The core purpose of this project is to educate and create economic development opportunities through the use of broadband telecommunications for the most rural residents of Alabama through the use of this traveling demonstration laboratory. While assisting rural citizens in the State of Alabama, the research staff will add to the body of knowledge of the challenges and obstacles to the utilization of broadband by rural citizens. Based on the latest New Economy Index from the Kaufmann Foundation, Alabama is 48th in the nation in the overall index and 34th in broadband telecommunications. The central problem to enacting a strategic broadband-based strategy for Alabama is identifying the issues keeping rural areas from utilizing broadband. Perhaps more important is the need to teach rural Alabama the meaning of 'IT' (IT-meaning broadband). Accordingly, this project will address these specific questions: 1) What is IT? 2) Why IT is important; and 3) How can you use IT for education and economic development/job creation? So in short, before we can ever expect the State of Alabama to become more engaged in the new economy, there is a need for IT to be demonstrated and exposed to more rural Alabamians. We feel that this project offers an innovative approach by having the tools to reach any location in the State through wireless broadband. The presence of this traveling vehicle can bring exposure and public awareness to underserved areas throughout the state. This project will rely heavily on the expertise and resources of Troy University's key areas of education and economic development can be delivered through training and outreach. The overall approach of this project is grounded on the application of cluster theory. Why cluster theory for an applied training mobile unit? As one of my former professors once said, 'nothing is as practical as good theory.' The ability to assess and develop a structural framework for delivery and evaluation of this project is dependent upon a solid grounding in 'real world' application. This project has two main purposes that conform to the application of cluster theory: 1) the focus on specialized needs and resources in each rural community and 2) the need for a framework to produce meaningful research that can be duplicated in other areas of the United States. This project will examine the potential role of broadband telecommunications in the economic development of rural communities in Alabama and develop a structural framework for guiding broadband-based rural economic development planning. The project is structured to deliver outreach and awareness of broadband technologies and enable researchers to ascertain the following: 1) evaluate the importance of broadband telecommunications to the economic development of rural Alabama communities, 2) use the experiences of the outreach activities of this project to develop a 'broadband development index' for assessing the potential of rural communities to utilize broadband telecommunications for economic development and job creation and 3) determine the role of leadership in telecommunications-based economic development planning which can only be
accomplished through one-on-one contact with rural users. In practice, the research results focus on 'real-world' use by economic developers for the improvement of rural communities. Thus, a secondary research purpose is to report the findings of this research in a manner that is so fundamental that any economic development professional or local leader can easily put into action. These results will be available through a website dedicated to this project and will allow users to 'follow' the mobile unit. Beyond the mobility of the unit to reach any location in the State of Alabama, this project will allow for hands-on assistance to provide training of utilizing broadband for job creation and education that translates into meaningful applied research through the application of cluster theory to produce applied research for planning. Sports prognosticators analyze the attributes of football teams to predict the outcomes of games. These areas of analysis include offense, defense, special teams, and so on. Though these categories have statistical foundations for comparison, the category that often influences the outcome is 'intangibles.' These 'intangibles' are the non-statistical factors that play a significant role in the result of the game. As in football, 'intangibles' play an important role on the 'playing field' of economic development. Of these 'intangibles,' one of the most essential in rural citizens utilization of new technology is leadership. The literature recognizes the significance of leadership in local economic development. According to Thornburgh (1998, 298), 'without creative, sustained local leadership, federal help alone can have little enduring impact on local economic conditions.' Also, the research studies identify local leadership as a critical factor in improving the economic conditions of a community (Raagamaa 2001; Aristigueta and Fernandez 1998; Winter 1996). In addition to changing economic conditions, leadership is a force that determines the success of local economic development. Malcolm Williams notes: Within any given region, communities both large and small are essentially the same. They have the same environment, natural resources, market access and demographics. The one factor that makes them different is leadership. Why do similar towns with similar characteristics have different results in their economic development efforts? The answer is leadership. All towns say that 'we have good people, good workers, good leadership!' (Williams 1990, 4) Due to the importance of leadership, this project emphasizes the development of local leaders to encourage and promote the use of broadband telecommunications as a vehicle for education and economic development. The overall area served by this project is the State of Alabama, with concentrated outreach in the 16 central and southeast Alabama counties. Of Alabama's 67 counties, 46 have more than 50 percent of the people residing in a rural area. Based on data from the US Census Bureau, in 2008, the total rural population for the State of Alabama is approximately 1.33 million. The total population of the State of Alabama is 4.6 million. Approximately 18.6% of rural Alabama citizens live below the poverty level with just over 30% having a high school education. This project is led by Dr. Judson Edwards, Associate Professor of Economics and Director of the Center for International Business and Economic Development at Troy University. Dr. Edwards is recognized as one the leading outreach and research experts in the application of broadband telecommunications for rural economic development. He is the author of the book, 'Digital Deliverance: Dragging Rural America, Kicking and Screaming, Into the Information Economy.' This work, published by the University Press of America in 2009, is based on Dr. Edwards fieldwork in rural communities in the United States and Ireland to examine innovative strategies for encouraging rural citizens to utilize broadband telecommunications for job creation. Beyond his writing, Dr. Edwards serves as the Managing Editor of Applied Research in Economic Development, Editorial Board Member, Community Development: Journal of the Community Development Society and Editor of
the Troy University Business and Economic Review. Dr. Edwards is Advisory Economist for America's Center for Foreign Investment, a Board Member of The Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER), Member of the Agriculture Advisory Board of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta and member of the Special Advisory Committee to the Executive Council of the Alabama Rural Action Commission and the Alabama Rural Broadband Initiative of Governor Bob Riley. Through this mobile project, jobs are expected to be created in the small business sector. At this point, with the state of the economy, we are hoping to save existing jobs in rural communities by expanding market reach through broadband. Though we cannot be precise, it is our belief this project can generate 50 direct jobs over the course of the project. The total project cost for the two year project is $1,072,451.