Macon and Pickens County AERN Sites Hold Open Houses

The traditional open house, complete with a spread of tasty treats, a scattering of curious citizens, a reporter, and a ribbon to cut occurred on two fronts in January of this year, in Aliceville and in Tuskegee, for the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network.

AERN is the University of Alabama’s strategy to grow small business in rural areas, a response to the nation’s call to keep our population employed when major industries downsize or close. These two newest centers, in Pickens and Macon Counties, were made possible through a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission. Pickens and Macon are designated “distressed” counties by the ARC, but the hope is that some of that distress will vanish with new business growth.

These additions bring AERN membership to 12 counties. The two open houses make it official that two more small business teaching and learning outposts are open in rural Alabama. In Aliceville (Pickens County site) AERN’s presence is in a dedicated room in the Aliceville Public Library. In Tuskegee (Macon County site) the resources are in the community development center.

The AERN strategy is three-pronged. The program provides business research books, interactive software and hardware, and periodic workshops. The goal is to have more people in the community who can jump into self-employment, bringing increased prosperity to rural Alabama.

The operation in the Aliceville Public Library at 416 Third Avenue NE in the Civic Center is called the Small Business Research Center and is a partnership among the library, AERN, the Aliceville Area Chamber of Commerce within the same building, and the City of Aliceville. City hall is located in the same block. The contact person is Nelda Hudgins, the library director. Her phone number is 205-373-6691.

In Tuskegee, Carlos Finkley, the director of the Tuskegee-Macon County Community Development Corporation, is the contact person to schedule the AERN computers and software. His phone number is 334-725-8496. “Tusk-Mac,” as it is fondly called, is located on 608 NW Dibble Street.

Each of the state’s 12 AERN small business research centers has a set of reference books on small business planning and development—how to choose a type of business, how to find statistics on potential business viability in a particular area, or how to write a business plan. Each also has a computer and printer. The computer is loaded with the basic Microsoft Office software—Word and Excel, for example—and also a program called Business Plan Pro.

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Research, both at the University of Alabama, are co-directors of AERN. They are responsible for local workshops, annual meetings and making sure the local research centers have the latest instruction and equipment. They were at the recent open houses and both are very enthusiastic about the possibilities for Pickens and Macon Counties.

Hanninen has already made a return visit to Tuskegee to conduct a business plan workshop with around a dozen determined start-up entrepreneurs. “Paavo was very helpful. He was there to answer various questions coming from the people present,” Finkley explained.

Finkley discussed the eclectic group’s vision for impacting the local economy. “We have among them a young lady who would like to open a health food store that also informs, educates, and counsels on health and eating habits. We have a custom seamstress who already has clients but would like to take the next step—develop a business plan essential to getting financing. We also have a professor from Tuskegee University who is thinking about opening a bookstore and cultural shop in Tuskegee because that has been a dream of his for quite a long time.”

Finkley mentioned an upcoming open house for one of his early AERN clients. “We are announcing a Grand Opening for the Super-E Quik-Stop. We have been working on this one since we cracked open the new AERN books around the first of October last year.”

In Aliceville, Nelda Hudgins credits the news story in the Pickens County Herald by Doug Sanders for much of the traffic the Business Research Center has experienced. “We may have had about 20 citizens from the community come to the open house, but since the Pickens County Herald gave such good coverage, a lot more people have come in, curious to see the computer and how it works,” Hudgins explains.

“We had a local building contractor come in because he had never done a complete business plan and wanted to check what he has been doing against our new resources to see if he should expand his operation or make changes,” she said.

The sheriff came in just to know more about the idea of small business. “This is what a lot of people are doing, coming in to become more educated about small business in general and see if they spark an interest. Slowly but surely, the word is getting out.”

In this way and others, the hardworking people of rural Alabama are learning that in AERN they have a local partner, an approachable person with a smile, a handshake, and an interest in building the community’s business interests. This is exactly the way the Appalachian Regional Commission intends for its grants to be used.

Grant Will Upgrade Equipment, Stress Promotion and Publicity

AERN, through its parent organization, the Center for Business and Economic Research, has received a grant of $30,000 from the Alabama Small Business Development Consortium (ASBDC), which it will use to upgrade some of the equipment at its various sites, design promotional materials about the program, and train partners to be more effective local public relations practitioners.

“We are excited about this opportunity to improve our services and to help local partners bring in more clients seeking to develop their entrepreneurial abilities,” said Annette Watters, one of AERN’s two co-directors. The six AERN charter members scheduled for equipment upgrades under the grant from ASBDC are Dallas County (Selma); Marengo County (Demopolis); Perry County (Marion); Greene County (Eutaw); Sumter County (Livingston); and Wilcox County (Camden).

While more and more people are using AERN resources, one of the biggest challenges facing the organization and its partners, says the other co-director Paavo Hanninen, is how to get the word out so that even more local entrepreneurs can take advantage of the partnership services.

In just six years, AERN has grown from four counties to twelve. Two more counties have been approved and are “in the pipeline,” as more nonmember counties see what membership means to those who are.
“We think we should be getting even more people in small towns to come to our sites to use our services,” said Watters. “Business is becoming more and more competitive. That means to be successful we must continually improve. We believe these new initiatives will help.” The two newest counties in the network are Macon and Pickens, and elsewhere in this issue of *Alabama Outreach* you will read of the open house events held by these two new members.

According to Census Bureau estimates, more than 232,000 people live in these twelve counties, translating into about 108,400 households and some 4,000 existing businesses. That’s a lot of potential customers for what AERN does, Watters said. “Now we need to develop better tools to get them into our ‘showrooms’ and let them go to work.”

One of the important things that AERN’s new grant will do, and one that will benefit all twelve partner agencies, Watters said, is an updated and revised publicity manual prepared some years ago by a group from the University’s College of Communication and Information Sciences. That it is out of date is demonstrated by the fact that there is no mention of the Internet in it.

She said the staff will also schedule training sessions for partners and others at a number of sites to make sure they are skilled at writing news releases, public service announcements, sponsoring special events such as annual festivals or anniversaries, developing brochures, deploying websites, and more.

“We have heard from many of our partners that more and better publicity about what we do and what they do is one of AERN’s greatest needs,” Hanninen said. “We will work with our partners to get their ideas on the best ways to make use of these funds to improve our equipment and reach more people.”

Key Team Member Brings Small Business Accounting Experience to AERN

Todd Hines, assistant professor and reference librarian at the Bruno Business Library, knows that whether you’re selling ice or diamonds, candy or can-crushers, it isn’t enough to know your product and your customer. You also have to be able to do the math.

“I’m a CPA and worked with a number of small businesses when I was in public accounting,” he says. “I feel this experience helps me give good advice on the practical aspects of running a business, such as keeping the books, paying taxes, and meeting payroll systematically.”

Hines became an AERN team member shortly after leaving the Georgetown Business Library to take a similar job at the University of Alabama. “I’m glad there was an opening here. I was working part-time for Georgetown while I was gaining a master’s degree in library sciences at the Catholic University of America. I’ve enjoyed working here and feel I made a good choice,” Hines says.

For AERN he helps respond to e-mails from fledgling and prospective entrepreneurs in AERN’s rural counties, but he also hits the road with AERN co-director Paavo Hanninen and fellow business librarian Paul Brothers to bring training and answers directly to the customer. “Start-up business people are looking for best practices. They’re looking for tips on how to deal with banks and grant agencies. And they’re looking for customers. They are our customers and we want to do everything we can to keep them satisfied.”

The usual pattern for onsite training is to walk people through the core books furnished by the University through AERN. There they learn the basics of writing a business plan, market research, advertising, promotion, site selection, and bank financing, among other basics. But no two on-site visits are ever the same. “Some of the questions are fundamental and we’ve answered them countless times. But sometimes the questions are outside the box and we do our best not to dismiss the idea. We go back to data and proven practices and show them where strategies have and haven’t worked in the past.”

Back at the Bruno Business Library on campus, Hines, Brothers, and fellow business reference librarian, Karen

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Chapman, field questions from the counties. “Karen Chapman is the one who watches the e-mail. She’ll take many of the questions herself and forward others based on particular expertise.” Hines says the staff at the Bruno Business Library helps AERN clients get their necessary business chores done faster by showing them shortcuts to all kinds of information that small business owners need.

Hines points out the “type A” nature of the successful small-business person, “With business, time is a premium, so we respond to questions they needed answered yesterday. And although we get questions through e-mail, the majority of the questions we get are still over the phone.”

Hines points out that several good business databases are available for free to any Alabama resident through the Alabama Virtual Library (www.avl.lib.al.us). “AERN researchers can access overviews of hundreds of different U.S. industries: how big they are, how the industry operates, who are the biggest players, what are the major trends in the industry, etc. These types of reports cost several hundred dollars at a minimum if you don’t have access to databases like Business Source Premier (BSP) and Business and Company Resource Center (BCRC).” Luckily, any Alabama resident can use these databases for free if they visit their local public library to establish Alabama Virtual Library access.

Whether it’s helping new businesses get started or counseling established business owners with ideas of expansion, AERN, with its working partnership with Todd Hines, Paul Brothers, Karen Chapman, and the rest of the staff at the Bruno Business Library is there to help.