

The Multidisciplinary Entrepreneurship Scholar



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Abstract A scholar is a person who studies an academic subject and knows a lot about it. A great scholar in the academic subject of small business economics is David B. Audretsch. He even co-created small business economics as an academic subject! But David has also had an impact on a broad range of academic disciplines. A look at David's most highly cited publications (in Google Scholar and Web of Science) shows the broad disciplinary range of his high-impact publications. It is first and foremost economics (including the journals *American Economic Review*, *European Economic Review*, *Review of Economics and Statistics*). He is even the 20th most cited economist of the world according to Google Scholar. But his high-impact work can also be found in geography (*Regional Studies*, *Annals of Regional Science*), management (*Journal of Management*, *Journal of Management Studies*), entrepreneurship (*Journal of Business Venturing*, *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*), and innovation journals (*Research Policy*, *Industry and Innovation*, *Journal of Technology Transfer*). In his recent research he also endeavours into psychology (Welpel et al., *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 36:69–96, 2012); (Obschonka et al., *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 7:95–104, 2016). The *Small Business Economics Journal*, just like David's research, is first and foremost economics, but is also very much a multidisciplinary endeavour. It is an endeavour to achieve a better understanding of entrepreneurship, firms and the economy at large, informing and improving public policy to stimulate entrepreneurship and economic growth, not by coincidence the name of the unit David founded and led at the Max Planck Institute of Economics in Jena. In this essay I will discuss the value of multidisciplinary scholarship, in general and in particular for economics, and use David as an exemplar scholar in that respect.

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E. E. Lehmann, M. Keilbach (eds.), *From Industrial Organization to Entrepreneurship*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25237-3_36

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Multidisciplinary Scholarship

Academic disciplines can be defined as academic studies that focus on a self-imposed limited field of knowledge. Academic disciplines as the primary unit of internal differentiation of science is a nineteenth century invention: before the rise of academic disciplines there was no such thing as disciplinary scholarship. Disciplines can be demarcated based on three criteria: the phenomena of interest, their research methods, and their theories (epistemologies). The good thing is that academic disciplines provide a means for the accumulation of knowledge (theories and tools) about particular phenomena: expertise of one community, build up over time. The bad thing is that a disciplinary view on the world, tends to be reductionistic (focusing on one aspect). Sticking to one discipline has at least two drawbacks. First, research that limits its scope to one disciplinary silo is likely to be inferior to research drawing from the fields of knowledge beyond any one disciplinary silo. Second, solving the world's problems requires knowledge from multiple disciplines (Terjesen and Politis 2015). Even though there are great benefits in having academic disciplines, most scientific and societal progress is likely to be realized with multidisciplinary scholarship. David's work is an excellent example of the power of multidisciplinary scholarship: producing superior research starting with economics, but enriched with other disciplines, in order to better understand this multifaceted phenomenon called entrepreneurship. Starting with economics, can his research be qualified as multidisciplinary economics?

Multidisciplinary Economics?

Multidisciplinary economics is an odd term. Can one discipline be multidisciplinary? This seems to be a linguistic impossibility. From a historical point of view, however, economics has always been multidisciplinary. Economics largely emerged out of (moral) philosophy, and initially evolved as political economy, considered as a branch of the science of the legislator (Smith), combining what we would now call economics, law and political science. Economics has been created as a separate discipline in the nineteenth century. The disciplines it teamed up with have changed. Initially, history and sociology were its companions, with the German historical school (Schmoller, Sombart), and the 'sociological' studies of capitalism by Marx and Weber. But later on mathematics and physics became the preferred partners, going back to Cournot, Von Thunen, Walras, Fisher, combined into the 'invention' of econometrics (Frisch, Tinbergen), and creating the dominance of general equilibrium theory (Arrow, Debreu). More recently we see combinations with psychology in behavioral economics (Kahneman, Tversky), with history, law, sociology and political science in institutional economics (North, Williamson, Ostrom), and with history and geography in evolutionary economics (Arthur, Boschma). So economics has always been in the company of other disciplines. One may say that combining

economics with other disciplines is a good thing. Friedrich Hayek even claimed that an economist who is only an economist cannot be a good economist. The question is what makes a good economist? I suggest that the answer is that a good economist is someone who develops and disseminates scientifically rigorous and societally relevant economics knowledge. The rigor and relevance can be improved with enriching economics with other disciplines. Teaming up with physics and mathematics made economics more rigorous, while teaming up with the other social sciences and humanities made economics more relevant.

Rigor and Relevance: Small Business Economics for the Real World

A good economist is someone who develops and disseminates scientifically rigorous and societally relevant economics knowledge: economics for the real world. This is in contrast to irrelevant economics that is disengaged, ivory tower science. It is also in contrast to economics that has turned into a belief, not setting itself up for discussion. This happens when economist say that they “believe in the market”, or “believe in entrepreneurship”. The latter has frequently been stated by policy economists, advocating entrepreneurship policy. A situation in which policy runs ahead of theory. David is an excellent example of “small business economics for the real world”. Leading the small business economics field, while standing on the shoulders of (scientific) giants before him (Schumpeter, Galbraith, Solow, Arrow), and using the tools and theory of economics to better understand the antecedents and consequences of entrepreneurship. It is a scientific approach for better understanding entrepreneurship, but also engaging with public policy to improve the real world.

David is a great multidisciplinary scholar, who combines economics with other disciplines, combines rigor and relevance, and in this way created a “small business economics for the real world”.

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