



**Ten Steps to Prepare for Success
from Jail or Prison:**

Straight-A Guide Introductory Course



**Module 0:
Introduction**

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Straight-A Guide: An Introduction

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines mastermind as “A person who supplies the directing or creative intelligence for a project.”

If you’re looking for a “mastermind,” where would you turn? I suppose your answer would depend on your current situation.

If you’re a young man who aspires to become a professional athlete, you might want a mastermind who has proven himself in the athletic arena.

If you’re looking to create wealth, you may search for someone who has made a lot of money.

If you’re in trouble, you may want to learn from someone who has gone through struggle and overcome.

Who am I?

My name is Michael Santos. As a young man, I made many bad decisions. I didn’t listen to my parents, my teachers, or my guidance counselors. I finished high school with mediocre grades. Then I got into trouble. The friends I chose were also in trouble. I became involved with selling drugs. Authorities arrested me. Prosecutors charged me with crimes. A jury convicted me. By the time I was 23, I started serving a 45-year prison term.

While in prison, I learned a lot. Mostly, I learned lessons that I should have learned earlier in my life. If I had been exposed to masterminds in my youth, I may have made better decisions in school. I could have built a better life. I could have avoided problems with the criminal justice system.

But I didn’t make good decisions. And as a result, problems surfaced. And I didn’t get this message until I was locked inside of a jail cell. While in that jail cell, however, I read a book that led to a profound change in my way of thinking. And by changing the way I thought, I changed my life.

I’m convinced that anyone can have the same type of transformation—the change starts with a positive mindset that we can learn from others.

Masterminds taught lessons that helped me through prison. Those lessons made all the difference in my life. Through this course, I'd like to share what I learned. Truthfully, I can sum up those lessons in one sentence:



The decisions we make today have a direct influence on our prospects for success tomorrow.

While living in struggle, it's sometimes hard to accept the importance of all our decisions. In my case, the struggle was serving time. When we're serving time, we feel all kinds of pressures:

- » *We're separated from our family and communities.*
- » *Other people are watching us.*
- » *Some prisoners want to build or protect reputations.*
- » *Others want to run away or hide from reputations they've built.*

As someone who has gone through 9,500 days in prison, and returned successfully, I feel a duty to share the concepts that I learned from leaders. Every person in jail or prison can benefit by learning strategies to develop a positive mindset. When we make better decisions, we move closer to building lives of meaning and success.

We're always making choices. And the choices we make have a direct influence on our prospects for success.

We sow seeds every day. We can choose to sow seeds that produce gardens of abundance. Without a doubt, those seeds can lead to success today and in the future.

Through this course, you'll see that I began working toward that goal back in 1987. A jury convicted me after a lengthy trial. Wanting something better, I made a decision to change. I looked for masterminds to guide me. From masterminds, I learned that helped me through my adjustment in high-security penitentiaries, medium- and low-security federal correctional institutions, and minimum-security prisons.

I finished 26 years with the Bureau of Prisons in August of 2013. My adjustment in prison opened opportunities to succeed upon release. Success came to me after release because I willingly learned from masterminds and leaders. Some of those leaders created companies that employed thousands of people. Some of those leaders built professional ca-



reers. And some of those leaders included other people that had gone through the criminal justice system—yet still created pathways to recalibrate and grow. I will share their lessons in this course.

Had I learned those lessons earlier, I may have made better decisions as a young man. I may have avoided going into the criminal justice system completely. It's my hope that others will find value from the content presented in this 10-part course. Besides offering the course content to jails and prisons across the nation, we'll also publish on the following platforms:

- » *[YouTube: Prison Professors channel](#)*
- » *[iTunes: Prison Professors podcast](#)*
- » *[Facebook: Being Resilient Page](#)*

We encourage people in prison to share what they're learning from this course with family members. Family members should see and understand the efforts their loved ones are making to prepare for success. This course will show how and why we should use time effectively. Grasp the influence of every decision. We need to connect the dots from struggle to success. I'm trying "to be the change that I want to see in the world," as one mastermind taught.

Before getting too far ahead, let me provide some background. We know that people in jails and prisons get exposed to many courses and programs. As an author, and as a co-founder of the Prison Professors program, I can assure you that everyone on our team wants to earn your trust.

I'll begin by sharing my story.

Background:

As mentioned above, I made many bad decisions as a young man. I didn't pay attention in school. I didn't listen to guidance counselors, teachers, or my parents. Despite having every opportunity to build a life of relevance and meaning, I made one bad decision after another. In 1982, Shorecrest High School, in North Seattle, awarded my diploma. But I didn't earn that diploma. In fact, I was a lousy student.

Following high school, I rejected the idea of furthering my education in college. I drifted into a fast life. At 20, I saw the movie Scarface. Tony Montana, the lead charac-

ter, had a horrible influence on the decisions I made. After seeing the movie, I started making inquiries about how much dealers would pay for cocaine. I'd never sold cocaine before, so I had a lot to learn.



Once I learned more about the cocaine market, I traveled to Miami to see if I could find a supplier. Once I found a supplier and learned that I could make a profit, I began recruiting others to join the network I was creating. Not understanding the criminal justice system, I made more bad decisions. I fooled myself. If I never handled the cocaine directly, I convinced myself that I'd never get caught. I recruited others. I paid people to retrieve the cocaine in Miami, drive it to Seattle, and distribute the cocaine to customers.

Trafficking in cocaine became my way of life. I lied to my family and to anyone else who asked about what I was doing. I sold cocaine in Seattle and other cities for about 18 months. But the drug-dealing phase of my life came to an end on August 11, 1987, when the DEA caught me.

I saw three men standing close by when I stepped out of an elevator. As I approached, they asked my name. When I responded, the men drew their guns. In an instant, I saw the barrels of three separate pistols, each one pointing at my head. I didn't resist when they ordered me to raise my hands.

The agents frisked me. Then they locked me in chains. That started my institutional routine. The agents locked me in a holding center in Miami, Florida. While being processed inside, I learned that a grand jury indicted me for operating a continuing criminal enterprise and other drug-related charges. The charges carried a possible sentence of life without parole.

At the time of my arrest, all I cared about was getting out. My defense attorney told me that there was a big difference between an indictment and a conviction. Although I knew that I was guilty of every charge, he told me what I wanted to hear. I agreed to let him navigate my way through the process.

My attorney instructed that I shouldn't talk with anyone else in the jail. He told me to leave everything in his hands. Foolishly, I held on to a belief that I could win. If my attorney could persuade a jury that I wasn't guilty, I would walk out. He coached me on how I should present myself. I lied on the witness stand as I denied involvement in any type of crime.

My lies didn't fool the jury. The foreman read the verdict, and I learned that members of the jury voted unanimously to convict me on every count. After I heard the guilty verdict, I began to understand.



I was in deep trouble.

The guilty verdict would change my life forever. United States Marshals locked me in chains and led me out of the courtroom. They returned me to the Pierce County Jail. Suddenly, I was a convicted felon rather than a pretrial detainee. Jailers locked me in a cell.

The pressure weighed on me, crushing my spirit, extinguishing hope.

I didn't know what type of sentence my judge would impose. The conviction exposed me to life in prison. Such a sentence didn't make sense. I'd never been locked up before.

» *Where could I find a reference point on how to serve time successfully?*

Confined to a solitary cell, I remember lying on the rack. Although I wasn't religious, I prayed. I didn't ask God to let me out. By then I accepted reality—prison was about to become a big part of my life. I couldn't change the past decisions that put me in this place. Instead of asking for release, I prayed for strength and guidance. Challenges would come as I made the switch from jail to prison. I was determined to prevail.

Philosophy:

I felt strength when those prayers led me to a philosophy book. That may sound strange to some readers. I understand if such beliefs sound absurd. As a young man, I didn't know anything about "philosophy." I didn't even know what the word meant.

Up until my time in jail, I wasn't a reader. I only read books if teachers assigned them. I didn't read a single book since finishing high school five years earlier, in 1982. While locked in a jail cell, reading became the escape to occupy my mind. I remember looking through the stacks of books on a book cart. Westerns and romance novels packed the cart.

Fiction and storybooks could help me forget problems. Yet forgetting about problems wasn't going to help. I needed to solve my problems. I wanted to change. I needed guidance. With guidance, I could cross through years or decades of prison.

I found a two-volume book called *A Treasury of Philosophy*. Although I didn't know anything about philosophy, I picked it up. The books were part of an "anthology." That means they included submissions from many authors that wrote about their "philosophy."

The more I read, the more I knew that I had been living by a bad philosophy.

By holding the book of masters in my hand, I felt as if I had the key to begin building a better life.



Socrates:

When I flipped through the pages, I found a story about Socrates. I knew that other people considered Socrates a man of great wisdom. He lived more than 2,000 years ago. I didn't know much else about him.

As I read the first paragraphs of that chapter, I completely identified with Socrates. Why? I could identify with him because, like me, Socrates was locked in a prison cell. His imprisonment caught my attention. But there was more. I learned that judges sentenced Socrates to death. He waited in that jail cell for his execution date.

At the time I read the story, I hadn't been sentenced. From my lawyers, I understood that I was facing a sentence of life without parole eligibility. That meant I could potentially die in prison. I didn't know how to cope with that possibility, and I wanted to learn from Socrates.

In the story, Socrates received a visit from his friend Crito. During the visit, Crito told Socrates that others made arrangements for him to escape. The plot was foolproof. The jailer agreed to unlock the gate. Socrates would be able to walk out. He could escape his execution. Besides that, friends would support Socrates in exile. He could live the rest of his life in peace.

In my mind, Socrates should leave the jail if given the opportunity. I remember lying on that rack and wishing that someone would come and open my cell. If I could escape my punishment, I would. More than anything, I wanted out.

Socrates responded differently. He declined the offer from Crito. He said that he would remain in his cell and let the system kill him. When Crito asked why, Socrates said that he lived in a democracy. As a citizen, he had to accept the good with the bad. He had accepted the good of society. He didn't agree with the laws that resulted in his conviction and punishment. But he wanted to be a man of principle. Socrates considered himself a citizen of a democracy. He said that he had the right to work toward changing laws he didn't agree with. He didn't have the right to break laws.



Influence on my Adjustment:

Socrates' message influenced my adjustment. I was locked in solitary when I read the book. I remember setting the book on my chest. I stared at the ceiling. Although I hadn't been sentenced yet, I had more clarity. I knew that I wanted to change. Regardless of how many years my judge would impose, I wanted to grow. I wanted to come out of prison differently from how I went in.

Like Socrates, I wanted to serve my sentence with dignity. I created my own problems. I would create my own solutions.

Yet I didn't know how to define "serving a sentence with dignity." The jail wasn't providing any guidance that I could see. The walls and ceiling closed in. They suffocated my spirit and hope.

While in the dayroom of the jail, I looked around. Televisions blasted music videos. People slammed cards and dominoes on steel tables bolted to the concrete floor. I didn't want to be locked inside of a jail pod. But it didn't matter what I wanted. Many years would separate me from liberty. I didn't know when I would control external factors in my life—like where I lived.

» *What, if anything, could I do to live a life of meaning and relevance?*

» *What could I do to prepare?*

This course shows what I learned from masterminds, and how I came to answer such questions. It's my hope that participants will learn how to answer such questions, too.

Prison Professors and our Straight-A Guide Course:

The Straight-A Guide course helps people who live in challenging conditions. I wrote the course and want to serve as a guide for participants. But I also rely upon help that I've learned from other leaders.

Participants will see 100% authenticity. I transformed my life while crossing through 9,500 days in prison. Our country incarcerates millions of people. Along with our team at Prison Professors, I help people learn strategies to make decisions that will lead to fulfillment rather than prison. We teach strategies that we learned from other leaders that lived before us.

Through this Straight-A Guide Course, participants will learn how to re-enter society equipped with knowledge to build lives of dignity, with opportunities to thrive.



The decisions we make every day open new opportunities for success. In my book *Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term*, I provide much more detail about my journey through prison. If it's in your library, you may find value from reading that book. We also make it available through the Prison Professors platform.

Those who read *Earning Freedom* may follow along the entire journey, starting with the day of my arrest, on August 11, 1987. The story takes readers through jails and prisons of all security levels. It shows how decisions I made in prison led me from jail to high-security penitentiaries to medium-security prisons. Then I transferred to a low-security prison followed by a series of minimum-security camps. On August 13, 2012, after 25 years inside, I transferred from the federal prison camp in Atwater, California to a halfway house in San Francisco.

Later, I wrote *Success After Prison: How I built Assets Worth \$1,000,000 Within Two Years of Release From 26 Years Inside (And How You Can Succeed, Too!)*. I wrote that book because I wanted to offer hope for people in prison. I wanted them to learn from the same masterminds that taught me.

- » *Wherever you are in life, opportunities exist to change. At any time, we can start sowing seeds for a better future.*
- » *The decisions we make today have a direct influence on our prospects for success.*

That motto influenced my adjustment in prison. It helped me commit to positive programs. It influenced the friends I chose. It influenced every step along my journey. We can make adjustments that lead to success. For example, I provide a chronology of some of the events that transpired since my wife picked me up from the prison in Atwater and I began building my life in society. As my wife drove, I told her that I wanted to build my career. But I also wanted to create programs that would:

Prepare people in jails and prisons to adjust well so they could return to society successfully, with opportunities to thrive.

Build bridges that would connect former prisoners with employers.



And I wanted to help more Americans understand steps we could take to improve prisons.

To build credibility with people in prison, I knew that I would need to become successful in society. For that reason, I pledged to my wife that within five years of being released from prison, I would build assets worth \$1,000,000. I felt convinced that with the right mindset, anyone could sow seeds for success, even if that person was starting inside of a jail cell.

Below I provide a summary of what I experienced after leaving the Federal Prison Camp in Atwater:

August 13, 2012:

- » *My wife picked me up from the Atwater prison and drove me to the halfway house in San Francisco.*

August 14, 2012:

- » *My case manager in the halfway house gave me a pass to go to the DMV to take the driver's license exam.*

August 15, 2012:

- » *I had my first day of work at a job I coordinated before I left prison.*

August 30, 2012

- » *Despite having a 0-0-0 credit score, I persuaded a real estate developer to finance a brand-new house that his company would build for me.*

November 24, 2012

- » *The San Francisco Chronicle published a front-page story about my journey through prison and return to society.*

February 12, 2013

- » *The halfway house switched me to home confinement.*

June 14, 2013

- » *I traveled to San Diego to speak for a panel of federal judges about the prison experience.*

August 12, 2013

- » *I finished my obligation to the Bureau of Prisons after 9,500 days.*

August 28, 2013

- » *I began teaching as an adjunct professor at San Francisco State University.*

October 17, 2013

- » *NBC news profiled me as I taught in a San Francisco jail, at San Francisco State University, and at UC Berkeley.*

February 11, 2014

- » *I gave a TED talk for a Silicon Valley Joint Venture Conference in front of more than 1,500 business leaders.*

April 2, 2014

- » *The PBS NewsHour profiled me on a news segment about efforts to bring positive reforms to the prison system.*

May 29, 2014

- » *I moved from San Francisco Bay area to Newport Beach to begin new career in real estate.*

July 1, 2014

- » *The Robina Institute invited me to serve as an advisory-council member for a panel to assess probation and parole procedures in 50 states.*

August 12, 2014

- » *Federal Judge Susan Illston granted early termination of my Supervised Release with support from the AUSA and my Probation Officer.*

January 15, 2015

- » *I launched the website that has become PrisonProfessors.com.*





February 13, 2015

- » *I keynoted a symposium on Federal Sentence reform at UC Hastings Law School.*

March 23, 2015

- » *I launched the Earning Freedom podcast on iTunes, and later, I launched the Prison Professors podcast on iTunes.*

April 30, 2015

- » *I purchased my second rental property.*

September 30, 2015

- » *I purchased my third rental property.*

October 20, 2015

- » *I purchased my fourth rental property.*

January 20, 2016

- » *I purchased my fifth rental property.*

June 20, 2016

- » *I purchased my sixth rental property.*

June 24, 2016

- » *I traveled to Guam and Saipan to deliver Prison Professors products at the request of the US Attorney and the Federal Court System.*

January 25, 2017

- » *I launched Earning Freedom, Inc.*

January, 2018

- » *I began a new investment to develop property in Costa Rica.*

January, 2019

- » *My intended investment in Costa Rica led to a massive lawsuit, exposing me to a potential judgment of more than \$140 million.*



January, 2020

- » *I settled the lawsuit by surrendering \$5 million in assets, and \$3 million in equity and began architecting the next phase of my career.*

May, 2020

- » *Begin collaboration with Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office to create a program to teach and inspire people in jails and prisons.*

As I write this revised edition of the Straight-A Guide program, I'm rebuilding. I am determined to work independently, using the strategies that powered me through prison and led to my success upon release. I am self-employed, with both corporate and government clients. With my wife, we continue building an asset base, recovering what I lost by settling the lawsuit.

I left prison with a 0-0-0 credit score. Yet neither a lack of credit, a lengthy term in prison, nor a financial setback, will stop me from building a life of success, meaning, and relevance. My life is a testimony that, at any time, we can recalibrate and grow.

As I write this version of the Prison Professors Straight-A Guide program, it is June 2020. I'm approaching the seventh anniversary since I completed 26 years in the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

The course includes a total of 10 lessons. It includes access to both video and audio files. Our team at Prison Professors hopes to both teach and inspire people in jails and prisons, but also to improve outcomes for society.

We hope participants will recognize how decisions inside influence prospects for success outside. Participants may use this course to navigate their way from darkness to light. If participants stick with strategies in the Prison Professors courses, we're confident they will put themselves on a trajectory for success. Participants build dignity and create better job opportunities, as well as a support system that can lead to success.

If I could emerge successfully after 26 years as a federal prisoner, just imagine what you can achieve!