

The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream

by Sampson Davis, George Jenkins, and Rameck Hunt, with Lisa Frazier Page
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Reviewed by:

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The Pact tells the success story of three men—Sam, Rameck, and George—who grew up in poverty-stricken areas of New Jersey surrounded by crime, drug abuse, and broken homes. Their story is one of friendship, hope, persistence, and inspiration as they strive to achieve their goal of graduating from high school, college, and medical/dental school. Alternating chapters provide each man’s perspective on the same experiences, written in his own voice. They also bring to light some of the positive role models who helped the young men pursue their dreams.

The authors begin by presenting their family, educational, and social backgrounds. Each man’s childhood story is told separately from the other two. The narrative then moves into their high school years when they meet and seal their pact. The book takes the reader through their undergraduate years at Seton Hall University and on to professional (medical and dental) schools. It ends shortly after graduation when, as practicing physicians and dentist, they treat patients from the same neighborhoods in which they grew up.

In the introduction, the authors explain their reason for writing this book: “We did this because we hope that our story will inspire others, so that even those young people who feel trapped by their circumstances, or pulled by peer pressure in the wrong directions, might look for a way out not through drugs, alcohol, crime, or dares but through the power of friendship” (p. 3). The importance of supportive friends weaves throughout the book, with comments such as “We knew we’d never survive if we went after it [goal of becoming a doctor] alone” and “. . . we learned to solve our problems together. We are doctors today because of the positive influence we had on one another” (p. 2).

This conversational, easy-to-read book may be useful in a first-year reading program to help students see how they can identify resources and relationships to be successful in college. As the three doctors’ story is largely focused on their experience in higher education, it appears to be a good match for college students. However, the manner in which the book is written seems more directed toward high school students or younger. While some beginning college students will be able to engage with the story, a majority of students may not. While the book offers touching stories of survival through hardships, without a particular purpose for selecting this type of reading, I am not confident that the traditional-aged, first-year student would find that it speaks to their experience or provides motivation for their college journey. Many students would come away with a better understanding of the challenges of growing up in the projects, but might find it difficult to apply this to themselves. With this in mind, I offer some suggestions on how the book might fit for specialized populations.

I see this being useful with selected populations of students, such as new students participating in TRIO programs, to help provide motivation at the beginning of the university

experience. The personal stories in the book speak to a variety of situations that make students vulnerable to failure at the university level. Many of the examples shared permeate any community across the nation that has been negatively affected by poor school systems and poverty. The three doctors attended Seton Hall University through an Educational Opportunity Program; because much of the book is about their experience in the program, it would be a natural fit for this group.

Peer leaders or facilitators for at-risk populations (including organizations that tutor at local schools) will find helpful background knowledge on issues that their constituents might have faced or could be facing in this text. For this reason, it could be a useful training tool for developing understanding and empathy for students who come from educationally and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Additionally, this text could be a helpful resource for academic advisors and other student affairs and academic support staff. The information shared in the book on what students need to succeed attests to what is missing in our traditional academic advising models. Many academic advisors have large advising loads and cannot provide as much attention as their students—especially first-generation students—may need or want. This might help academic advisors realize that they are an integral component of students' success and that they impact their pathways to graduation.

Furthermore, this text could be an excellent choice to use with new students in themed residence halls, living learning communities, or in first-year seminars related to social justice. The book discusses race relations, access to and equity in education, socioeconomic barriers that impact fulfillment of basic needs and academic preparedness, and a range of other social justice topics. These topics could provide opportunities for social experiments, research or outreach projects, or simply stimulating conversation. Students interested in social justice especially may connect to this book in attempting to find a way to actively address some of these concerns.

Lastly, the book speaks to student affairs professionals in almost every functional area, but specifically in residence life, student conduct, financial aid, and student activities. The more we understand about the students whom we serve, the more intentional we can be in connecting with them. We also can better understand the decisions that students make while in college and help them make sense of their experience. Educating ourselves about diverse experiences will inform our practice.