The American Success Story of Alexander Hamilton and Diligence

- **Compelling Question**
  o Why is it important to be diligent in life?

- **Virtue**: Diligence
- **Definition** – Diligence is intrinsic energy for completing good work.

- **Lesson Overview**
  o In this lesson, students will understand the importance of being diligent in their lives by examining the life of Alexander Hamilton. They will read a narrative about Hamilton and discuss the ways in which he remained diligent in different periods of his life. They will analyze Hamilton quotations to understand how he acted with diligence and how they can act with diligence in their own lives. Finally, students will create a plan about how to act diligently regarding a project, task, or situation in their own lives.

- **Objectives**
  o Understand the definition of diligence and the importance of being diligent in one’s life.
  o Examine how Alexander Hamilton acted diligently during each period of his life.
  o Discuss ways in which they can act diligently in their own lives.
  o Apply knowledge of diligence and examples of diligent behavior in creating a plan for acting diligently in their own lives.

- **Background**
  o The Constitutional Convention was held in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. After the delegates produced a new framework of government, they sent it to state ratifying conventions for approval. During 1787 and 1788, the representatives of the people assembled in each of the states to debate the Constitution. Those who supported the Constitution were called Federalists and those opposed were known as Anti-Federalists. The Federalists included Alexander Hamilton, who wrote Federalist essays in defense of the Constitution that were published in New York and the other states. In an incredibly diligent effort, Hamilton produced over fifty essays that served as a successful political propaganda for the Federalist effort ratifying the Constitution as well as a lasting examination of American political principles.

- **Vocabulary**
  o Succumbed
  o Enlightenment
  o Intervened
  o Siege
  o Mercenaries
  o Tenacious
  o Confidant

- **Introduce Text**
  o Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  o As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    ▪ What challenges are you facing?
    ▪ What fears or concerns might you have?
    ▪ What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
  o How did Alexander Hamilton’s diligence advance the freedom of himself and others?
  o What was Hamilton’s identity as a child? As a young man? As a student? As a member of the Continental Army? As a Founder?
  o What was Hamilton’s purpose at the different stages of his life? How did that affect his diligence?
  o Hamilton faced many difficulties throughout his life. How did his diligence help to define his performance in each role he had throughout life?
  o What is the link between Hamilton’s identity and purpose throughout his life?
• Discussion Questions
  o Discuss the following questions with your students.
    ▪ What is the historical context of the narrative?
    ▪ What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    ▪ How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    ▪ How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    ▪ How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    ▪ What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    ▪ Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    ▪ How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

• Additional Resources
  o A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress, 1774, by Alexander Hamilton
  o The Farmer Refuted, 1775, by Alexander Hamilton
  o The Federalist Papers, 1787-1788, by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison
  o Speech at the New York Ratifying Convention, 1788, by Alexander Hamilton
  o Report on Manufactures, 1791, by Alexander Hamilton
  o The Pacificus-Helvidius Debates, 1793-1794, by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison
  o The American Experience: The Duel (film)
  o Alexander Hamilton: A Life, by Willard Sterne Randall
Handout A: The American Success Story of Alexander Hamilton and Diligence

Background

The Constitutional Convention was held in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. After the delegates produced a new framework of government, they sent it to state ratifying conventions for approval. During 1787 and 1788, the representatives of the people assembled in each of the states to debate the Constitution. Those who supported the Constitution were called Federalists and those opposed were known as Anti-Federalists. The Federalists included Alexander Hamilton, who wrote *Federalist* essays in defense of the Constitution that were published in New York and the other states. In an incredibly diligent effort, Hamilton produced over fifty essays that served as a successful political propaganda for the Federalist effort ratifying the Constitution as well as a lasting examination of American political principles.

Narrative

Alexander Hamilton was born and raised in the Caribbean and had a very difficult childhood. His father, James Hamilton, abandoned his family when Alexander was ten years old, leaving his mother a twice-divorced, single mother struggling to make ends meet. The young man did not receive much of an education and was forced to work at an import-export business to help support his mother. Tragically, she succumbed to a tropical fever when he was thirteen years old, leaving him and his brother to make their own way in the world. The chances that Alexander Hamilton would be successful in life seemed very remote indeed. Fortunately, Hamilton had some excellent mentors who helped give the determined young man a chance. His employer taught him a great deal about the business and the youth applied himself diligently to mastering the complexities of accounting, international trade, and shipping. A Presbyterian minister moved to the capital where Hamilton lived and introduced him to the Christian faith, principles of liberty, and the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment in his vast library. Finally, several important local men recognized Hamilton’s natural genius and work ethic and decided to pay for his education in America. It was a golden opportunity to succeed in life, provided he continued to earn it.

When Hamilton arrived in America, he lacked sufficient academic preparation to attend Princeton University, where his sponsors wanted him to attend college. He hit the books hard at a preparatory school and quickly finished the necessary work. When he met with Princeton President Rev. John Witherspoon, Hamilton felt so confident of his abilities and diligence that he asked to complete the four-year education in only two years. Witherspoon turned him down, so Hamilton attended Columbia University instead. He was a successful student when the larger events leading to the American Revolution intervened and provided another opportunity for him to demonstrate his commitment to liberty.

Hamilton was drilling an artillery company in New York when the war moved there after the siege of Boston ended. The British invaded New York with a massive armada carrying 32,000 redcoats and German mercenaries. The enemy army and navy easily drove the Americans out of New York, across the Hudson River, and deep into New Jersey. Many colonial militiamen had their enlistments expire, and they returned to their farms in the fall of 1776. Nevertheless, General George Washington persevered in holding the army together and battling the British. Throughout the long retreat, the general noted the great courage and leadership of Hamilton, particularly during the daring attacks across the Delaware at Trenton and Princeton, where the artillery played a significant role in the success of the battles. Washington invited Hamilton to join his staff as an aide because the general believed that merit, not birth or wealth, should determine who advanced in the army.

Hamilton accepted the position and was one of Washington’s most trusted aides for the duration of most of the war. Washington entrusted Hamilton with sensitive correspondence with generals and members of Congress, and sent the twenty-two-year-old aide on several important missions. He bravely endured the horrors of Valley Forge and fought at Washington’s side at the battles of Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth Courthouse, and finally, Yorktown, the decisive battle that essentially ended the war. At Yorktown, Hamilton demonstrated tenacious courage by leading an audacious charge on a redoubt that turned the tide in favor of the Continental Army and their French ally.
Hamilton had won fame and rose to an important position because of his continued dedication to the American cause of liberty. He contributed even more to the founding of America during the next decade. After rapidly studying law and passing the bar exam to support his growing family, he was strongly committed to serving the public good. He was a representative in New York and in the national Congress. In 1786, he attended the Annapolis Convention to strengthen the Articles of Confederation and attended the Constitutional Convention the following year. After the Constitution was written, Hamilton demonstrated perhaps the greatest example of diligent effort in his life. He was the author of fifty-one *Federalist* essays in defense of the Constitution during the debate over ratification. In July, 1788, he overcame overwhelming opposition to the Constitution in the New York Ratifying Convention and was instrumental in securing ratification—but only by three votes! He deserves a large share of the credit for winning the ratification of the Constitution and then seeing the new government take shape.

Hamilton had invested a great deal of time and energy into the creation of the new Constitution and wanted the “more perfect Union” to succeed. He thought it was critical that Washington serve as the first president and virtually demanded that he come out of retirement to serve. In turn, President Washington tapped Hamilton, who was a financial genius, to become the first Secretary of the Treasury. At the request of Congress, Hamilton produced several important reports—the Report on Public Credit, a proposal for a National Bank, and a Report on Manufactures—which contained his proposals to put the United States on a strong financial foundation. Congress passed measures instituting the first two reports, and President Washington signed the bills. As a result, the American economy prospered. Hamilton continued to serve as Washington’s main confidant and policy advisor on many other important issues until retiring to his legal practice in 1795.

Hamilton was deeply involved in politics and practiced law for the rest of his life, which was tragically cut short in a duel with Aaron Burr in 1804. He left behind a large family and a legacy as an important Founder of the American political system and economy. His diligent effort to rise above his humble circumstances and succeed in life is a classic American rags-to-riches story. He was also an example of an immigrant who came to America and worked hard to take advantage of the opportunities the country had to offer.

**Questions**

1. How did Alexander Hamilton's diligence advance the freedom of himself and others?
2. What was Hamilton's identity as a child? As a young man? As a student? As a member of the Continental Army? As a Founder?
3. What was Hamilton’s purpose at the different stages of his life? How did that affect his diligence?
4. Hamilton faced many difficulties throughout his life. How did his diligence help to define his performance in each role he had throughout life?
5. What is the link between Hamilton's identity and purpose throughout his life?
**Handout B: Alexander Hamilton’s Diligence Graphic Organizer**

**Directions:** In the table below, list 2 to 4 ways in which Alexander Hamilton was diligent during the period in his life that your group was assigned. Next, you will jigsaw into new groups and complete the rest of the chart with information from your new group members.

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<th>As a child</th>
<th>As a young man</th>
<th>As a student</th>
<th>In the military</th>
<th>As a Founder</th>
<th>As a government leader</th>
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Handout C: Hamilton Quotes

**Directions:** Read the Alexander Hamilton quotations below. Write a brief statement about how Hamilton shows diligence in the quote. Then answer the questions that follow.

“Give me the steady, uniform, unshaken security of constitutional freedom. Give me the right to be tried by a jury of my own neighbors, and to be taxed by my own representatives only. What will become of the law and courts of justice without this? The shadow may remain, but the substance will be gone. I would die to preserve the law upon a solid foundation; but take away liberty, and the foundation is destroyed.” *A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress, 1774*

“There is a certain enthusiasm in liberty, that makes human nature rise above itself, in acts of bravery and heroism.” *The Farmer Refuted, 1775*

“Safety from external danger is the most powerful director of national conduct. Even the ardent love of liberty will, after a time, give way to its dictates. The violent destruction of life and property incident to war, the continual effort and alarm attendant on a state of continual danger, will compel nations the most attached to liberty to resort for repose and security to institutions which have a tendency to destroy their civil and political rights. To be more safe, they at length become willing to run the risk of being less free.” *Federalist No. 8, 1787*

“Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of man will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice without constraint.” *Federalist No. 15, 1787*

“The republican principle demands that the deliberate sense of the community should govern the conduct of those to whom they intrust the management of their affairs; but it does not require an unqualified complaisance to every sudden breeze of passion or to every transient impulse which the people may receive from the arts of men, who flatter their prejudices to betray their interests.” *Federalist No. 71, 1788*

“As riches increase and accumulate in few hands, as luxury prevails in society, virtue will be in a greater degree considered as only a graceful appendage of wealth, and the tendency of things will be to depart from the republican standard. This is the real disposition of human nature; it is what neither the honorable member nor myself can correct. It is a common misfortune that awaits our State constitution, as well as all others.” *Speech at the New York Ratifying Convention, 1788*

“There are certain social principles in human nature, from which we may draw the most solid conclusions with respect to the conduct of individuals and of communities. We love our families more than our neighbors; we love our neighbors more than our countrymen in general. The human affections, like solar heat, lose their intensity as they depart from the centre... On these principles, the attachment of the individual will be first and for ever secured by the State governments. They will be a mutual protection and support.” *Speech at the New York Ratifying Convention, 1788*

“To cherish and stimulate the activity of the human mind, by multiplying the objects of enterprise, is not among the least considerable of the expedients, by which the wealth of a nation may be promoted.” *Report on Manufactures, 1791*

**Questions**

1. How could being diligent help you to advance your own freedom and the freedom of others?
2. How did Hamilton’s diligence help him perform his roles successfully?
3. How did Hamilton’s changing identity affect his diligent behavior?
4. Give an example of a time when you had to be diligent like Hamilton.
5. What can you learn about your own identity from Hamilton? How will your identity change over time?
6. What can you learn about your own purpose from Hamilton? What does your purpose have to do with diligence?
7. How will your life be different if you are diligent?
8. How can diligence help you find your purpose in life?
9. How might remaining diligent help you to succeed?
10. How can diligence help you fulfill your identity in the many stages of your life? Think about your identity as a student, a family member, a friend, an adult, etc.