The global economy has not been kind to Monroe County, according to Sandy Smith, executive director of the Monroeville Area Chamber of Commerce. But Smith sees the resources of the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network (AERN) as a tremendous asset to Monroeville and communities like it across Alabama.

Monroeville is widely known for two things, according to Smith—Harper Lee and Vanity Fair Mills. The local economy is built primarily on textiles and wood products; both industries have been in decline in Monroe County, though Vanity Fair Mills is still the largest employer in the area. “Today Vanity Fair Mills employs just less than 1,200 people,” Smith said. “But the jobs have shifted from manufacturing to distribution and a cutting plant. The textiles are sewn in Mexico and offshore. We’ve also seen declining employment in wood and wood products industries. Export markets for wood products have dried up because other countries are building their own wood processing operations.”

As Smith sees it, this situation provides an ideal climate for the resources of AERN, even though Monroe County is not an AERN site at this time. In February, Smith attended a workshop at the Wilcox County AERN location at the Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission in Camden. She was impressed with what she saw and learned and has begun putting AERN resources to work for Monroe County. “This system that we have available through AERN could be a good resource for entrepreneurs who are trying to build the security of starting their own business,” she said.

Perhaps more importantly, Smith quickly put AERN to work by using the Sourcebook America software that is available at each AERN site to write more compelling grant proposals for Monroe County projects that would improve education and utility infrastructure. Though the results of two grant applications are not yet known, Smith believes the applications are stronger thanks to the resources of AERN.

“Our water board was applying for a grant through USDA for a major water plant upgrade,” Smith explained. This was a $1 million project for Peterman, a Monroe County community with a population of fewer than 100. “Through the AERN resources we were able to identify the median income, which is far below the rest of Monroe County. It really helped us make a more favorable case for getting the grant.”

In another instance, Smith and Cindy Martin of Alabama Southern Community College were writing a grant to support adult education in Vredenburgh, a town of (continued on page 3)
The University of Alabama and the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network hosted the seminar “Business Sources of Information” at the Angelo Bruno Business Library on April 29.

Presenters at the seminar included Lee Pike, head of Bruno Library, Paul Brothers, and Todd Hines, business reference librarians, Karen Chapman, business reference librarian and Website editor for AERN, and Bryan Reber, assistant professor in public relations. Paavo Hanninen, director of the Small Business Development Center at the University of Alabama and co-director of AERN, coordinated the event.

The day-long seminar covered topics including how to use the AERN Website, reference materials on creating a sample business plan, and how to collect demographic information classified by zip codes or counties through online databases and software such as Sourcebook America. University of Alabama business reference librarians also taught AERN partners about resources available through the Alabama Virtual Library, such as Business Source Elite database.

During lunch AERN center representatives were given public relations handbooks to assist in promoting usage of the centers.

“These materials are very helpful for us to publicize our centers,” said Phillis Belcher, executive director of the Greene County Industrial Development Board, reviewing the packets distributed to the Network members during the seminar. Others who attended the seminar expressed similar opinions about the materials presented to them, stating that they were extremely valuable and could see the future of the Network growing in a positive direction.

“I’m now very excited about what opportunities lie ahead and am looking forward to what we can now do with AERN to help promote future businesses in our communities,” said Eva Greene-Bryant, a representative of the Hale County AERN center.
Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network

Paul Brothers began working with the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network in November and has since helped lead three workshops on how to use online databases to do business research.

Brothers, a business reference librarian at the Angelo Bruno Business Library at the University of Alabama, is one of four UA librarians who are working on the AERN project. Lee Pike, head of the Bruno Business Library, Karen Chapman, and Todd Hines, business reference librarians, are also working on the project.

A graduate of UA with a bachelor’s degree in communication studies, Brothers received a master’s degree in library and information science from UA and started working full-time at the Bruno Business Library about three years ago. In addition to staffing the reference desk at the library, as do Chapman and Hines, Brothers and Hines regularly teach classes on how to use business databases. Chapman also teaches such classes from time to time. Each of the reference librarians has expertise in specific databases, according to Brothers.

Since December, Brothers and other members of the AERN staff at the University of Alabama have presented workshops in Camden and Marion. “At the AERN centers I explain the resources to attendees and demonstrate the databases they can use,” Brothers said. “Participants can get access to these databases through the Alabama Virtual Library. The first step each AERN researcher should take is to obtain a free Alabama Virtual Library card from their local library.”

Brothers said the training in Camden and Marion “went very well.” He estimated that about 15 attendees were present at each workshop. “A few already had established businesses and they were looking for ways to improve their ongoing businesses,” Brothers said. “And then there were those who were looking to start a business. People were very enthusiastic to our reaching out to them with encouragement of their business endeavors.”

“We want to play a supportive role to AERN and provide the resources and augment the information that is available at the sites,” Brothers said of the Bruno Business Library staff. “We want to make AERN members aware of resources that are freely available to them.”

The Bruno Business Library staff is available through the AERN website (http://aern.cba.ua.edu). Go to the website and click on “Ask the Librarian” to send a question directly to one of the members of the library staff.

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Monroe County provides a case study showing the resources available at the AERN centers are valuable beyond the borders of the counties they serve. While Monroe County does not have its own AERN center, Smith has become a believer in the resources these centers provide. The data available can be just as important for improving Alabama communities through research for grant writing as through research for small business development.

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Brothers teaches AERN members in business research basics

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