



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

Straight-A Guide Introductory Course



www.prisonprofessors.com

**Module 4:
Aspiration**

Module Four: Aspiration

A noble man compares and estimates himself by an idea which is higher than himself. Such pursuits produce aspirations.

Marcus Aurelius

It's my hope that you're making progress with this introductory Straight-A Guide course. Staying focused while in school or while locked in custody isn't easy. We feel pressure. Still, if we remember how all decisions influence our prospects for success, we empower ourselves. Never forget that reality.

If I would have learned that concept when I before I went to jail, I may have made better decisions. Bad decisions led me to court proceedings, jail, and prison. The more I reflected on my life, however, the more I realized how early decisions set me on a bad path.

I chose to ignore my teachers. I chose to ignore my guidance counselors. I chose to ignore my parents. I chose friends who were bad influences on me. All of those choices led me into a life of crime by the time I turned 20. And by the time I turned 23, I started serving a 45-year prison term.

I should have made better choices as an adolescent and as a younger man. Fortunately, I started to make better decisions after a jury convicted me, while I was still in the county jail. From masterminds I learned how to make better choices. Because of the lessons that masterminds taught me, I had a better outcome when I finished serving 26 years.

How to Aspire:

From masterminds, I learned how to overcome adversity. Mastermind thinking taught me a strategy. We strengthen ourselves when we look beyond our current struggles. We have to see into the future, into what we're striving to become. We need to see and feel success. Success may be far away, but we pursue it with every choice we make.

Let me summarize what we learned from earlier lessons. Namely, masterminds teach us that we each define our own success.

We define success by stating our values.

We commit to values by setting clear goals.

We succeed by living with the right attitude. We define the right attitude with our 100% commitment to the values and goals we set.

If we can envision success, we can aspire and set aspirations.

An aspiration relieves pressure. An aspiration gives us a reason to complete lessons because we know those lessons lead to success. Our aspirations strengthen us and help us make it through challenges. They weaken the force of anything that is holding us back. We see the future that we aspire to create. Then we engineer a path from where we are to where we aspire to go.



- » *Can you envision your future?*
- » *How are your actions moving you closer to the success you aspire to achieve?*

Success is a journey. It's not a destination. The day we stop pursuing success, we wither. Values and goals evolve. In later lessons, I'll explain how values and goals evolved during my adjustment. The values and goals evolve, but they should always harmonize with our aspiration.

- » *How will your values and goals evolve?*
- » *As you advance through stages, what will change with your values and goals?*

The Labyrinth

When I was locked up, my aspiration served as a light. I had a long way to go but I could always see the light at the end. The light guided my decisions. I didn't have that light when I was a student in school, and I didn't have that light before my prison term started.

I made bad decisions when I was a teenager. At 20 I started selling cocaine. Bad decisions from my youth led me into a dark pit, or a labyrinth. Aspirations could have led me out.

I learned about labyrinths (pronounced lab-ir-inth) when I began reading the work of masterminds. While confined in the Pierce County Jail, waiting to get sentenced, I waited for the marshals to transport me to prison. I read a lot while I waited. One book I read included a story about a labyrinth.



Some readers may not grasp the definition of a labyrinth. I didn't. But the concept of finding my way out of the labyrinth inspired me. This concept can empower anyone who lives in struggle.

Socrates influenced me to change the way I thought. By continuing to read stories from authors that wrote about ancient Greece, I found a lot of stories to inspire me.

Greek Mythology

In Greek mythology, I read about Theseus. He was a mythological king, and his story gave me hope. The story introduced me to the concept of a “labyrinth.”

Theseus had to save his community. A beast kept killing the youth. To solve the problem, Theseus needed to kill the beast. The beast lived at the bottom of a labyrinth. The labyrinth was an intricate maze buried deep underground.

Theseus knew that no one escaped the labyrinth. Either the beast devoured those that entered, or the individual got lost in the labyrinth and died.

Theseus valued his community.

To show his commitment to the community, he set a goal of killing the beast.

He aspired to make his community safe. He didn't want others to live with the threat of the beast.

To succeed, Theseus made a plan. Before entering the labyrinth, he armed himself with a sword. He would kill the beast with the sword. But killing the beast wouldn't be enough. He still needed to find his way out of the labyrinth. His plan would help.

Theseus tied a string to a post at the entrance of the maze. He tied the other end of the string to his ankle. After killing the beast, Theseus used the string to find his way back out.

Identifying with the Labyrinth

» *Can you relate to that story?*

When I was in my youth, school felt like a dark pit. I hated to get up in the morning. I didn't like learning. I didn't aspire to building a better life. Since I didn't have any aspirations, I didn't have a reason for learning, school didn't inspire me. I made decisions that led me into prison. It was another dark pit.



Imprisonment is like a dark pit. Statistics show that most people struggle when they get out. The more time in prison, the less chance for a fulfilling life.

I wanted a fulfilling life, in prison and beyond. If I wanted a fulfilling life, I had to make the right choices. Every person has choices to make.

- » *What do you want?*
- » *When will you start pursuing what you want?*

Fitting in with the culture of school was one choice that I didn't make. In prison, I had to make choices about the new culture I was in. Prisoners offered advice on the best way to serve time. "Forget about the outside world and focus on life inside."

I had to think about what would follow that choice.

- » *What do you think would follow for those that make a choice of adjusting to the prison culture?*

I can give you an example. Think of a shot caller in prison. The choice to live as a shot caller brings consequences. The shot caller may control the television set. He may control where people sit in common areas.

Think about what follows for someone who pursues that adjustment pattern. They can expect the following:

- » *They face problems with staff.*
- » *They spend time in SHU.*
- » *SHU time can also mean a longer stay in prison.*
- » *SHU time means less access to opportunities to prepare for success.*



- » *Lower preparations for success can mean fewer opportunities for employment after release.*
- » *Fewer opportunities for jobs means a harder time generating resources.*
- » *Without resources, it's harder to gain traction in society.*
- » *Without traction, it's harder to resume stability.*
- » *Without stability, more problems with the law follow.*
- » *Problems can lead to more time in prison.*
- » *The cycle of failure would continue.*

Without a doubt, I wanted a different outcome. I set values and goals to define success. My attitude showed a 100 percent commitment to staying out of prison. My aspiration kept me on course.

Aspirations:

Masterminds teach that we always aspire to success. When we see success, we begin to advance. Pursue the deliberate path, even if you're locked in a cell. Leaders like Mandela, Gandhi, Frankl, and Martin Luther King aspired to end social injustice. They took clear steps to succeed. Even while living in struggle, they knew what steps to take. Leaders like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Jack Welch aspired to build businesses that would ease life for millions of people. They knew what they wanted. They set a path to succeed. They inspired others to follow their path.

Students can choose to prepare for the careers that they want to lead. Or they can make choices like I made. Either way, they make a choice. And choices have consequences.

Similarly, prisoners can choose to focus on their life prison, or they can choose to prepare for success. Consider likely outcomes. Those projected outcomes may lead to better decisions.

Aspirations Means Looking Ahead

At the start of my sentence, I thought about the best possible outcome. I had to look far ahead, decades ahead. Unless I made changes, my return to society would bring many struggles:



- » *I would not have a work history.*
- » *I would not have financial resources.*
- » *I would not know anyone other than people who were in prison with me.*
- » *I would not have any credit.*
- » *I would not have any clothes.*
- » *I would not have a place to live.*
- » *I would not have resources saved for retirement.*
- » *I would not have a car.*

Those thoughts could weigh me down. Fortunately, I found courage and hope in stories like Theseus in the labyrinth. All I needed was a string. A string could guide me from the depths of my labyrinth to the brightness of a better world. I would have liked to have found that string when I was in school.

Values, goals, and my attitude would become my string. My aspiration would be the new life I would lead. First, I had to kill the beast that devours so many people that serve time in prison.

10-Year Aspirations:

Another Greek myth inspired me. I read Homer's Odyssey. The story describes Odysseus, a man separated from his family and home after fighting a war. Despite his separation, he never lost sight of home. He aspired to return home. Odysseus spent 10 years fighting battle after battle. His aspiration sustained him, and he made a 100% commitment to succeed. Odysseus knew what he wanted. He had the right attitude! That attitude brought



him closer to his aspiration. After 10 years, he succeeded, returning home.

Homer's Odyssey inspired me to set a 10-year plan. I didn't expect to return home in 10 years. But if I stayed true to my values and goals, I would be farther ahead. I knew that every decision I made during the first 10 years of my time in prison would have an influence on my life.

- » *Where will you be in 10 years?*
- » *Will you be closer to your aspiration?*

When I learned about aspirations, I was at the start of my journey inside. I couldn't think of 26 years in prison. I hadn't even lived that long. To put the term in perspective, project into the future by 26 years. It's a challenge to sustain a high level of discipline and energy through all of that time. As a strategy, I followed the path of Theseus and Odysseus. I set an aspiration I could grasp. I set my initial aspiration for 10 years. During that first decade, I knew what I would need to achieve. I could see success.

And what was it?

- » *Within 10 years I would have at least one university degree.*
- » *Within 10 years I would find someplace to publish an article, chapter, or book.*
- » *Within 10 years I would start my support network by bringing 10 new people into my life.*

Those aspirations strengthened me. I could see success. I could measure progress on the journey of success. I didn't obsess over matters beyond my control, like my sentence length. Instead, I focused on aspirations. By advancing, I restored strength and confidence that I could succeed.

Restoring Strength and Dignity:

Don't live like a prisoner. Don't let calendar pages anchor you in a pool of hopeless thoughts. Don't dwell on the past, or on parts of life that you can't control. Focus on what you have the power to change. Live in the world as it exists, not as we want it to be. Each

day brings an opportunity to work toward something better. Make decisions that show you want to climb out from the labyrinth of confinement.

Through each of my 9,500 days in prison, I considered my values and goals. Adhering to them positioned me for the best possible outcome. If I ignored those values and goals, I became vulnerable. Decisions could easily derail my progress. After all, I lived in prison. I would remain in prison for years, for decades. People around me could be volatile. Fights would erupt over trivial issues. Television programming, noise, personal space, or perceived respect could bring problems. I couldn't ignore those realities. Instead, I needed a strategy to succeed in spite of those threats that could block progress.

Good decisions in prison could lead me closer to my aspiration. Bad decisions could threaten progress. This insight helped me assess bad ideas that I heard from others. Bad ideas can derail people in prison. For example, consider how some people in prison interpret the meaning of "respect."



Respect or Fear?

As a young person in prison, I heard many experienced prisoners talking about respect. Stump, for example, spoke about "respect" in prison. He said that anyone could get respect as long as he was willing to pay the price. The price, Stump said, was to respond immediately with lethal violence at any sign of "disrespect." Others would "respect" a man, he said, if they knew that he would retaliate to any type of disrespect with a knife.

Stump's perspective was consistent with the prison culture. Yet that perspective differed from my avatar's concept of respect. I didn't aspire to become "the man" in prison. Instead, I aspired to success when I returned to society.

With success in mind, I had a reason to avoid problems. I wanted to sidestep the cycles of failure that others faced when they finished their time in prison. My avatars defined respect differently from Stump and others in prison.

I wanted respect from my avatars, and I made decisions that were consistent with my aspiration.



Who Will Facilitate Your Success?

My avatars would not respect me if I pursued a path that included violence. They would “fear” people that responded to problems with violence. They would want that person to stay in prison.

My 100% commitment to living a values-based, goal-oriented life influenced my decisions and my adjustment. My aspiration influenced every step I took. It influenced every decision I made. I made decisions that would minimize exposure to problems.

What does it mean to avoid problems and pursue success?

- » *I avoided hustles.*
- » *I avoided television rooms.*
- » *I didn't participate in team sports or table games.*
- » *I selected jobs that would allow me to work toward goals that I set.*
- » *I was deliberate with regard to my conversations, the words that I used, and the activities that I pursued.*

Every step felt like I was crossing a high wire. Each step forward would lead to my aspiration. One false step could lead to my fall. Holding a clear aspiration gave me reasons to continue the journey to success, as I defined success.

Your library may include a copy of my book, *Success After Prison*. I wrote that book to share what I have been up to since I finished my term. As I wrote in an earlier lesson, my wife picked me up at USP Atwater in August of 2012. She had to transfer me to a halfway house in San Francisco. I was supposed to serve my final year in the halfway house. While driving to San Francisco, I told my wife that I was going to follow the same strategy that got me through prison. I had values and goals in place. But they evolved from the values and goals that I set when I started my term. The decisions I made in prison put me in a different place. I had an education, as evidenced by the bachelor's and master's degree that I earned. I contributed to society, as evidenced by the many books that I published. I had thousands of people in my support network.

When my wife drove me from the prison in Atwater to San Francisco, I told her of my new aspiration. Within five years of my release, I told her that I would control more than \$1 million in assets. If I achieved that goal, I told her that I could inspire more people to follow the Straight-A Guide. Success follows for anyone that adheres to that goal.



In *Success After Prison* I describe how I built a portfolio of assets worth far more than \$1 million. I can tell you for certain that my decisions in prison influenced the possibility for that success.

» *Decisions you're making today influence your future.*

Basic Questions:

1. *1. Your behavior today will influence your prospects for success.*

» *A. True*

» *B. False*

2. *Can you make decisions today that will advance your income prospects?*

» *A. Yes*

» *B. No*

3. *Do the friends you choose influence your chances for success?*

» *A. Yes*

» *B. No*



4. *Would the people you love and the people who love you prefer that you focus on a preparing for success, or on being a badass?*
- » *A. They want me to succeed.*
 - » *B. They want me to be a badass.*
5. *Can you seize opportunities in your life right now that would show your commitment to preparing for success?*
- » *A. Yes*
 - » *B. No*

Personal Development Exercises:

- » *Pursue these personal-development exercises independently, or in a group breakout session. Respond to the questions and discuss with your group.*

1. *Can you envision your future?*
2. *How are your actions moving you closer to the success you aspire to achieve?*
3. *How will your values and goals evolve?*
4. *As you advance through stages, what will change with your values and goals?*
5. *What kind of maze are you in?*
6. *What steps are you taking to find your way out?*
7. *What do you want? When will you start pursuing what you want?*
8. *What follows for people who choose to forget about the future, and focus on the*

present moment?

9. *Where will you be in 10 years? Will you be closer to your aspiration?*



Module Activities

- » *Vocabulary Exercise: In each chapter, write down 10 words you did not know. Use a dictionary to look up each word and write the definition next to the word. Practice saying each word out loud, correctly.*

Critical Thinking Exercise

Return to the module and read the sentences and paragraph sections where you looked up words. Think about what you learned by looking up the words.

- » *Does understanding what the words mean bring you a new understanding of the meaning in what you're reading?*
- » *As your understand of vocabulary increases, are you relating to the course content differently?*
- » *Next to each word, write down what you learned from reading deliberately.*