Living Archive: Oral History of Entrepreneurship

Conversations with the scholars whose ideas shaped the field
—preserving not only conclusions, but intellectual journeys.

by

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Academic fields often tell their histories through finished products: landmark articles, influential books, theories that survived peer review, prestigious journals, and professional organizations that eventually seemed permanent. But fields do not begin that way. They begin uncertainly—in conversations, disagreements, improvised courses, professional risks, friendships, mentoring relationships, conferences with small audiences, and ideas whose importance may not become apparent for years.

Entrepreneurship is a striking example.

The phenomenon itself is ancient. People created enterprises, took risks, assembled resources, and discovered opportunities long before universities treated entrepreneurship as worthy of systematic study. Tim Mescon's recollections make an important distinction: the modern academic field did not invent entrepreneurship; rather, it gradually supplied the phenomenon with a research vocabulary, curricula, professional organizations, conferences, journals and claims to scholarly legitimacy.

That distinction is essential to understanding why an oral history of entrepreneurship matters.

The published record tells us what the field eventually concluded. The people who built it can tell us what they were trying to figure out before anyone knew what the conclusions would be. Arthur H. Cole provides an illuminating starting point. Writing in the *American Economic Review* in 1954, Cole objected to the stereotype of the entrepreneur as simply a hard-driving owner interested only in maximizing profits. He argued that what distinguished twentieth-century entrepreneurial leadership was change itself. Businesspeople and their institutions evolved alongside technology, government, employees, and society.

Cole's larger insight seems remarkably contemporary. Economics alone could not adequately explain entrepreneurship. Near the end of his essay, he argued that the study of entrepreneurship could serve as a bridge connecting economics, business administration, sociology and history. Decades before entrepreneurship became a recognizable multidisciplinary academic field, Cole was already describing why such a field might be necessary.

Yet intellectual ancestry is not the same thing as institutional existence.

Interviews with entrepreneurship scholars show how precarious that institutional existence once was. In the 1970s, entrepreneurship often occupied the spaces between established academic disciplines. Barbara Bird remembers the Academy of Management community when entrepreneurship was still an interest group rather than a division. Harold Welsch recalls that mainstream strategy concentrated heavily on large corporations, leaving the "coming and going" of smaller and emerging firms in need of serious theoretical attention. George Vozikis remembers early gatherings where encountering established entrepreneurship scholars could be both intimidating and exhilarating.

These memories reshape the official chronology.

Archival history records that Karl Vesper convened an entrepreneurship group at the Academy of Management meeting in Seattle in 1974. The community was tiny enough that only 12 papers were submitted to its program in 1977. Eventually conferences, journals, newsletters, bylaws and professional offices appeared, and the Academy granted entrepreneurship division status in 1986. Read only as dates, this looks like ordinary organizational development. Heard through the recollections of the people involved, it becomes something different: a campaign for legitimacy. The scholars were not merely studying entrepreneurs. In an important sense, they were behaving entrepreneurially themselves.

They identified an undervalued intellectual opportunity, assembled networks, obtained resources, experimented with programs and teaching methods, persuaded skeptical institutions, established organizations, and created a scholarly market where little had existed before. The Mescon history makes this parallel explicit: entrepreneurship education's development can itself be interpreted as a story of academic entrepreneurship.

Mescon's own story reveals another feature that polished histories can obscure: academic fields rarely have a single birthplace. His experience connects entrepreneurship to private-enterprise education, small-business management, the University of Georgia, the emerging Small Business Development Center system, and management education. Yet the supporting research cautions against turning any one of these into the singular origin story. Entrepreneurship entered universities through several neighboring doors.

That ambiguity is not a weakness in the history. It is part of the history.

The same is true intellectually.

Early entrepreneurship research concentrated heavily on the entrepreneur as a person. Scot Shane remembers psychology as an important intellectual source before scholars from strategy and other disciplines "moved in." Shaker Zahra describes a broader migration from adjoining fields that changed the questions researchers asked. Entrepreneurship became increasingly informed by strategy, sociology, economics, and organization theory.

The resulting field did not advance by simply replacing one correct theory with another. It expanded the object of inquiry.

Researchers moved from asking principally who entrepreneurs are toward studying what they do, how ventures emerge, where opportunities come from, how context shapes entrepreneurial action, and how entrepreneurial activity can be measured. Paul Reynolds recalls the deceptively difficult questions embedded in large-scale research: What counts as a business? Who exactly is the entrepreneur? Per Davidsson's reflections, the field is being pushed toward another stage of maturity—away from celebrating isolated "first" studies and toward replication, accumulation, and coordinated evidence.

Once again, the oral record tells us something journal articles cannot. A published theory tends to look inevitable after it becomes influential. An interview restores contingency. It reminds us that today's conventional wisdom was once one proposal among competing possibilities.
The interviews also reveal the social architecture behind intellectual change. Doctoral consortia were not merely professional-development events. They were places where definitions, paradigms, and standards were contested in real time. Mentoring mattered. Conferences mattered. Repeated encounters mattered. Fields are communities of argument before they are bodies of settled knowledge.

And success created a new problem. Entrepreneurship eventually became large enough to divide into "many entrepreneurships": corporate, international, social, women's entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial ecosystems and other communities. Candida Brush's recollections of building the women's entrepreneurship research community illustrate how an empirical problem can become an enduring scholarly infrastructure. But she also raises the question that accompanies maturity: how can a field encourage specialization without losing its shared intellectual community?

That may be the most important reason to preserve these interviews now.

The written literature preserves arguments. Institutional archives preserve dates. Citation counts preserve influence. None fully preserves what participants believed was at stake, whom they learned from, what frightened or excited them, which ideas initially failed, why certain relationships mattered, or how uncertain the future looked from inside the present.

The archive is also necessarily unfinished. Memories differ. Some claims require documentary verification. Some interviews remain incomplete or unavailable in the present collection. Oral testimony should therefore complement—not replace—the published and archival record.

But that is exactly its value.

Entrepreneurship teaches that outcomes emerge through uncertain processes whose meaning becomes clear only afterward. The history of entrepreneurship scholarship followed a similar path. To preserve only its finished theories would be to preserve the destination while discarding the journey.

A living archive does something more. It allows future scholars to hear the uncertainty before legitimacy, the debate before consensus, and the people behind the ideas.

And perhaps that is the most entrepreneurial story the field has yet to tell.