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Developing a Community-Based Research Network for Interdisciplinary Science: The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network

Annette Jones Watters, Paavo Haninen, and J. Michael Hardin

Abstract

The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network (AERN) is a program originated to encourage entrepreneurship in rural areas of economic distress. In addition to promoting prosperity in low-income areas, the program now also serves as an opportunistic research network for interdisciplinary science investigations. Through AERN, potential and existing entrepreneurs in rural areas of Alabama have access to extensive university resources and personnel to advance their ideas for improving their local economies. The network provides materials, training, counseling, and business research services. AERN now includes 15 partners located over a large geographic area. This network has been sustained for over 10 years at a non-land grant state university. This paper describes the AERN program and suggests that an extensive university bureaucracy devoted to community relationships (such as the very successful and admirable Extension System) is not always necessary for long-lasting, effective engaged scholarship. The University of Alabama (UA) team has benefited as surely as the rural partners and local entrepreneurs. We have gained skill in community-based engagement scholarship and research; journal articles have been written; cross-university collaborations have been forged; students have been involved in real-life problem solving. We see this endeavor as a positive example of how to form a sustainable university-community relationship.

Introduction

Entrepreneurs worldwide find it harder to access capital and technology in rural areas. Even with a good idea and a strong will, potential rural entrepreneurs often lack the technical or managerial know-how necessary to create successful businesses. Rural areas are also often areas of economic distress. (Snyder et al., 2011.) Our aim has been to establish a robust community-partners network within the business community in rural, low income areas. The network serves as a vehicle to increase prosperity, but it is also a resource for community-based research for interdisciplinary science. Business and economic research might come first to mind, but we have discovered with experience that a community-partners network of entrepreneurs is also an important resource for research in other academic fields.

An original aim of the community-partners network was to make resources from The University of Alabama available to local communities in creating jobs and for increasing locally available goods and services. From that original aim, a network with more sophisticated goals has evolved. The original goal of interaction with rural communities has never changed, but along the way we have developed interdisciplinary coalitions and research opportunities. This paper chronicles that process and encourages others to be open to this kind of academic endeavor.

Our rural partners perceive a positive relationship between physical, environmental, and cultural amenities and economic growth; nevertheless, they know that they are not freestanding economies. Their economic well-being depends on other, surrounding rural counties and on nearby metropolitan areas. Having a formal, long lasting link to business research with a major university has given each partner the chance to develop its own unique strategy for using the university-community resources to improve its local economy.

Despite rural socioeconomic difficulties, our study region has a rich cultural history, and its citizens are optimistic about the future. The area has produced artists, musicians, writers, civil rights activists, and national political figures. In celebration of these assets, different organizations within the various counties organize annual festivals devoted to culture, crafts, cuisine, local flora, music, and in one case, to that great economic powerhouse of earlier times, the mule. (Mule Day is held every June in Gordo, in Pickens County.) Our community partners are constantly pursuing new ways to improve the economic and social conditions in this most impoverished part of Alabama.

By putting resources directly into the hands of people who need them, AERN, the university-community network we have established, enables the targeted communities to build local economic successes and simultaneously contribute to original research. Building a sustainable, cohesive, committed network of community partners and university
researchers is hard, but doable. The process we describe here is proving valuable for the advancement of research and for the economic benefit of the partner communities.

Literature Review

Community-university collaborations are not new (Austin, 2004). Many units and disciplines across academia have engaged in a wide range of community-based relationships for generations. Because community problems offer opportunities for all three legs of the university’s mission—research, teaching, and service—the experiential learning for students, fresh data sources for faculty, and publicly recognized service outreach, make the community-based research model attractive (Brooks & Schramm, 2007).

The literature regarding community-based research collaborations points to the value of trust and mutual understanding among all partners to a project. At the earliest possible point in the research process, the community partners should be involved and all participants should be mutually defining the goals and objectives of the project. The community partners should have legitimate input regarding the direction of the project, the gathering of the research data, and the analysis of the project results. It is through this level of shared processes that another key element of true community collaboration can be attained: research that has a real and impactful result in the partner communities. A goal of any community-based collaboration should be for the partnership to survive beyond the life of the project currently being undertaken (University of Washington, School of Public Health, 2010).

The ongoing challenge to effect change in rural, low income communities often is that community engagement varies across different socioeconomic groups. For example, less affluent groups participate at a lower rate in community activities than other individuals (Williams, 2004). In any effort to overcome long-standing socioeconomic and cultural hurdles and to ensure broad participation in network activities, communication among local government workers, local politicians, and entrepreneurs is important. While entrepreneurs can tap informally into social capital networks—i.e. personal contacts with important players in the community—the structural dimensions of social capital can also provide a framework regarding the three ingredients important to the individual entrepreneur: access (to scarce resources), timing, and referral (Berggren, 2009).

Community-based development and research continue to gain momentum, particularly in health-related disciplines. There is an ongoing hope that local citizens will take ownership and responsibility and undertake action to achieve sustainability within their own communities for medical translational research efforts (Prinsloo, 2008). “Translational” research moves an idea from theory into practice, and experience shows that sustained university-community research networks like AERN are an excellent vehicle for this to happen.

Building capacity and sustainable economic development activity in “marginalized” communities (Austin, 2004) is the foundation upon which our model rests. Millio (1995) has noted that institutions such as those acting in partnership often serve as important intermediaries between individuals within low performing, rural communities and larger structural partners outside the community. As suggested by the literature, nurturing the community-based groups, and creating and sustaining bridges between individuals and the institutions that support them, are nearly synonymous with rebuilding community capacity (Anheier & Salamon, 2001; Dekker & Van Den Broek, 1998; Merrett, 2001; Perotin, 2001; Salamon, 2001; Stoll, 2001; Williams, 2004).

The bridging of individuals and institutions and larger outside structures takes place through a series of progressive stages that, over time, will increase the likelihood that collaborative, mutual democratic interactions occur that enhance the long-term success of the partnership and the specific project. The shared growth and building of the collaboration, with the preferred goal of full participation by the community partners, also allows for the development of local, engaged democratic interactions that will lead to behavioral changes and local advocacy for future and ongoing collaborative actions among all parties (Terlecki, Dunbar, et al., 2010).

Any approach to sustained community and entrepreneurial capacity building should begin with a common understanding of the individuals and communities involved. First, at its most basic level, “...the ideas for a new venture seem very much rooted in single entrepreneurs.” These entrepreneurs have knowledge and experience harvested over their lifetimes and are searching for “relevant resources to exploit the idea.” (Borch, Forde, Ronning, Vestrum, & Alsos, 2008). Second, at the community level, the local players are looking for tangible action and results, rather than further analysis of the underlying structural social, economic, cultural, or demographic factors that undergird the community or targeted project population. In other words, community partners expect the research and collaboration to directly benefit
the community, enhance community assets, and provide some understanding of the community’s place in relationship to the larger structures beyond the local environment. In practical terms, regular meetings, specific actions, focused attention on new members to the collaboration or partnership, and other tangible work products all contribute to creating sustainability and build a common sense of purpose that can ultimately lead to true social change and increased local capacity (Austin, 2004).

The fundamental challenge facing community-based development and collaborative research efforts remains “…to adapt and develop support tools that work well in the specific local context.” Any community-based network must manifest flexibility in the deployment and adaptation of the support tools used in its collaborative efforts—particularly in rural communities (Borch et al., 2008). Over time, the partnership model has the opportunity to transcend traditional project-based collaborations due to its ability to deal with both high levels of complexity and a lack of capacity by any one organization. Long-term efforts to build trust among partners should be predicated on shared decision making, flexibility, mutual implementation of the project, and transparent conversations among all partners. By focusing on the partnership, the likelihood for greater long-term impact and sustainability for both the partners and the partnership will be enhanced (Terlecki, Dunbar, et al., 2010; Austin, 2004).

The AERN Model

This paper describes a community-based model (Figure 1) that meets the community expectations outlined above by Austin and the research expectations outlined by Terlecki and Dunbar. The community-based research model described in this paper has a 10-year history with a strong base of service and a more recent history with successful academic research endeavors.

Our network is deliberately only in rural areas. The commonalities of history and culture that our rural counties share contribute to our successful AERN community partnerships today. Nevertheless, university researchers who might begin work in a rural area in which they did not grow up should not assume that all nearby rural counties with similar statistical profiles are all basically alike. Advice from this project is that university researchers must be carefully attuned to local sensibilities, expectations, and leadership. “They all look alike to me” is never a good way to begin any research endeavor—ever. Even though AERN counties are some of the poorest counties in Alabama with poorly developed physical and social infrastructure and minimal resources, they have leaders who want to see improvement and progress.

Our area’s common history includes chronic poverty and lack of access to high quality public education, factors that introduce impediments to increasing rural prosperity in the area. Chronic poverty restricts access to capital for business
startups. Local public schools don’t always offer a solid early childhood or elementary education; nor do the public secondary schools always ensure that students have strong basic skills to support further, postsecondary education. Business owners sometimes wish for a better collaboration between educators and employers to ensure that curricula are aligned with workforce needs.

Seven of the 17 counties in our network had a majority African-American population (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2010); every county had double-digit unemployment rates (Alabama Department of Industrial Relations, 2010); poverty rates ranged from 18 to 35 percent of the total population in the 2005–2009 time period (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates Program, 2009); up to 30 percent of the adults in these counties have not completed high school and the median family income in several counties is approximately half the national average, while none of the counties has a 2010 median family income as high as the Alabama state average, which is only 85 percent of the national average (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 2005-2009). Our AERN counties generally lack a strong tradition of entrepreneurship among the African-American population.

The socioeconomic situation described above for our research area seems dire, but local response to the AERN initiative has been good and the program has met with success. Local business leaders in all AERN counties, regardless of location, have shown interest and enthusiasm for participation in AERN activities and for participation in community-partnership research activities.

Origins

The University of Alabama launched AERN to enhance rural entrepreneurship with the long-term objective of reducing some of the economic distress in these communities. Plant closings and layoffs have resulted in extensive lost jobs in the AERN service area. Textile/apparel, lumber, food, and paper are industries in the AERN area that have shed a considerable number of jobs in the recent past. This industrial downsizing has, of course, resulted in other layoffs from locally owned businesses forced to downsize after the local economy began to shrink. The original program 10 years ago had no academic research objective. The purpose then was to get business research tools into the grasp of rural entrepreneurs, train them in effectively using the research materials, and stay in touch. It was a good idea; it worked; its success has given us opportunities beyond the original intent. Our advice to others is that evolving goals and objectives are not bad. Stay true to your cause, but certainly add different ingredients from time to time to make the recipe tastier. This idea is expanded later in the paper.

Equipment and Materials

From the beginning (Figure 2), AERN has been a program with three components. One is to make available computers and peripheral equipment, business software, reference books, and other business research resources to chambers of commerce, industrial development agencies, or other nonprofit organizations whose mission includes business development in very rural, low income areas of Alabama. These organizations put the AERN resources in a secure location accessible to the public. The computers and other research materials are used to encourage potential entrepreneurs to start or expand a local business, or for other economic development work in the target area. The second component is a strong training emphasis. The staffs of the partner agencies receive training in how to use the materials and the public is offered seminars and workshops. The third component is AERN’s website. Many online resources are accessible there and the site is designed for ease of use by the lay public.

The program that was piloted in several West Alabama counties has subsequently been expanded fourfold. The small towns in our rural service area do not have a budget to purchase the business research tools provided through AERN; nor have they had the experience and expertise to use business software and printed business reference books effectively. Yet experience shows that when these tools are available, potential entrepreneurs are willing and able to access them for many uses.

The system works because it is a community-university partnership. The University of Alabama provides the service delivery components of the program. The UA-selected business reference materials (printed materials and software) are housed in the offices of partner agencies, but remain on the UA inventory. UA technical staff set up computers, peripheral hardware, and basic software in the offices of the partner agencies. The local partner agencies provide consumable materials (printer cartridges, paper, etc.), office furniture, physical access to the materials, and staff to help people use them.

AERN centers are located within agencies whose mission is economic advancement—chambers of commerce, industrial development authorities, community development agencies, and the like.
AERN provides a flexible toolkit for locals who want to bring businesses and opportunities to their areas. AERN creates a decentralized network to bring cutting edge entrepreneurial computing tools and training directly to underserved, rural communities in Alabama affected by economic conditions of downturn and long-term decline. The system has proved remarkably replicable. The project began as part of a strategy to bring prosperity to rural, economically distressed areas and is beginning to produce solid community results. Following are two examples.

**Traveling Workshops, Train-the-Trainer Programs.**

Training local entrepreneurs to use computers and software for the purposes of adding new jobs and income to the area is done primarily by on-site seminars and workshops, but also through the AERN website. Training topics include researching markets, accessing expert advice, writing business plans, communicating with the public and current and prospective clients, and using technology in business applications.

The staff of the partnering agencies receive training so they can be local resources when UA personnel are not available on-site. Agency staffers learn to use the business software and electronic media. As funds permit, UA upgrades and enhances the resources available to its partners. Our partners have proven to be very entrepreneurial in their own right. They have used the AERN resources not only for helping individual entrepreneurs, but also for industrial recruitment, as a catalyst/leverage for grant proposals, and as a resource for other business development.

**Recovering from economic downturn has several possible paths.**

In one county, a man whose job had been eliminated at his long-time employer decided he wanted to open a restaurant on the downtown square. His father was willing to give him financial backing. He and his father came to the local chamber of commerce multiple times over the course of several weeks as they worked on a rigorous business plan. Starting a restaurant is risky. In fact, this entrepreneur was moving into a location where a previous restaurant had failed. A year later, he has met all his sales targets and is now open for lunch in addition to his original evening hours. He and his father give much of the credit to the AERN resources for the informed decisions they made, and they are grateful to our AERN partner for helping them through the process.

This story can be repeated again and again in different counties, for a consumer electronics store, an office supply store, an industrial paint contractor and others.

Several of our partner agencies use the AERN resources for local industrial recruitment. This is a use of the system that we never envisioned at the beginning. One county has been able to attract a pipeline company; another has used the socioeconomic statistics available through AERN to document need and write a successful grant for an airport upgrade. Others have used AERN to research an industry group (poultry processing, pulp and
Web-Based Client Delivery Services.

AERN has a website housed at the University. This website has current program information and news, connects the AERN partners to a variety of UA resources they would otherwise not have, and provides a central point of contact for persons outside AERN to access the program. We post a regular short newsfeed with tips about information resources for entrepreneurs (e.g., highlighting a special feature of one of the AERN reference works or a particularly helpful free website). We deliver this information via RSS or an email list on a monthly basis. We archive the feed on the AERN website. We created Flash (audio/animation) demos showing how to use the various resources located at the centers. (See http://aern.cba.ua.edu; especially note the “Ask a Business Librarian,” which gives website users the professional services of University faculty librarians to help research a business problem.

In 2009, we created a DVD that contains the digital tools listed above. The DVD was designed to deliver the tools to the user’s desktop without need for Internet access. Copies of the DVD were made available for distribution from the AERN partner centers because, when the AERN began, access to the Internet was problematic for some of our target audience. To our delight, the DVDs have not been popular. The digital divide is closing. Our rural clients generally have regular, reliable access to the Internet and are getting more and more comfortable about using it.

AERN investments are a catalyst for our partners to build further capabilities. AERN is a “tool kit” for do-it-yourself business building. UA faculty, staff, and researchers will not do any of the “hammering and sawing” for a person who wants to create his or her own business. Instead, the UA team will guide and direct that person in the use of business research tools so that he or she can make good business decisions. The project leaders of AERN are committed to providing ongoing training and upgrading the technology in the local sites, as resources allow. The local partner agencies are the key to the success of the program. Where an agency has recognized the potential of AERN’s resources and made proactive use of them, there has been notable success.

Factors Necessary for Success

Local Partners. In counties where a local partner has not been interested or creative, the program has languished. Where an agency has recognized the potential of AERN’s resources and made proactive use of them, there has been success. Our experience confirms what other engaged community scholars have noted—for a partnership to be successful, it must have buy-in from both the agency’s administrative level and the contact person with whom we work every day. In one county, our contact person was a charming, cheerful woman with an accounting background. She organized AERN workshops; she worked one-on-one with a local black-owned business that expanded to a second location; and she seemed to enjoy this aspect of her job. She and her board didn’t agree and they asked her to discontinue spending time on AERN activities. When we went back to that county to retrieve the resources, everyone in the room was sad. On a different occasion we had a contact person who was also charming, eloquent, and friendly, but not at all interested in AERN. We met with her board members to clarify why the program wasn’t working well. When they discovered the problem, they solved it by reallocating some of the AERN responsibilities to another person who was delighted to have this project to work with. Our original contact person is still a team member, and we appreciate the board’s creative solution.

Money and Staffing. AERN began, as an idea only, in the fall of 2000 with a grant from the state legislature. It became operational in the spring and summer of 2001. So, we have about 10 years of experience. AERN began with no permanent staff, no identifiable home base, and no budget guaranteed beyond the end of the initial fiscal year. The co-directors had other, full-time jobs within the University. Nevertheless, AERN has grown geographically because it was a good idea that was developed in partnership with community-based leaders, and it has grown academically because it is nourished by a research-minded administration.

For the first several years, AERN’s funding base came from a grant that the state legislature gave to The University for the purpose of economic development. The University’s administration was not required to allocate those funds to AERN, and certainly there were competing projects by others within the university. The administration continued to allocate these earmarked dollars to AERN because it was a program with a successful track record and a vocal set of community partners. In the past decade’s lean years of funding for higher education, the University’s administration has continued to support the program because it has become interdisciplinary and research-oriented, as well as being popular with rural constituents.

In the mid-2000s we won a competitive award for economic development activities from a federal agency. We have applied for, and won, several others since then, from a variety of federal departments and
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agencies. Additionally, the university’s administration has continued to show monetary support, even when the earmarked funds from the state legislature were no longer available. A state consortium devoted to economic development has twice given a grant to AERN. We continue to seek funding from the public and private sectors. There is no line-item funding for this program in anybody’s budget—federal, state, local, public, or private. We have been proactive in asking, and over about 10 years we have been allocated, from one source or another, about $1,045,000.

**Documenting the Process.** The co-directors try to substantiate the economic differences AERN has had in its counties, not an easy task. Entrepreneurs sometimes let an idea “percolate” for quite a while before acting on it. When they do make a business decision, there’s no legal or even ethical requirement for them to report the results to us. Although attributing a dollar value to AERN’s efforts in rural Alabama is difficult, evaluation has been a strong component of the AERN from the beginning. Partners give regular feedback in the form of formal, quarterly conversations with one of AERN’s co-directors. Additionally, partners fill out an annual report form that asks for numerical information regarding usage of the materials and the results of that usage. We specifically ask our partners to monitor to their best ability the jobs created and jobs saved that can be attributable to the use of AERN resources. We have a continuing sense of the business opportunities that have been made possible by this program and we can describe particular examples.

**Lessons Learned**

Some initial technology choices for program partners were not popular, specifically training videos, reference books on DVD instead of paper, and scanners for the computers. We bought small televisions and VCR tapes for the very earliest partner agencies. The VCR tapes were commercially produced tapes about small business topics such as financing, management, and the importance of good accounting. We envisioned our partners hosting small groups to watch the videos and discuss them afterward. Or perhaps individuals who came into the centers would want to watch the videos privately. That never happened, anywhere. People were interested in researching their particular small business needs; they were not interested in spending time on general-interest small business topics.

When we began the program we bought one very expensive reference book on DVD instead of in paper. Only one partner agency ever used the DVD. Many lost that expensive disk. Initially, our rural areas had strong preferences for doing business research with books. We have seen a dramatic difference in the decade we have been operating the program. While DVDs are still not popular, finding information on the Internet is. In a very short time, middle-aged residents of rural Alabama have become remarkably more adept at using the Internet. When we began this project, Internet service was not available in all of Alabama’s rural areas. “Last mile” digital divide issues were an early problem that has gotten better as the 21st century progresses.

Even with better Internet access and less Internet anxiety, the basic reference collection of books continues to be important. Reading and taking notes from a book is preferable many times to reading on a screen about a subject. Yet, the information in books ages as time passes. People are tempted to take a book home, and some don’t return it. The AERN reference books are not intended to circulate, but keeping the collection complete and up-to-date is challenging.

**Factors Contributing to Successful University-Community Partnerships.**

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important lessons we have learned is that buy-in from the local agency is crucial. Our partners must spend time and energy on the ground promoting the program and training its users. Not all partners are equally good at this or willing to spend time on it. Many of our partner agencies have part-time staffs and staffers in all agencies have other pressing job assignments. AERN is most effective in counties where AERN’s goals and the staff person’s job responsibilities are very congruent.

Another lesson not to be overlooked is that a successful program requires time and attention from the administering university. Neglected partners will become disinterested and nonfunctional. It is the job of the administering partner to find ways that the program can be beneficial in both directions; finding those ways is not the job of the community partner. Motivating the community partners is another important function of a successful administrative style. It would be easy for the partners to be passive recipients of university teaching and expertise. Experience has taught them that this is the model most universities prefer. This program aims for a partnership that runs in both directions—both from the university and back to the university (Figure 3).

**Successful Engaged Scholarship Benefits the Partnering University**

The benefits to a university that seeks to build a long-term community relationship accrue in several
areas—political, public relations, student recruitment, academic research, and interdepartmental cooperation are easy, obvious examples. Other university-related benefits are more subtle. The University of Alabama is not a rural institution and has always had strong attachments to the urban parts of the state. An enhanced UA presence in rural Alabama educates both the UA team members and the rural partners. Sophisticated, well-educated, highly paid, urban academics can be mightily out of touch with rural realities. (One eye-opener is learning about sophisticated, well-educated, highly paid, rural dwellers—whose point of view about nearly everything can be different from the urban scholar’s.)

Developing a successful, sustainable community outreach network in rural areas based on economic development has positive public relations and political benefits to the local partners as well. Local governmental leaders are intensely interested in the health of their local economies and are generally interested in and appreciative of partnerships that foster that growth. Local leaders are also quick to notice a relationship that is not a partnership. A community outreach effort marked by university employees’ insincerity, inconsistency, and short-term commitment is not good for the initiating university’s reputation, the cooperating community, or the careers of anyone on either side.

Building a network that can be used for research and engagement scholarship, as well as for entrepreneurship training, has created intracampus connections and cooperations that are leading to other, more, and different ways to strengthen translational scholarship. In the case of AERN,
this program at various times has been engaged with the UA Libraries, the School of Medicine, the College of Human Environmental Sciences, and faculty within AERN’s own home, the College of Commerce and Business Administration, as well as from several other disciplines. Undergraduate and graduate students from many disciplines have worked with our rural partners. Students and community members have like one another and value what each brings to the process.

**Successes—and Some Failures**

There are several ways to measure success for an entrepreneurial research network. One is a positive impact on the local economy. The formation of new small businesses contributes to the well-being of their local communities, and the ability to attract a new, outside industry provides jobs and additional income. AERN has had a number of those successes and we highlight them in our program’s quarterly newsletter, on our website, and in our annual report.

Another way to measure our success is that the program has continued for a decade and is thriving. University administrators have supported it; so have funding agencies. With no permanent, line-item source of funding and no full-time staff until a few months ago, the program has grown in number of partner counties, expanded in scope, and achieved some degree of recognition.

The ability to bring people together to work toward a common goal is another measure of success. AERN has several examples of this. The partners in our network have frequently met together to discuss, or to engage in, regional cooperation for economic growth. In the past, none of these agencies would have been in touch with each other or would have the possibility of cooperating for the common good. Another well-known benefit of engaged scholarship is moving academic experiences and expertise to the real workplace, and conversely moving everyday realities of community life back to university researchers’ work. AERN continues to bring rural partners together with urban scholars.

Another success AERN has achieved is in building a network of partners in rural counties who are interested in and willing to participate in university academic research studies. What is the attitude of rural residents about the relationship between the business enterprises in a local economy and the local availability of health care? What do new small business owners in Alabama have in common with new small business owners in a different country? What role does the existing business community have in expanding health care options in a rural area?

Is there money to be made in that effort, while at the same time improving the general level of health to the community? These are academic research questions that AERN has already been working on in Alabama, in partnership with faculty members from various disciplines within the university. The network of partners AERN has established has begun to make a difference in engagement scholarship and translational science in Alabama.

There have been failures over the years. Our partnerships in two counties have formally dissolved. The organizational infrastructure in those counties was too fragile to sustain the partnership. The agencies in those counties could not continue to provide a place to keep the AERN materials, a contact person, and the support of the governing board. Some of the small businesses that have started have failed. Despite the background research and consultation that preceded the business start-up, some entrepreneurs found the rigors of small business ownership were too difficult and closed voluntarily. Others found they could not sustain their businesses during the economic downturn. No venture is one hundred percent successful. We regret the businesses and relationships that were not long-lasting, but we are able to document a long-term, overall positive effect in rural Alabama because of the program.

We believe this is a portable, easily replicable business development model for other counties within Alabama and certainly in other states or countries with low income, rural, isolated communities affected by economic downturn. Easily demonstrable benefits accrue to local communities, the university at large, and the academic community. Benefits to local entrepreneurs include researching markets; accessing expert advice; writing business plans; and networking with other rural areas in Alabama. Our community partners have training sessions on the UA campus; small group workshops for potential entrepreneurs led by business librarians and small business experts; one-on-one training for staff personnel of partner agencies; and “Ask a Librarian” and other targeted information on the AERN website. Our partners have equally been proactive in the program by hosting, and frequently leading, local seminars using AERN materials.

The University of Alabama has just as surely benefited from its community-based engagement with AERN partners. Students have had experiences they would never otherwise have had; faculty have interacted with community leaders and entrepreneurs they never would have otherwise known; and researchers have learned things they would not have discovered without the AERN network.

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The “soft” benefits of AERN are not to be taken lightly—increased visibility; enhanced ability to provide service; encouragement of regionalism; collaborative, community-based academic research. But the “hard” benefits also speak loudly in a low-income, low population density region. Despite some failures, there is solid evidence that AERN has helped create or save jobs in rural Alabama (Table 1).

What’s Next?

At this writing, AERN’s future looks promising. There is both university institutional support and community support and interest. What began as a good idea for providing services, with the potential for increasing prosperity in rural Alabama, is now poised as a model for university/community research. The model is so strong that it could be implemented in all counties, not only rural counties. Funding for that is not in place, but if the money were available, the mechanism would work.

The program partnerships that have been forged lend themselves to cooperative community-based research in areas other than small business formation and traditional economic development. We have made beginnings in these directions. In 2008 and 2009 AERN network partners and university researchers cooperated in a survey research project that looked at the relationship between health care in our AERN communities and economic development. Without question, health care has improved over time in Alabama, but not equally in all areas. The Black Belt1 has been an area that has attracted the attention of medical researchers because of its incidences of certain diseases, cancer and diabetes for example, and for health care disparity in the region. The economic and health care service problems of the AERN service area are well known. What is not so well known is the dynamics of the two together. This initial small study gave some insights, but further study is needed, for example to assess the immediate and long-term impact on a community of the opening of a new doctor’s office, hospital, or multi-employee business or industry.

AERN is partnering with the university’s College of Community Health Sciences (CCHS) to seek grant and research opportunities to introduce the latest health innovations into these rural areas. By combining health and business opportunities, AERN and CCHS expect to both enhance the health of the communities and chart the economic benefits of healthcare activities. This intracampus coordination benefits both the university and the AERN partner communities. The cohesive network of AERN partners benefits university researchers who seek to work in the Alabama Black Belt and the Black Belt citizens benefit from the university’s long-term, collaborative relationship with them.

An unexpected benefit has accrued to the University’s Business Library faculty, who report real enjoyment from working with actual entrepreneurs. Ordinarily, their time is spent helping students with their assignments or faculty with their academic needs. Working with business people located in a rural setting has been completely different and very satisfying for the librarians, and now they have taken their work to the next important sustainability level: They published the results of their experience in a refereed library journal (Pike, Chapman, Brothers, & Hines, 2010).

What was initially conceived as a service project is easily moving into the realm of solid community-based academic research, producing publishable results. The service component of AERN has not lessened and will never be replaced by academia’s research and publishing requirements. Continuing our community-based network of local business communities partnered with the university is our main goal. At the same time, that network is potentially interesting to health researchers, social work researchers, undergraduate student service-learning projects, and the academic arts community, as we have seen thus far. Other research opportunities no doubt will reveal themselves.

Conclusion

AERN is a 10-year-old program originally designed to encourage entrepreneurship and build local capacity in rural areas of economic distress. The network now includes 15 partners spread over a large geographic area of the state and provides training, counseling, and business research services through its local community partners. The local partners

1Scholars include 12–23 counties in Alabama’s Black Belt, named for its dark, rich soils in the central part of the state. The area roughly tracks the state’s former plantation region. Counties that make up the region tend to be predominantly African-American.
consist of local economic development agencies, chambers of commerce, and other stable nonprofit entities in the local infrastructure. In addition to promoting prosperity in low-income areas, the program now serves as an opportunistic research network for social science investigations.

Why does The University of Alabama participate in this activity? Building mutually committed community relationships advances the teaching, research, and service missions of the university. Sustaining these kinds of partnerships for the long term has historically been a challenge within many research settings. The partners and the researchers must both perceive inter-related needs that are worthy of time spent working together. The concept of engagement scholarship, as codified by the National Association of State University and Land-Grant Colleges2 (2004), implies reciprocity, whereby both the institution and partners in the community benefit and contribute.

Engagement blends scientific knowledge from the university with real-world knowledge within the community to establish an environment of co-learning. Engagement involves shared decision making. Successful community-based research involves a series of steps that are intended to lead to cohesion among all participants while also sustaining the network. Ideally, the lessons learned from the process will be written up, submitted, reviewed, and published in a journal article, thereby elucidating the successes and failures of a given project upon which future scholarship may be built.

The best community-based research requires that the professional researchers adopt an attitude of humility when entering the community. If researchers seek information from community partners, they need to be honest with the community about their intentions and motives. They must be willing to accept moments of disagreements and resistance. Likewise, the community participants must be willing to be honest and to follow through on activities for which they have agreed to participate. Relationships between communities and the academy should be measured by impact and outcomes on the communities and individuals served, not only by the academic outcomes achieved.

Finding that balance is difficult. The model we suggest here is that a service-based community network with leadership committed to its future is the kind of engagement that enables faculty to be better scholars and provides positive outcomes that are appreciated within the community. Additionally, a long-term, sustainable community network for research projects enhances the learning experience for students and multiplies the institution’s impact on external constituencies. The scholarship of engagement is tied to public accountability. In coming decades all universities will face a redefinition of how they conduct teaching, research, and service in community relationships. As Dr. Heather Pleasants at The University of Alabama put it: “We have arrived at a moment in time when colleges and universities are increasingly engaging in research with communities, rather than research on communities” (Hollander, 2010).

The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network is an example of how to form a community relationship that works on several levels. It enables participating community members to seek new paths to prosperity, while allowing university researchers to seek new paths for translational research—research that translates ideas from the ivory tower to the market square, and also in the other direction. Community members are willing to give time and effort to the network because they see ongoing, positive benefits to themselves and their communities. Scholars in many forms of action/engagement research in several disciplines see professional benefits to their fields and their careers. Students have gotten “real world” experience along with academic credit for their projects and service in rural Alabama. People at each of these entry points into the network have learned to appreciate the point of view of the others.

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