Entrepreneurship

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Community as the living infrastructure of Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is often portrayed as an individual journey, the story of a visionary who defies odds and creates something new through personal drive and exceptional talent. Yet decades of research show that entrepreneurial activity is, fundamentally, a community-embedded process. New ventures emerge not in isolation but through interactions, relationships, shared knowledge, and collective meaning-making. For this reason, the idea of community is not peripheral to entrepreneurship: it is the infrastructure that enables it.

This chapter reflects on how community shapes entrepreneurial action, drawing from established insights in the field while connecting them to the lived experience of universities as communities of knowledge, purpose, and transformation.

1. **Community as a source of knowledge**
   Entrepreneurship begins with noticing and interpreting opportunities, a process that rarely occurs in isolation. Research shows that opportunities often emerge through participation in networks and communities of practice rather than through individual insight alone. Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning, widely applied in entrepreneurship research, highlights how knowledge is acquired through social participation and shared activity, enabling individuals to recognize patterns, understand industry dynamics and imagine alternative futures.
   Communities provide the conditions for this form of learning. Interactions with peers, mentors and practitioners, as well as exposure

to diverse disciplinary perspectives, shape how entrepreneurial ideas are developed. A student exploring an idea in a university lab or classroom, a researcher sharing findings at a seminar, or a team testing prototypes with local organizations are all acts of community-embedded learning. Within entrepreneurial ecosystems, knowledge spillovers allow ideas to circulate across individuals and institutions, linking scientific discovery, technological development and business experimentation. In this way, communities do not merely transmit information; they cultivate collective intelligence that no entrepreneur can generate alone.

2. Community as a mechanism of legitimacy

While community-based learning is essential for recognizing and developing entrepreneurial opportunities, knowledge alone is rarely sufficient to turn an idea into a viable venture. Even highly innovative initiatives must acquire legitimacy to be understood, accepted and supported by relevant audiences. As Aldrich and Fiol's (1994) classic analysis argues, new firms in emerging contexts face not only resource constraints but also deficits in cognitive legitimacy, as their activities are not yet taken for granted, and sociopolitical legitimacy, as they lack broad social endorsement. Communities play a decisive role in addressing these challenges by helping new initiatives become comprehensible, credible and aligned with shared norms.

Legitimacy flows through multiple channels, including social networks in which trusted individuals and early investors signal confidence in an entrepreneur's capabilities; local institutions such as universities, incubators or civic associations that provide formal endorsement and position new ventures within established structures; and community narratives that frame emerging ideas in culturally meaningful ways. Together, these mechanisms help new ventures become understandable and worthy of support. When early collaborators, local partners or alumni engage with a student- or researcher-led venture, they do more than offer practical assistance; they enable the project to cross the threshold from possibility to reality.

3. Community as emotional and moral support

Securing legitimacy and external support is a necessary step in the entrepreneurial process, but it does not eliminate the uncertainty, personal risk and exposure to failure that entrepreneurs face. Behavioural research in the field indicates that psychological factors, including resilience, persistence and the ability to cope with setbacks, play a crucial role in entrepreneurial outcomes. Communities provide the emotional scaffolding that sustains individuals through this volatile journey. Empirical research in entrepreneurship reveals that emotional support from social networks enhances persistence in the early stages of venture development, thereby increasing the likelihood that entrepreneurs continue despite setbacks and uncertainty (Klyver, Honig, & Steffens, 2018).

Within a university setting, this support takes concrete forms: encouragement from peers, guidance and empathy from faculty mentors, advice from alumni who have previously navigated entrepreneurial paths, or reassurance from supervisors when experiments fail or ideas need to be rethought. These community ties alleviate the emotional burden of decision-making and help entrepreneurs reframe obstacles not as signs of incapacity but as expected components of experimentation and learning. In this way, the university community transforms uncertainty into a shared experience, making persistence and long-term engagement more likely.

4. Community as a site of co-creation

Beyond learning, legitimacy and emotional support, communities also shape how entrepreneurial ideas are refined over time. Once entrepreneurs can cope with uncertainty and persist through early setbacks, they rarely advance alone. Entrepreneurship is not merely about launching a venture; it is about mobilizing people around a shared vision and coordinating contributions from multiple actors. Communities facilitate this mobilization by providing spaces for co-creation, environments where diverse actors contribute and shape a project's trajectory. Research on collective innovation shows that new ideas often emerge through community-based co-creation, in which multiple actors contribute to iteratively shape solutions over time (von Hippel & von Krogh, 2003).

This co-creation may occur within established structures, such as university entrepreneurship centres or student clubs, or informally among colleagues and friends. Either way, community is the arena where ideas evolve through iteration. Even the smallest entrepreneurial insight is typically the result of numerous conversations: peers who challenge assumptions, researchers who provide data, practitioners who test prototypes, and supporters who help articulate the mission.

The university as community

Universities occupy a distinctive position within entrepreneurial communities because they bring together, in a sustained and structured way, many of the social dynamics on which entrepreneurship depends. They are spaces where disciplinary, cultural and generational diversity coexist, enabling interactions among students, researchers, faculty, alumni and external partners who might otherwise never meet. This diversity underpins the circulation of ideas, the formation of relationships and the emergence of new entrepreneurial possibilities.

Seen in this light, the university is not simply a setting where ventures are launched, but a living community that enables learning, legitimacy, resilience and collective creation to reinforce one another. By cultivating such communities, universities contribute not only to the formation of new ventures but also to the development of entrepreneurs who understand entrepreneurship as a fundamentally relational and socially embedded process.

References

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