The Problem/Need Residents of Southwest Georgia lag behind the nation in access to broadband technology and broadband education, and many have voiced great concern over the performance and success of our public school programs. Many have concluded that among other social and economic factors, the lack of ready access to the information highway by a large segment of the student population contributes heavily to the lack of educational achievement. Technological advances such as broadband have the ability to substantially enhance the daily lives of the residents of this rural region, improving their quality of life. Economic growth is maximized when business owners and citizens throughout the state and the nation are aware of the benefits derived from the use of information and communication technologies; and increased awareness as to broadband technology and how it can be used to better position residents to compete in the global market. In a report released October 2, 2009, The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy stated that 'Considering how much business is done on the Web, including the process of applying for jobs, it's vital to get as many people plugged in as possible. More than a third of Americans do not subscribe to broadband services and, in many rural communities, they don't even have the option'.

Overall Approach The Albany State University (ASU) Digital Broadband Resources to Improve Development, Growth, Education and Economy (BRIDGE Connect) Initiative is an integrated service solution towards increasing broadband access, fostering intensive systemic adoption and permanent high use in the Albany MSA and institutional service areas with concerted focus on vulnerable populations that lag in educational achievement, family income, organized development and essential services. Albany State BRIDGE Connect will offer a suite of broadband educational programs to unserved, underserved and disadvantaged communities within the six county area located in Southwest Georgia. ASU plans to leverage current educational offerings and develop new programs. Additionally, ASU aims to bridge the broadband digital divide by providing access to law enforcement and emergency management trainings, online degree and certificate education, digital skills, workshops, and other opportunities to its community residents. The BRIDGE Connect portal offers educational potential through expanded broadband access to include an innovative Use of Social Networking Technologies. Social Networking is an innovative approach that offers many benefits, including communication with peers, connections with professors, scientists, and other professionals around the world, and access to published, peer-reviewed journals, while fostering professional networking and social fulfillment. BRIDGE Connect will expand the existing ASU portal MyCampus to include online communities with a self-subscriber feature, blogs and online chat rooms, shared document libraries, online self service, a call center, virtual labs, streaming, and an easy to use online course format.

Healthcare/Education Programs: Community
healthcare education, online nursing programs, health and wellness classes, and continuing education activities will be expanded. Public Safety/Emergency Operations: Tornado Drills, Active Shooter Drills and Fire Drills offered by ASU-PD will be used to present digital media for FEMA Certifications. Existing table top exercises in Firearms, Traffic Enforcement, Ethics, Drug training will also be added for enhancing online lectures. Programs for Children: Workshops for Early Childhood Development and a Center for Parents will be included. Key elements of BRIDGE Connect include: 1. Using social networking technologies to build community relationships and further engage broadband use at ASU and surrounding counties. 2. Expanding digital literacy and use to area counties by making popular software applications available using streaming technology so that all programs participants can fully benefit from broadband technology. 3. Leveraging and expanding existing online educational programs to provide residents with job skills and educational attainment not bound by geographical and physical barriers to access. 4. Developing best practices and collaboration with like institutions who are seeking to achieve the same services in their local areas. 5. Developing greater collaboration among HBCUs, and local, state, federal governments, anchor institutions, public-private entities and broadband providers. The Albany State BRIDGE Connect program will target services for the citizens of southwest Georgia and particularly residents of the Albany MSA that consists of Dougherty, Lee, Terrell, Mitchell, Worth, and Baker Counties with approximately 164,919 residents. BRIDGE Connect will provide technology skills development for vulnerable populations including African and Hispanic Americans, low-income and displaced workers, seniors and school aged children in K-12 educational programs. Albany State University (ASU), a Historically Black Institution in rural Southwest Georgia, is uniquely qualified to fulfill this service due to the institution's long history of providing educational attainment to underserved individuals. ASU is a comprehensive, coeducational liberal arts institution which offers undergraduate and graduate curricula. ASU was ranked 3rd in the University of Georgia System for the 6th year with a graduation rate of 50.2%, ranked in the top 10 of 35 universities in a variety of areas and disciplines among Georgia state higher education institutions. In addition, ASU was ranked 25th in the U.S. News & World Report's list of America's Best Black Colleges. ASU is a regional and state partner in the advancement of the economic, social, human and physical development, and is committed to public service, research, technical assistance, and economic and leadership development activities in the region, state and the nation. Albany State University possesses both the resources and capability to complete the activities of the proposed project, and has a long history in the conduct of state and nationally funded projects. Over the past five years, the University has simultaneously managed multi-million projects including but not limited to: the Minority Biomedical Research Science and Research Infrastructure in Minority Institutions Programs, funded by the National Institutes of Health; the Historically Black College Undergraduate Program, funded by the National Science Foundation; and the Title IV-E Welfare program, which provides funding for in-service training of State of Georgia social workers located in the southwest Georgia region. In addition, ASU recently received awards from the U.S. Dept of Agriculture to include the following: $1,440,940 (over 2 years) to conduct an extensive program of outreach and policy analysis in order to support the development of sound water policy in Georgia and to involve Georgia farmers in state and regional water policy processes, and $134,665 in funds to develop a website portal that would give farmers the ability to track water use against real-time benchmarks based on data from other Georgia farms. The University has a variety of institutional resources to support the proposed project including computer facilities available to faculty and students.
(at least one lab per academic building), a Department of Education Technology Training Center, which provides training to internal and external consumers, and dedicated facilities for satellite reception and distance learning. Per calculations based on Council of Economic Advisor's guide to job creation estimates http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/cea/Estimate-of-job-creation, Direct job-years to be created from this project = 99 delineated as follows: 13 applicant direct-hires, 50 Indirect and 35 induced. Additionally, the Albany State BRIDGE Connect will provide job skill development to area agencies, law enforcement, public safety organizations, and other regional stakeholders, further enhancing job creation and skill/knowledge base of workers. The total cost for the Albany State BRIDGE Connect program is $9.1M of which $6.5M is requested as federal support for the program.