Supporting Materials, Section D
Writing Your Degree Program Rationale

This section assists you in developing the best explanation and justification for your degree program.

Your degree program is a map to show where you have been and where you are going with your education. It reflects your prior learning, current educational needs, and personal and educational goals. All Empire State College students, whether they are working on an associate degree or a bachelor’s degree, must write an essay to explain their proposed plans. This essay is called a rationale since it provides the reasons for the design of the educational program – the reasons you chose your personal route on the larger educational map. The degree program and the rationale become part of the portfolio submitted to the faculty academic review committee at the center for approval.

The degree program rationale works like a cover letter for your portfolio. It explains your program to the people who will review and approve its design. It is the responsibility of the faculty academic review committee to judge whether the degree program complies with college expectations, meets general education requirements, meets your goals as stated in the rationale, and makes sense as a sound academic program.

There are many possible ways to organize your rationale, but thinking about what the faculty academic review committee needs to know should be helpful. The committee includes faculty members and administrators who meet periodically to review every degree program designed within the center. Committee members are familiar with the college’s expectations for degrees, but are not necessarily experts in your area of study.

The committee needs to know the reasons behind the decisions you made in choosing what to put into the program, so that they can make informed judgments about whether to approve it as is, or to recommend changes.

PREPARING THE RATIONALE

The following information can guide you as you develop your essay. While you are writing, you should be meeting with your mentor regularly to discuss your questions. Expect to write a number of drafts of your essay before you and your mentor are satisfied with it.

You may want to use a writer’s technique to work through the information that follows. Read each section and immediately free-write or brainstorm – just jot down your thoughts. Then go back, reflect upon your initial reactions, and flesh out your information.

In these sections, you should try to address the questions raised. It is not necessary to address them all; not every one will be relevant to you. (If you are uncertain, talk with your mentor.) As you move through the sections, keep in mind that each builds on the one before, and your explanations all refer to the starting point – your goals.

GOALS

Probably the most important question raised by the faculty academic review committee will be: Does this degree program help you achieve your goals? In order to answer this question, you first need to determine what your goals are. What are your present and future personal, educational and career goals? Describing those goals clearly, and how the elements of the program contribute to their achievement, provides an essential theme for your essay.

Some students may have very clear academic and professional goals at this time. Others may have some short-term goals but may not have defined plans for the long term. The essay should help the committee understand your goals at this time and their connection to your degree program.

Not only will you help the committee understand why you want your program to have the components it has, but you also will think through the reasons for yourself. Keep in mind that you cannot explain it if you really do not understand it yourself.

ACADEMIC CHOICES AND PROFESSIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Use the rationale as an opportunity to consciously focus on your goals and to explain how they translate into academic choices and professional expectations. In so doing, you can check on the fit, or how well your degree program moves you toward your goals.

Your degree program should take into account both your personal interests and the educational expectations of a professional community to which you belong or hope to join. For example, students of accounting need to be aware of expectations in that field – just as counselors or managers do. If your primary goal is graduate education, you will need to attend to the expectations of the specific graduate program in which you are interested.

Frequently, students will design programs that simultaneously prepare them to meet changing career and academic opportunities. For example, an industrial manager may use a bachelor’s degree to prepare for advancement at the current
place of employment, to prepare for a future job search, and/or to lay the groundwork for a future master's program.

What are expectations in the specialized field for which you are preparing? If you are planning graduate study, will your degree program satisfy entrance requirements? You should be able to answer those questions for yourself and for the faculty academic review committee. Excellent information sources available to you include your mentor, professionals in your field, professional associations, the resources available through the Empire State College library and various college publications.

The college’s Area of Study and Concentration Guidelines (Supporting Materials, Section C) is an important reference for you to consult. The guidelines specify generally accepted academic and professional expectations for particular concentrations. Your rationale should explain how your choices reflect the guidelines.

FOUNDATIONS SKILLS
College graduates are expected to be literate in many areas. Look again at the area of study guidelines to give you a sense of the basic competencies needed in your field (e.g., communication skills, a familiarity with computer applications, a working knowledge of mathematics). The college’s policies on associate and bachelor’s degrees (Supporting Materials, Section F) also contain information about skill development. Students sometimes find that to achieve the expected skill level they must first develop foundation skills especially in such areas as writing and mathematics.

If it is not readily evident in your degree program, explain how you achieved such skills. For example, if you found that you needed additional skill development in writing, you may have structured a history contract to focus on writing about history. Talk about that in your essay.

CONCENTRATION
In your discussion of your goals, you may have explained how your concentration choice moves you toward your goals. Now explain why you chose the studies that make up your concentration. Remember that you are explaining your concentration to someone who may not be an expert in this area, and who may not be familiar with your background. The more unusual/unique your choice of concentration components, the more help a reader might need in understanding your choices.

This is a good place to address the college’s expectations for the academic content of your concentration. The faculty academic review committee follows the area of study guidelines when reviewing your degree program. In addition to the general guidelines, there are specific concentration title guidelines for several areas of study. Check with your mentor or Center Office of Academic Review for copies of specific disciplinary and professional/vocational concentration guidelines that may be relevant to your program. You may find it helpful to summarize your understanding of the guidelines and how they relate to your particular degree program.

Does your program address the guidelines? If not, why not? If some element of your concentration seems inconsistent with the guidelines, the faculty academic review committee will need your help in understanding your interpretation of them. If the particular component titles on your degree program do not fully define elements specified in the guidelines, you should explain where in your program particular guideline expectations are satisfied.

Is your concentration a traditional one, or does it focus on a particular theme or problem? Since your concentration choices may differ from traditional college programs, why did you decide to make the choices you made? Explain your individual needs and desires that made you want to do something differently, e.g., if a graduate program you want to enter has certain requirements which you have not already addressed, you might do so here.

An associate degree does not require a concentration, but choosing not to have one needs explanation. Are you exploring various academic disciplines? Want a broad liberal arts foundation? If you want a concentration that includes many specialized studies at the associate level, explain the reasoning behind that choice.

PROGRESSION/INTEGRATION/BREADTH
Although advanced-level study is not required at the associate level, bachelor’s degrees must include at least 45 advanced-level credits. On the degree program itself, you indicated which learning components you consider advanced level. The rationale provides you with an opportunity to elaborate, to indicate how your degree program progresses from introductory toward increasingly advanced learning. Although the college requires progression within the concentration, students have the opportunity to build progression into their general learning as well.

Give examples of how you will deal with material in more depth. What are some of the advanced and complex issues you will consider? Have you provided opportunities for analytical thinking? (A more complete description of advanced-level study is on page 12. Additional information is contained in the bachelor’s degree policy on page 119.)

These statements provide suggestions of learning activities to enhance your ability to analyze, apply and evaluate ideas.

An integrated degree program is unified. Within the concentration, the learning components are related. In addition, some general learning components may support or provide learning related to the concentration. For example, a management student might include communications studies in the degree program in order to develop better oral and written
communication skills. A student with a concentration in human resources management might include studies in psychology and sociology as well as cultural diversity. A marketing student might include psychology as a foundation for the study of consumer behavior.

Discuss how you see the studies within your degree program fitting together. Are there particular relationships between your general learning and your concentration?

The reason the academic world likes to stress breadth in degree programs is to make sure that students are exposed to a variety of academic perspectives. Such perspectives might include (but are not limited to) the historical, literary, aesthetic, philosophical, scientific, multicultural and international.

The SUNY general education requirements are another way to work breadth into your degree program. Use them as a springboard to create studies that meet the requirements and allow you to study a topic you want to learn more about.

At Empire State College, the emphasis on individualized degree programs precludes any one approach to breadth. Students must evaluate their own experiences and needs and then determine what is the best way for them to deal with this issue. Pay particular attention to Supporting Materials, Section F of this guide, which describes college policy about learning in a broad context.

Then check your degree program. Is the context broad? Does it show that you are familiar with more than one way to think about your area of interest? Does it show that you are familiar with different areas or that you have more than one area of interest? Does the program as a whole represent you as a broadly educated individual? In your rationale, be sure to let your readers know just how you dealt with these questions.

Breadth is just as important for associate degrees, which function as preparation for further study, and which should include the same awareness of different perspectives.

**GENERAL LEARNING**

Any studies that are not part of your concentration are included in your degree program as general learning. These studies may support your concentration or add breadth to your degree program. Explain why you selected the various general learning studies that you did. What do the studies outside your concentration bring to your overall program? Have they enriched your educational experience? In your opinion, is your degree program sufficiently broad-based? Why do you consider it to be so? How does your general learning move you toward your goals?

**ADVANCED STANDING/PRIOR LEARNING**

The readers of your essay will want to know what general proficiencies or special competencies you gained before coming to Empire State College. Your consideration of your prior learning probably gave you a sense of what you do not know as well as what you do know. How did this influence your choices for Empire State College studies?

If you attended another accredited college from which you are requesting transcript credit, describe the broad areas that you studied. Do not describe each course. However, you could describe groups of courses that are related or particular courses that were of greatest interest or importance to you.

D grades are not accepted for credit at Empire State College unless they are part of a completed A.A., A.S. or A.A.S. degree and you are using the entire degree.

If you are requesting individualized prior learning assessment, briefly describe what you have done and what you learned from these various opportunities. Do not include all the materials that you may have prepared for an evaluator. A summary is all you need.

**EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE STUDIES**

Your Empire State College studies have been carefully thought out and planned; you have considered what you still need to learn to be competent in your field and to add breadth and depth to your education. Let the committee know why you think your studies are appropriate. How do they build on your prior learning? If any might appear to be redundant, be especially careful to explain how they are distinct.

How did you make the selection of what studies to pursue? What options did you consider? Why did you choose the ones that you chose?

Is the content of your studies reasonably clear from their titles? If not, add an explanation.

**RESEARCHING YOUR PROGRAM**

When you were developing and defining your goals, you decided on an educational direction that would help you achieve those goals. Will your degree program move you toward your goals? You probably did some research into your chosen field of study. What are the sources of information you used in developing your degree program, particularly your concentration?

What research did you undertake to ensure that your degree program reflects current thinking in the field? What did you learn about preparing yourself for future employment in that field? Did you talk with professionals who work or teach in that field? If your degree is related to possible future employment, have you investigated employment prospects in that field? Are there new trends and developments in the field that you need to be aware of? How have you tailored your program to respond to those needs? This is your opportunity to explain how the different elements in your concentration (transcript credits, credit by evaluation and contract learning) fit together to form a coherent whole that exhibits the progression and integration expected by the college.
WRITING THE RATIONALE

Now you are ready to put your information together in a draft essay. Feel free to organize your presentation in a way that feels sensible and meaningful to you. As you write, keep in mind what the faculty academic review committee will be looking for when they review your degree program and portfolio:

- Why this degree? What are your goals, and how does this degree enable you to meet those goals?
- Why this concentration? Why did you choose those particular studies?
- How did you arrive at your decisions?
- What is the relationship between your prior learning and your contract learning?

Keep in mind that there is no single correct way to develop and organize your essay. Most rationale essays average between four and six pages in length. Use as few or as many pages as you need to clearly and carefully present your information.

SAMPLE SECTIONS FROM STUDENT RATIONALES

Students often find it helpful to see how other students developed their rationale essays. The following samples were selected from actual student essays. The variations in style and approach show that there are many different ways to present your information.

- Read the selections as if you were a faculty academic review committee member.
- Review the questions asked in Chapter 10 of this guide.
- Are you satisfied with the student's information?
- What more would you need to know (relevant to goals, concentration, general learning, etc.) to be able to assess the degree program?

Commentary is provided to let you know why the selection is good or not so good, from the point of view of mentors who serve on faculty academic review committees (i.e., what the student might have added to help the committee understand the program).

What follows are some examples of rationale sections in five common areas: goals, concentration, general learning, prior learning and researching your degree program.

GOALS

A clear statement of your goals provides the faculty academic review committee with a sense of who you are and why you are seeking a degree. It sets a framework against which the committee can review your degree program.

Example 1 – My goal is to obtain an Associate in Science degree and to concentrate on foundations in Science, Mathematics and Technology. I also will supplement this with liberal arts and sciences such as English composition, economics and psychology. This should give me a good foundation of learning that will enable me to pursue my present occupational goal of program manager and also provide a substantial foundation for me to pursue a bachelor's degree in the future.

Commentary: This is a succinct but minimal statement of educational and career goals for an associate degree. The student could have elaborated on why he chose this particular concentration and how it will move him toward his career and personal goals. The linkages are not obvious.

Example 2 – I have enrolled in Empire State College to complete a Bachelor of Science degree in the registered area of study of Business, Management and Economics concentrating in business administration with an emphasis in accounting. There are many goals I have set for myself in pursuing this degree, both personal and professional, and I know Empire State College is just the place to obtain them.

I feel that the degree program plan I have developed will enable me to achieve my career goals (a professional-level accounting or auditing position in state service) and my goal to be a well-educated person, being knowledgeable and having skills in many areas not just an expertise in one. Completion of my degree program also will give me the confidence to continue the learning process throughout my life not just for the short time I will be at Empire State College.

Commentary: Here is a direct, clear statement that helps the reader know that the student has reflected on the reasons for pursuing her degree in terms of planning for her future. She shows a linkage between her goals and her degree studies. She also shows how she intends to apply her knowledge.

CONCENTRATION

Discussion of your concentration should provide a good sense of the planning process and thought behind the design of your program. The committee will want to know why you made the choices that you made.

Example 1 – The degree program which I choose to pursue is a Bachelor of Science with a concentration in banking administration. In order to meet the requirements of a Bachelor of Science, I will need 24 credits in my concentration. My program focus in business meets college guidelines by including accounting courses (Accounting 101 and PLA for financial accounting), and various banking or financial-related courses (see PLA request for Series 7 Stockbroker license, Financial Planning, Personal Financial Management, IRA Administration and Advanced IRA Administration, Commercial Lending and Real Estate Lending).

Part of my contract learning will be two economics courses (Economics, and Banking and Money). I also took Principles of Banking and will request PLA for marketing applications (with an emphasis in banking), which makes sense as my career is in banking. Included in my curriculum are several more general
business-related courses (see PLA request for interviewing, principles of management and advanced management). To complete the curriculum typically required for most business degrees, I will be taking courses in statistics, science, business law and business policy.

Commentary: Why were these studies chosen? Lists are rarely helpful. They simply retell the degree program design. It would be better to try to establish how these blocks of studies contribute to an understanding of, and an overall view of, the concentration.

Example 2 – My concentration is a focused, in-depth study of subject areas to prepare me for my chosen profession. I have included introductory-level components from Maria College and the College of Saint Rose in Math of Business, Principles of Accounting, Business Law, Macroeconomics, Business Communications, Introduction to Personnel Management and Principles of Marketing.

These studies developed my skills in reading, speaking and writing, and I acquired mathematical and technical skills that prepared me for more advanced-level studies in business and accounting. Math of Business was a prerequisite for Principles of Accounting and developed my computation skills and my ability to apply them to business topics. In my research of college catalogs, I found these courses prevalent in business administration programs, giving students a solid foundation to build on.

To enhance my knowledge of business, I have included in my contract learning advanced-level studies, marketing research, corporate finance and organizational behavior. These studies will develop my problem-solving skills not in a numerical way, as in my accounting components, but in an analytical, theoretical and creative way. I will then be able to apply my learning to practical and real situations. I also have found these studies in other college catalog programs and consider them to be an important link for me to the world of business.

To build on my previous introductory accounting skills and knowledge, I have included components in governmental accounting, auditing, cost accounting and accounting information systems. In accordance with my present career goals to be in an accounting/auditing position with the state, these advanced-level studies will serve me well. I will be proficient in the terminology and theories, not only in the private sector but also in public service accounting and auditing.

It goes without saying that proficiency with computers and computer languages in today’s high-tech world is of increasing importance. Accounting information systems will give me that needed edge in being competent and ready to take on my first professional position with the state.

The component that is most important to me in my concentration is the internship in governmental accounting. This is my opportunity to show my aptitude for the career I have chosen and to gain the experience I need to move into that career as quickly as possible.

Commentary: This is a good explanation of the concentration. It follows through the prior learning and learning contract design of the degree program and addresses a range of educational planning issues like goals, integration and progression.

GENERAL LEARNING/GENERAL EDUCATION

Studies or courses that contribute to general learning are listed in the right-hand column of your degree plan. Although breadth of learning can be integrated into concentration studies, students often use general learning studies as opportunities to add breadth, to explore subjects and ways of thinking which are different from what they are used to. Discussion should address the value of the general learning to the overall program. What do the studies outside of your concentration bring to your overall program?

Example 1 – In order to round out the degree program and to provide breadth, I bring transfer credits in music, sociology, history, philosophy, biology, written communication, practical speech, community relations and business law. I will add breadth to the degree program by including literature, cultural diversity and women’s studies in contract learning in the degree program.

Commentary: This is a basic list of topics, not even a specific description of studies. It does not provide any more information than we can see on the degree program. A faculty academic review committee would likely find this of little real help.

Example 2 – In every degree program there must be diversity of learning. Without this diversity, a student will develop too narrow a point of view of life and the world in general. This narrow vision will prevent the ability to keep events in their proper perspective. In a business degree program, liberal arts is extremely important. A business major cannot simply concentrate on only business courses. A person in the business world must be able to understand the world around him or her and be able to relate it to how it impacts the economy and business.

Without the diversification which arts courses provide, a business person might fail to see the other point of view – or fail to see the other person’s logic in business dealings. Also, business people do not deal just with other business-oriented people but with people from all walks of life with extremely different backgrounds, views, opinions and needs.

Liberal arts helps expose a student to more than business only. In addition to my concentration, I must have 64 credits in liberal arts in order to qualify for a Bachelor of Science degree. I will be transferring in 51.5 liberal arts credits. I acquired these credits when I attended Westminster Choir College. Within these credits is a diverse range of education. They range from music-related courses (piano, voice, choir, Fundamentals of Theory
and Choral Conducting, to name a few) to a sound basis in psychology (basic, developmental and educational), to history requirements met with two history courses (Music History and American Experience). To round out my liberal arts, I will be taking Gender and Communication as a multicultural course.

Commentary: Since the student spends time nicely setting up the relationship between liberal arts and sciences and business, it would help to have more information about how her particular set of general learning studies will affect the professional side. She drops away from that specific notion when she gets to transfer credits, which she simply lists.

Example 3 – General learning elements in the degree program reflect not only my personal interests in social sciences but also provide the necessary communications and analytical tools required to enhance the described interdisciplinary concentration. The mathematics sequence, beginning with Mathematical Analysis I (college algebra and trigonometry) and continuing through the complete (differential and integral) calculus sequence, provides the quantitative skills necessary in the study of any technical discipline.

In a practical sense, this mathematics sequence is necessary to the proper comprehension of engineering and developmental proposals. Digital Computation Fundamentals provides a background in numerical analysis and the engineer's computer language, FORTRAN. Most notably, the methods of integrating computers and mathematics has limitations. Those specifics are identified and dealt with in this study.

The basic written and communications skills are provided by formal study and experiential college-level learning in English Composition I, Technical Writing and Oral Communications. To this end, Oral Communications is intended to include presentation skills and parliamentary procedure, as well as the development of effective individual communications.

Transcript studies in the History of Western Civilization I and II, economics and psychology provided a substantial beginning in the study of humanities and the social sciences. Whereas my studies in the humanities have provided me with a factual understanding of where our civilization came from and how it came to be, the thought provoked by those studies also provides me with genuine pleasure and content (i.e., the Enlightenment period).

More practically, as a manager responsible for personnel and business performance, the study of psychology and economics has contributed to the enhancement of my ability to responsibly perform those tasks. Indeed, I have built upon those studies in designing my learning contracts. Similarly, in dealing with specific personnel problems (i.e., substance abuse), I am able to rely upon my studies in Critical Issues in Health Education in interaction with both the troubled individual and staff specialists in the human resources area.

Finally, my learning contracts were developed to enhance all areas of my degree program. The studies in sociology and American literature are intended to broaden the scope of the social science and humanities elements of the overall degree program. Having already completed the Introduction to Sociology at this writing, I have initiated a study, in cooperation with our human resources department, in deviant behavior in the workplace. On the advice of my primary mentor, I added readings in American literature to enhance my exposure to humanities study and to develop critical and abstract thought processes.

General physics was selected to round out the influence of the sciences in my degree program. Indeed, optics, sound and mechanics play a substantial role in television technology. The study of Accounting Principles I and the Principles of Statistics, although prerequisite to graduate study in the M.B.A. program at the New York Institute of Technology, also provides background in accounting form and the quantitative tools.

Commentary: It is clear that this student thought about how to enhance his concentration with particular general learning studies. There is a checklist of particular studies but these are connected to the sequence within the program. This is much more than a list. It is a discussion of how studies relate and how they build a full set of intellectual and skill relations.

ADVANCED STANDING/PRIOR LEARNING

Faculty academic review committee members do not need the full set of detailed essays that students provide their expert evaluators. However, they do need to have some sense of the learning that a student brings to the degree program.

Example 1 – My art school studies have provided transfer credit in foundation arts courses while my extensive work as a professional printmaker and painter over the past 16 years substantiates my advanced achievement as a visual artist. In addition, as the director of several community arts programs since 1983, my learning has extended into the areas of performance and music in a community context and to art education. I have written essays on my life experience in art administration, art education and studio art for evaluation.

Commentary: This sets the context for the requests for credit and does so clearly and briefly. Here is an instance of how time and learning do relate: the student's years of practice enabled her to progress to an advanced-skill level.

Example 2 – For the past six years, I've worked in the human service field, largely with special individuals. My various experiences range from my employment in the Department of Social Services working with income maintenance (public assistance and food stamps), and with hearing impaired and emotionally disturbed children in a residential program, to a school system working on mainstreaming an autistic student into school life. My employment history and current job have given me a working knowledge of psychopathology.
My current job as a site supervisor with Housing Opportunities Management and Essential Services Incorporated (H.O.M.E.S. Inc.), which provides housing and support services for adults with disabilities, in addition to expanding my knowledge of psychopathology, requires me to possess skills in interviewing, staff training, ongoing supervisions, developing policy and program evaluation. Many of these skill areas were sharpened through off-site trainings, including How to Supervise, Positive Behavioral Supports and Evaluations just to name a few.

Commentary: The discussion here places the requests for credit in a very specific context. The professional connection is valuable as is the variety of experience that led to the learning. The mention of specific skills and topics help weave together the formal training and basic on-the-job learning.

Example 3 – At this point, I should explain that the absence of any credit by evaluation on my degree program proposal fails to reflect the sum total of my previous learning. I have chosen not to seek application of some legitimate evaluation credits because those credits are not relevant to the degree I seek. I bring them to your attention now because they indicate a breadth of learning not apparent in the narrow-seeming scope of my general learning proposal, which lacks in quantitative courses of the mathematical and natural sciences.

I submit that my business and medical courses at Paine Hall, and also my life experiences, give indication of prior college-level learning in these areas. For instance, while I was attending Paine Hall, I successfully completed bookkeeping courses and such laboratory courses as hematology, urology and X-ray technique and development. In addition, during the 18 years of managing our motel, the skills I used included the hiring and training of personnel; ordering supplies; interface with clients and the public; and all bookkeeping duties including payroll, quarterly reports, sales tax recipients and returns, reservations and deposits, safety and hygiene inspection reports, and publicity and advertisement.

In a similar vein, I omit some creative writing transcript credits to allow more room for contract studies. I would like to emphasize that I am attempting these studies for the love of learning and not in preparation for a change in or resumption of a career. If it should happen that in the pursuit of scholarship I could contribute literary reviews or do archival research, I would be pleased to do so, but those works would be peripheral activities contingent upon the main goal of learning for its own sake. My main purpose in attempting this degree is personal fulfillment, which I trust will affect positively my own life and the lives of my family, friends and members of my community.

Commentary: This student displays learning that, while not part of any credit request, will help the committee see the background and broad learning that still serves as the heart of a decision to come back to school. That is an important part of any discussion of a degree.

RESEARCHING YOUR PROGRAM

Students use a variety of methods to research their chosen fields of study, employment opportunities and graduate school possibilities. Committees want to know about that research and the information the student gained and how it influenced the development of the degree program.

Example 1 – In developing this program, I consulted a few college catalogs, people in the training and human resource fields, and several books. I consulted undergraduate courses from teaching, business and human resource programs at Saint Bonaventure University, SUNY Binghamton and Ithaca College. During this process, I interviewed a program coordinator, where developing staff and policy and procedures was a big part of her job.

I also interviewed a personnel director from a human services organization, who stated that interviewing, orientation, firing and communication with the Department of Labor are vital components of his job. Another resource I used to help develop this program came from reading a couple of books, “Human Resource Management, Foundations in Personnel” by John M. Ivancovich and “Cultural Literary” by E. D. Hirsch Jr. I found both helpful and enlightening.

Commentary: This is a good description of the planning process which might help a committee understand that the concentration design is informed by some solid research and investigation by the student. It would be helpful to know what she learned from her reading.

Example 2 – In devising my concentration, I checked with the entrance requirements of graduate schools and had an interview with Dr. Cheng, a research biologist at the Animal Behavior Institute at Rutgers University, concerning their doctoral program. I also met frequently with my mentor, who encouraged me to explore every avenue to help define my educational goals. Because of my work as a volunteer at the Bronx Zoo, I have had the opportunity to speak to many professionals who work and teach in my field of study – curators, zoo keepers and administrators.

I also sent out letters in the form of a marketing survey to the directors of all the zoological parks and aquariums on the Eastern seaboard, requesting information on their educational requirements for entry-level positions. Finally, by reviewing all this information and by consulting with Empire State College’s curricular guidelines, I have constructed a degree program.

Commentary: The student took an interesting approach. Her research seems quite valid. But what were the results? What did she learn? How was she informed by what she learned?

Example 3 – Since I plan to attend law school after Empire State College, I feel I have made the appropriate choice for the concentration of my studies, sociology with a liberal arts program. Research I have done on law schools and their programs and aims indicates that the knowledge I have
described, coupled with my interests and life experiences, will not only help in my graduate studies, but also will provide the foundation for a law career. Law studies, I found, cover a broad range of learning – not just what the student has acquired in the way of history, government studies, political science, writing and communications skills.

Also important are the abilities to question, to challenge what one hears, and to look a second time at what is presented as fact. Thinking critically and exhibiting a good understanding of human attitudes (people, after all, wrote the laws and administer them) as well as the skill of logic are necessary. The collection and evaluation of statistics and the research techniques I have learned at Empire State College will prepare me for similar work I will be required to do in law school.

As Felix Frankfurter once wrote to an aspiring lawyer, “No one can be a truly competent lawyer unless he is a cultivated man. Stock your mind with the deposit of much good reading, and widen and deepen your feelings by experiencing … as much as possible the wonderful mysteries of the universe … ”

Commentary: The student’s goal (law school) is a definite theme here. She explains the design of her concentration in light of that goal and addresses why she built into her degree program opportunities to gain new perspectives and learn other ways of thinking.

COMPLETING THE RATIONALE ESSAY

Now that you have carefully read these samples, can you improve upon sections of your draft essay?

- Reread your essay.
- Review once more the questions on page 44.
- Are you satisfied with what you wrote?
- Is there information that you should add to your essay to clarify points for the faculty academic review committee?

One hint: We all know what we want to say and are, therefore, apt to see it whether it is presented clearly or not. Read carefully to make sure you have included specific information that explains and shows your thinking. Do not rely on the committee to read between the lines.

Once you feel confident about your essay, give your latest draft to your mentor, with a copy of your drafted degree program, and ask for feedback.

Now is a good time to check your writing. Take the time to rewrite it carefully, proofread it, and be sure that it presents a clear picture of the educational program you are presenting for approval. Have someone else proofread it, also.

Just as the degree program rationale pulls together thoughts that have contributed to the design of your program, it walks members of the faculty academic review committee through the process you have experienced and helps them to understand why you have chosen to do some things and not others.