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Here, There and Everywhere: A Review of *DIY U* by Anya Kamenetz

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Abstract

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If you read [College, Inc.](#), the higher education blog by Daniel de Vise of the Washington Post, from the week of April 29, 2010 to May 6, 2010, here is what you saw:

VCU tuition, fees to rise 24 percent In-state undergraduates at Virginia Commonwealth University will see 2010-11 tuition and fees rise by 24 percent. VCU's Board of Visitors on Thursday set in-state tuition and mandatory fees at \$8,817, up \$1,700 from the current academic year. School officials say VCU will boost financial aid for students with the most need by using federal stimulus funds available for 2010-11. Undergraduate tuition and fees for out-of-state students will increase \$1,200, or 5.7 percent, to \$21,949. The average annual cost for university housing and meal plans will increase \$191, or 2.3 percent, to \$8,526. ([April 29, 2010](#))

UVa. tuition going up 10 percent In-state undergraduates at the University of Virginia will see tuition rise by nearly 10 percent in the upcoming school year. The university's Board of Visitors voted Friday to increase tuition and mandatory fees for Virginia undergraduates from \$9,672 to \$10,628 in 2010-11. The board blames cuts in state funding and the reduction in federal stimulus money to help hold down tuition increases. Out-of-state undergraduates will see tuition and fees rise to \$33,574, or 6 percent. ([April 30, 2010](#))

GMU tuition rises 8 percent George Mason University has increased tuition and fees for the 2010-11 academic year 8.2 percent, bringing the total cost to \$8,686 for resident students. Tuition and fees for nonresidents is up 6 percent to \$24,500. ([May 6, 2010](#))

George Mason University (GMU) and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) are the two largest universities in the commonwealth of Virginia. The University of Virginia (UVA) is the flagship institution of a deep and impressive system of public higher education in Virginia. These three public institutions of higher education rely on state support to varying degrees, but all three find themselves raising tuition and fees significantly for the 2010-11 academic year. This phenomenon is not limited to the Commonwealth of Virginia; tuition and fees at institutions of higher education have rising steadily across the United States for the last two decades.

It is impossible to know if it is pure coincidence that this review of *DIY U* by Anna Kamenetz was written in the immediate wake of these tuition and fee hike announcements. Regardless, the connections between those announcements and a premise underlying Kamenetz's book are clear. That is, the book exists largely because the institution of higher education is facing troubling times resulting in actions such as massive tuition hikes. There are serious questions to be asked and issues to be addressed about how we reached this point, how institutions of higher education will respond to the challenges they face, and what this all means for individuals pursuing post-secondary education.

Kamenetz's book is a fair attempt at tackling some of those issues and offering a surface-level glimpse at some intriguing possibilities for change. She devotes too much of the book explaining and examining the so-called crisis in higher education and then does not dig deeply enough into the DIY notion that one would expect more of given the title of the book. And, while Kamenetz does a fine job of bringing important issues and ideas to the public's consciousness, she ultimately struggles to create a deep or coherent narrative. In a review of Kamenetz's first book as well as another related book, Daniel Gross from Slate magazine wrote that, "it's not that

the authors misdiagnose ills that affect our society. It's just that they lack the perspective to add any great insight." In *DIY U*, Kamenetz suffers the same fate. She points out legitimate problems, and offers a shallow examination of loosely-coupled possibilities for "transformation." In the end, though, at least for those that wrote and contributed to this review, there is nothing terribly insightful about *DIY U*.

Summary of the Book

Kamenetz organizes the book in two parts. Part I, dubbed "How we got here," is a set of three chapters intended to establish the "crisis" in higher education that serves as the backdrop for the book. Part II, dubbed "How we get there from here," is a set of three chapters wherein Kamenetz describes the Do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to post-secondary learning.

The so-called "crisis" in higher education can be summarized as:

- **High demand** ("The number of undergraduates more than doubled from 7.4 million in 1970 to 18.2 million in 2007, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Two-thirds of all high school graduates now enroll in college immediately....," p. 19)
- **Low access / high dropouts /static enrollment** ("College-going continues to rise, but more slowly, and graduation rates have fallen slightly since the 1970s. Just 30 percent of young people today get a four-year college degree, and another 8 percent get a two-year degree or less, putting America now behind ten other countries....," p. 19)
- **Rising tuition** ("Between 1990 and 2008, tuition and fees rose 248 percent in real dollars, more than any other major component of the Consumer Price Index" p. viii.)
- **High student debt** ("Around two-thirds of undergraduate students take on debt to get through college with an average graduating debt of \$23,200 in 2007-08....," p. 20)

In sum, as a nation, while demand for higher education has grown dramatically, our educational attainment rates have plateaued, and those that do manage to earn a college degree are faced with unprecedented levels of debt upon graduation. There are other problems, including those addressed in *Chapter Two* called "Sociology." For example, there are huge gaps in attainment rates by race and income ("...the highest-achieving students from high-income families...are nearly four times more likely than low-income students with the same academic accomplishments to end up in a highly selective university," p. 33). Yet, for the most part, Kamenetz frames "the problem" in economic terms. And, *Chapter Three*, "Economics," is the longest chapter and the bridge to Part II where Kamenetz finally gets to the real subject of the book.

Part II is where Kamenetz tries to flesh out the ideas behind the title of the book.

Do-It-Yourself University means the expansion of education beyond classroom walls: free, open-source, vocational, experiential, and self-directed learning...Technology upsets the traditional hierarchies and categories of education. It can put the learner at the center of the educational process. Increasingly this means students will decide what they want to learn; when, where, and with whom; and they will learn by doing. (p. x)

In other words, Kamenetz looks largely to the Web where, like in other industries, "the great unbundling" happens. That is, the various components of the higher education experience (i.e. course content, teaching, socialization, etc.) can be "delivered" separately and students can navigate their way through the choices with the assistance of "personal learning networks" (i.e. a

self-selected collection of virtual relationships with people and content through social media). The increasing availability of open educational resources and networking technologies affords countless possibilities for self-directed learning. In sum, the DIY approach to higher learning lies at the intersection of technology and self-directed social learning.

A Critique of the Book

DIY U is informative if not insightful. That is, there is plenty of information throughout the book, and in some cases, maybe too much information. There is real value in naming problems clearly and for anyone who does not know about the state of affairs in higher education, Part I of the book is likely enlightening. Part II is more loosely arranged, but Kamenetz does bring important topics to light. Moving forward, open education resources, immersive role-playing games, social media, etc. are all really important considerations and possibilities for learning. Those technologies are announced and cobbled together in *Chapter Four*, “Computer Science.” *Chapter Seven*, “A Resource Guide...for a Do-It-Yourself education,” is a useful and reasonably well organized attempt to put some frames around the many resources. The possibilities for DIY learning can be overwhelming. Kamenetz’s resource guide gives those looking for a way a helpful series of tips and framework for getting started.

Fundamentally, though, the book has more limitations than strengths. For starters, there is a basic flaw in the logic underlying the book. The “here” is much more clear than the “there,” and it is not clear that the “there” necessarily follows from the “here.” In other words, Kamenetz makes a reasonably compelling case that trouble looms for the institution of higher education. I am not as willing as she is to call the situation a “crisis,” especially since undergraduate enrollment rose 25% in the decade from 1997 to 2007 (NCES, 2009). Yet, anyone who works in an institution of higher education these days can tell you that these are lean financial times, at best.

However, if we accept that there is, in fact, a crisis in higher education, then whose problem is that? Asked differently, do institutions of higher education need to make major adjustments in order to stave off the effects of this so-called crisis, or, is this a crisis for those individuals facing the prospects of higher education in the near future? If it is the former, then Part II does not necessarily logically follow from Part I.

In her own words, Kamenetz writes,

DIY U is about how America can get better at guiding all its young people toward supporting themselves, helping others, and living lives of awareness. It’s an argument for rethinking higher education to take advantage of the tremendous opportunities of the times we’re living in. And it’s a guide for individuals...” (p. xiv)

Leaving aside the obvious overreach of the first sentence, the second and third sentences suggest that Kamenetz imagines the DIY approach as something institutions consider as part of their reform efforts and also an approach for individuals to consider. That is, she would not see the unit of analysis of her book as either institutions or individuals; she targets both.

Perhaps the problem, then, is with the title (and subtitle) of the book. Let us consider three constructs: learning, schooling and education. If we accept that learning and schooling are two separate but overlapping processes that are both part of the larger construct of education, then a DIY approach is much more easily imagined as part of the learning process than as aligned with schooling. If Kamenetz’s goal was to have us rethink higher education (schooling)

but also to provide a guide for individuals (learning), she would have done well to make these distinctions explicit and write about them separately. For example, Kamenetz writes about how universities are engaging in course redesign processes in order to take advantage of modern technologies. She spends a few pages writing about the efforts driven by the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) over the past decade. This work is being undertaken by the institutions largely to use technology to create cost efficiencies. That is, they are examples of how institutions are integrating technology to, at least in part, deal with what are apparently rising costs in the provision of higher education.

But, what does the work of NCAT have to do with DIY? Students at colleges and universities where NCAT-driven “innovation” is taking place still enroll for courses at an institution into which they must be admitted and pay tuition and fees. In most of those instances, the only difference is that the students go to a computer lab on campus to “learn” instead of a lecture hall or a more standard classroom. That is not DIY anything.

It is in the availability of open education resources and the affordances for learning of networked computing applications, however, that the DIY learning approach really lights up. *Chapter Five* (“Independent Study”), then, is the natural and logical departure point for Part II. In that chapter, Kamenetz hits at the heart of DIY learning (notice: *NOT* schooling). In writing about the “edupunk” idea, Kamenetz writes, “[w]hat edupunk – DIY education, if you will – promises is an evolution from expensive institutions to expansive networks; it aims to fulfill the promise of universal education, but only by leaving the university behind” (p. 110). Kamenetz goes on to cite John Seeley Brown’s concept of “open participatory learning ecosystems” and the related evolving concept of “personal learning networks” (PLN) credited largely to Alec Couros who, in turns gives credit to Steven Downes who cites David Warlick (networked learning!). Both ideas are based upon open, social learning afforded by appropriate technological applications, an abundance of information, and a critical mass of participants willing to share, engage, interact, etc.

Thus, *Chapter Five* is where the *DIY U* premise comes alive. However, it took Kamenetz 107 pages to get there and then, even if we generously include *Chapter Six* as relevant to the DIY theme, she only devotes 28 pages to what is explicitly suggested by the title: “edupunks, edupreneurs, and the coming transformation of higher education.” Perhaps it is the title, then, that is most problematic. Or, perhaps the real trouble here is that Kamenetz tries to do too much. Part I of the book consists of the first three chapters that are, respectively, about the history, sociology and economics of education. Entire books and, perhaps ironically, courses of study, have been written and undertaken on the topics of each of those chapters. Scholars have devoted their whole professional lives to each of these topics. To devote half of the book to coverage of the history, sociology and economics of higher education does a disservice to those fields of study. Here, it also distracts from and delays the arrival of the promise of the title of the book.

With an appropriate and candid disclaimer about purposefully engaging in a surface-level synthesis, Kamenetz could have crafted a single chapter in the beginning that framed the problem. *Chapter One* should have been a synthesis of what is currently Part I in 20 precisely written pages, Kamenetz could have made a very compelling, evidence-based claim for her case that the institution of higher education is in crisis. In the remainder of the book, then, Kamenetz would have been free to explore the DIY approach and components in much greater depth.

The open education "movement," for example, merits its own chapter if not an entire book-length treatment. Curtis Bonk's book, *The World is Open: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education*, is an entire book about online learning. Kamenetz even mentions Bonk's book on p.152 and refers to it as "massive exploration of the field of online learning." The DIY approach is not necessarily about negotiating free learning resources. Therefore, if the for-profit higher education industry is to be included as part of the DIY mix, then there is at least a chapter's worth of material about that industry, including what are likely compelling statistics about the growth of that industry.

Thus, the overall structure and logic of the book are significantly flawed. There are some additional problems in the book. First, like nearly all narratives on the reform or transformation of formal institution of learning, P-16, a huge missing set of voices in *DIY U* is that of the students, current and future. If enrollment in higher education is up by 25% in the last decade, are students clamoring for something different?

Similarly, if this is the Reformation, who are the people who will have to die for it? Kamenetz gives us examples of people who are making it without a college degree, but she also gives just as many examples of people who are advocating for DIY learning having themselves been products of and receiving the benefits of formalized higher education. It is Jeff Jarvis giving a great "F^ck the SAT" TEDxNYED talk, while conceding that his son just took the SAT. Humans are biologically seekers as Kamenetz notes, but we are also biologically risk-averse. For now, *DIY U* (the institutional version) is risky or, at least, is perceived as risky. Whatever one may say about the system as a whole, real change will not happen until individuals make different choices for themselves and their children.

Also, as perhaps befits someone who writes for Fast Company, a business and innovation magazine, most of Kamenetz's measures of effectiveness are economic. In focusing on the economics, Kamenetz accepts as almost axiomatic that higher education is first and foremost an economic development/human capital engine, should be judged above all on how it does that and restructured to do that better (as opposed to the other things colleges and universities do). Kamenetz gives us something like **College value= (difference in lifetime earnings degreed v. non degreed) – (cost of college)**. One would be hard-pressed to find many post-secondary educators who do what they do because they want to increase students' lifetime earnings. If that is really how we are going to measure the value of education, the current way of doing higher ed is inevitably going to be found wanting. That is, dismantling the present system is easy if you measure against a standard (teaching employable skills at the lowest cost) that it was not designed to meet.

Kamenetz writes, "...higher education still retains some irreducible value, a pearl inside the oyster. It may be difficult to define, but its power over individuals and populations is too real to be ignored" (p. 35). If that value is as important as Kamenetz says it is, is it not worth the time to try to define it and make it part of the discussion of how higher education ought to change and not change? Ultimately, Kamenetz does not take on that challenge and is instead satisfied to talk about higher education and reform almost solely in terms of quantitative measures.

In conclusion, Anya Kamenetz is a journalist who writes largely at the intersection of technology, innovation, and finance. Also, her first book, *Generation Debt*, was about the problems facing young people graduating from college with massive amounts of loans to repay. Writing about technology and higher education, then, was a natural marriage for her. Clearly, she

learned a whole lot about the institution of higher education in researching both of her books. Unfortunately, in this instance, she tries to teach us everything she learned about higher education and, as a result, effectively buries the lead. The “here” that Kamenetz writes about in Part I is fairly clear, if not overstated. And, by going nearly everywhere with respect to technology, the ‘there’ she writes about in Part II is a muddled place. Ultimately, then, we never truly get “there.”