Marion County Alabama now has an Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network location inside of C3 of Northwest Alabama Economic Development Alliance, an agency which focuses on creating and promoting an environment through cooperative marketing efforts that attract businesses that will invest in the area and create jobs for residents in Marion, Lamar and Fayette counties.

Although The University of Alabama program is not new to Marion County, this center has been relocated and reopened in an area where it will be more visible and accessible to entrepreneurs throughout the county.

Previously, it was located inside Collins Life Center in Guin. However, since April it has operated inside of C3, which has been open in Marion County since 2010.

Everyone involved says so far, so good. “It’s going really well,” said Reneé Shirley, director of marketing and membership for C3. “Traffic at the AERN center has begun to pick up. We’re having a lot more people realize what it is and the different areas that AERN can provide assistance to them.”

Mary Patterson, outreach coordinator and interim director of AERN, said she is extremely optimistic about the potential of the new location at 4020 U.S. Highway 43 in Gu-Win.

“We wanted to be more visible and attract more traffic from business owners,” said Patterson, who has worked closely with Shirley to coordinate services. “It’s going well. We’re getting a lot of response from people who mostly want help with business plans and business ideas.”

Patterson said most of those interested in services want help starting new businesses. However, AERN also can provide assistance to those hoping to expand existing businesses, which is one reason C3 was selected for the new site.

In addition to foot traffic, Shirley has been receiving calls and inquiries concerning a variety of business topics.

Although no new businesses have opened since April, Shirley said there are several businesses that have used the services and are almost ready to open their businesses. One of these is a nutrition and weight-loss center.

“Many people come by just looking for ideas,” Shirley said. “One lady wanted to open a child care center, another man wanted to get information on starting a business, but he wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to do. We’re just excited to have it here.”

In addition to providing would-be entrepreneurs with free services, staff members employed by agencies where AERN center sites are located can take advantage of the information and resources available through AERN.

“We’ve had some workshops,” Shirley said. “We just went to a seminar at the University on websites.”

Shirley said she hopes to be able to offer that same workshop and others like it to residents of Marion County. Additionally, she said the AERN site is useful to C3 because it connects them to a broader base of knowledge to draw from for their clients.

“Mary has been very helpful,” Shirley said. “All I have to do is pick up the phone and call or send her an email. Her turn-around time is great.”

For more information about the Marion County AERN center, call 205.468.3213 or email rshirley@northwestalabama.eda.org.

Kirsten J. Barnes
AERN Graduate Assistant

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 17 member counties an opportunity to learn about new resources, two new centers, and to say farewell to co-directors Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen, who both 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 on websites that Reata (Strickland) did,” said Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce Director Sheryl Smedley, who has worked closely with AERN the past three years on several projects. “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 members had requested more information about the process. “At our workshops, we usually have a roundtable discussion, and some of the members said that they need more information about websites and marketing on the Internet,” said Patterson, who is serving as interim AERN director.

During the presentation, UA graphic designer and multimedia artist 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 of the AERN satellite locations are housed in local chambers of commerce, the information provided to the partners can be redistributed throughout 17 counties and potentially impact thousands of business owners.

Jenn Tate, director of the Demopolis Area Chamber of Commerce, also said she got a lot out of the website segment, adding she most “enjoyed the demonstration on how to create your own 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.

In addition to her presentation, Watters announced that there will be two new partners added to 17 existing counties of: Bibb, Butler, Chambers, Choctaw, Dallas, Fayette, Greene, Macon, Marengo, Marion, Monroe, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, Tallapoosa, Washington, and Wilcox.

“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.”

Watters added that one of the continuing emphases will be UA students, faculty, and staff collaborating with community partners on research projects designed to improve the economy in their areas.

AERN is operated through the College of Commerce and Business Administration, and Dean Michael Hardin told the assembly that AERN is a great example of engaged scholarship. Hardin said too often universities “parachute” in, conduct research and leave, conducting research that may help their own portfolios but leaving behind little sustainable improvement. “This is really what community engagement research is. This could serve as a [national] model,” Hardin said, praising Hanninen and Watters for their tireless efforts. The AERN approach has impact, he said, because the university and the community collaborate on projects of mutual interest.

AERN provides entrepreneurial tools and training to 17 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, computer technology, and project consulting.

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

Kirsten J. Barnes
AERN Graduate Assistant

Paavo First Came Up with the Idea for an Entrepreneurial Network

After serving as director of The University of Alabama’s Small Business Development Center for many years, Paavo Hanninen was given the opportunity to take the work he was doing in Tuscaloosa at the Culverhouse College of Commerce’s Center for Business and Economic Research to would-be entrepreneurs across rural Alabama.

Eleven years ago, Hanninen, along with Annette Watters, became co-director of the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network, starting with four counties and growing to 17.

“We were presented with an opportunity, and we came up with an idea to take some resources and use them with some initial counties,” said Hanninen, who holds a master’s of business administration from the University of Mississippi. “People got very interested in it. It’s gotten great support from the top down, and it’s just a pretty good idea that gained traction.”

It was Paavo, everyone associated with the program agrees, who first came up with the idea of a network that would create a dynamic team of local community agencies, small business people, and the University.

Over the years, the program has expanded into the following counties: Bibb, Butler, Chambers, Choctaw, Dallas, Fayette, Greene, Macon, Marengo, Marion, Monroe, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, Tallapoosa, Washington and Wilcox counties.

And Watters says the organization has secured funds enabling AERN to add Lamar and Hale counties.

The network has been pieced together through many years of working with small business owners, according to Hanninen.

We’re very fortunate to have the resources provided by AERN.”

It seems getting the word out about the program is the biggest challenge, but those who know about it are immediately interested.

“Everybody who comes in says they had no idea that we had anything like this in our community,” Smedley said. “They go out and spread the word.”

Smedley said not only has AERN helped several individual business owners in the Dallas County area, but that AERN also has helped her office with training and business development programs.

“Paavo was like a support pillar,” Smedley said. “If something needed to be done, he would see it through. If my board of directors needed a workshop, I could go to him. He helped me with a customer service workshop. I just told him what I needed, and he put it all together.”

Hanninen said this is the way the program is supposed to work. Business owners do not have to be members of the chamber to qualify for the free resources. However, they do have to operate a business in one of the counties with an AERN partner.

“AERN is based on the idea that “we wanted to put the resources at the community level,” he said. “We’d give them resources and tools to be able to help them in their own community rather than waiting for someone like me to come with a briefcase from 50 miles away.” The idea is an old one, he said: Don’t just give people fish; teach them to fish.

Most of the community agency partners are local chambers of commerce or libraries. Each partner agency is provided a toolkit of resources to encourage and assist potential and existing local entrepreneurs. The toolkit includes business reference materials, business planning software and computer technology.

The concept, popular across rural Alabama from the start, has only gained momentum over the years. “I just think that being an AERN partner agency is a plus in our area due to our population,” said Sheryl Smedley, the director of the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce. “Not every small city can have what we have here.

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Annette Watters came to The University of Alabama as a freshman in the early 1970s and until her retirement on May 31, 2012, spent most of her career on campus.

Although she has worked in several areas of the university, since 1980 she has worked for the Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration. The college runs the Center for Business and Economic Research, which operates the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network, where Watters has served as co-director, in addition to her duties as director of the Alabama State Data Center, a federal partnership program with the United States Census Bureau.

AERN was started 11 years ago based on an idea by her then co-director Paavo Hanninen, who also worked for the College of Commerce.

“I was just in the right place at the right time to be a mother to this program,” Watters said. “I think maybe it had something to do with my personality. I am extroverted enough that I like to meet people and do things outside of the campus, and I’m also introverted enough to write the grants and do the paperwork and keep the accounts. It was the perfect mix for me.”

The program targets entrepreneurs and would-be entrepreneurs in 17 rural, economically challenged counties throughout Alabama. On an interim basis, Outreach Coordinator Mary Patterson will oversee the program.

Patterson said she is glad to have been able to work with Watters. “It has been a rewarding experience to work with Annette for the past year and five months, and to help her accomplish the goals of AERN,” Patterson said. “She is dedicated, detailed, and prompt in her responses to the needs of the rural partners and entrepreneurs; and I was always impressed by the many hats she wore within the College of Commerce and Business Administration.”

Today the program, which started in four counties, operates partner agencies in these counties: Bibb, Butler, Chambers, Choctaw, Dallas, Fayette, Greene, Macon, Marengo, Marion, Monroe, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, Tallapoosa, Washington, and Wilcox, with two more counties, Hale and Lamar, to join soon.

“My favorite part has been getting to know people in rural Alabama,” Watters said. “The interactions I’ve had with people who are trying real hard to make their communities a better place has been very rewarding.”

Recently, Watters gave a presentation at the AERN Annual Meeting where she noted the recent accomplishments of the program. Having a background in collecting data for research, Watters’ presentation focused on specialized information afforded those who take advantage of AERN. She cited nearly 900 jobs that had been created or saved using resources provided by AERN and the availability of more than 700 reports on industries, markets, economic trends, and other areas.

“There have been new jobs created and there has been documentation of jobs that have been saved, which has a discernible economic impact in the rural areas,” Watters said. “There’s been a lot of education that has gone into that. I think a good many more people in rural Alabama are now smarter about what it takes to run
a successful small business in Alabama because of this program.”

Most of the community agency partner offices are located in local chambers or libraries. Each partner agency is provided a toolkit of resources to encourage and assist potential and existing local entrepreneurs. The toolkit includes business reference materials, business planning software, and computer technology.

Allison Tucker is the director of the Sumter County Alabama Chamber of Commerce in Livingston, which houses one of the newest partner agencies that Watters helped establish.

“She’s been very easy to work with,” Tucker said of Watters. “If I had any questions, I would just call Annette and she was really quick to respond. I haven’t had any problems.”

Sheryl Smedley, director of the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce, feels the same way about Watters and her efforts to assist the directors in finding resources and providing local business owners with options.

“I can’t say enough about Annette,” Smedley said. “If I got in a pinch or if somebody called and said they needed something, I could always go to Annette.”

It’s assisting the AERN partners and individual business owners that Watters said she would miss the most. “I will miss the interaction I have with our partner agencies in the different counties,” Watters said.

Watters can be sure her mark will be felt on the program for years to come. “Her heart was truly in AERN, and she worked tirelessly to find funding for the program and to assist rural business owners with information and research to help them be successful.” Patterson said. “Annette is a great leader and always enjoyed mentoring the success of rural businesses by bringing the University of Alabama’s expertise to the community level. As she retires, we realize the contributions she has made to the University of Alabama and to the quality of life in distressed rural counties.”

In fact, before she retired one of her last tasks was securing a grant that will add two new partner agencies. “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.”

Although leaving the program, Watters knows she and Hanninen have laid a strong foundation for others to build upon. “I hope that AERN can expand in a couple of different ways. I hope we can continue to add counties that are interested and that want to belong to this network, but I also hope we can integrate into the engaged scholarship of The University of Alabama in a permanent and deep way,” said Watters, referring to a scholarship philosophy that connects the development of sustainable community programs to research. “I think there are a lot of cross-campus partnerships that we can forge if we get the momentum right. I think there are a lot of possibilities.”

For now, Watters said she is looking forward to retirement and the chance to catch up on projects long neglected because of a busy work schedule. “I think I might learn to cook three nutritious meals a day,” Watters said. “Whatever I do it will be here in Tuscaloosa. My husband’s not retiring.”

Watters has been married to John Watters, who also works for UA, for 41 years. The couple has one daughter. Allison Watters, who is a UA graduate and works as a public relations practitioner in New York.

Kirsten J. Barnes
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