (Nature’s Own Carol’s Spring Water, LLC bottles pure, natural artesian mineral water at the source); Carl Morgan of Think Ink, LLC (a zero-waste management program, which will prevent recyclable material and electronic waste from entering the municipal waste stream and landfill); and alternate, Dr. Mustafa Morsy of Bio Boom (a bio-fertilizer that will increase production and improve drought tolerance).

These winners receive intensive technical assistance trainings, including development support for their business plans and detailed feedback on their product pitches, as well as the opportunity to pitch at New Orleans Entrepreneur Week in March, 2017. Through the Delta Entrepreneurship network, entrepreneurs are given regional mentoring, networking opportunities and access to business development resources so that business ideas might be converted into thriving businesses.