According to the architects of K’s new advising tool—Paul Sotherland, associate provost and professor of biology, and Zaide Pixley, dean of the first year and advising and adjunct associate professor of music—the three methods (journal, pensieve, commonplace) can have similar benefits.

Maintaining a “commonplace” book was a long-held tradition among scholars in Europe, writes Steven Johnson in “Where Good Ideas Come From.” Charles Darwin’s notebooks were a prime example. Far more than a diary, Darwin’s notebooks “quoted other sources, improvised new ideas, interrogated and dismissed false leads, drew diagrams and generally let his mind roam on the page,” says Johnson.

All that seemed like a very good idea for K students, Sotherland and Pixley felt. A Kalamazoo College education has a lot of moving parts, from wide-ranging classes to internships, seminars, externships, conferences, clubs, and study abroad. Students are frequently so busy doing things, says Sotherland, that they don’t have time to capture it all on paper or to see how it all fits together. By organizing their activities and reflecting on them, Sotherland and Pixley believed that students could better understand and articulate how their individual K-Plans were coming together.

An experiment with e-portfolios in the late 1990s had a similar goal, Sotherland says. But it came so early in the web-age that students first needed to learn to construct the web pages; that need, plus the fact that the early attempt was mandatory for students and a burden for those who administered it doomed it to failure, says Sotherland—“It died a quiet death.”
But the need was still there. This time around, the project’s champions decided to make participation completely voluntary, with a minimum of effort required on the part of students or any one campus department. “We realize that everybody’s busy,” says Sotherland. “So, to pull it off, it must be relatively easy.”

Dubbed the K-Plan Commonplace, the project was funded by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) and a gift from a K trustee. With the support of Provost Michael A. (“Mickey”) McDonald and help from a broad swath of departments across campus (“People at K are willing to jump in and try things,” says Pixley. “They have a positive restlessness focused on deeper learning.”), the project was launched to students in February 2013.

The K-Plan Commonplace is in essence an expanded transcript. Beyond just listing classes taken and grades earned, however, it also lists all other campus and off-campus activities that the student has experienced, categorized into the four guiding principles of the K-Plan: depth and breadth in the liberal arts; learning through experience; international and intercultural engagement; and independent scholarship. The activities are filled in automatically by the departments involved (the Commonplace is integrated into K’s data management systems), thus minimizing the amount of time any person or department has to spend filling it in.

In each section of the Commonplace, the student is given space for reflections: It’s a wide-open opportunity to share a little or a lot about what is going on in one’s head at the time. “Understanding comes more deeply when you write about it,” says Pixley. Advisors use the Commonplace to help students understand how seemingly disparate experiences may be helping them achieve the breadth of learning that is part of the liberal arts education.

First-year student Audrey Negro’s first experience with the K-Plan Commonplace came before she even arrived on campus last fall. As a member of the first class who would have all four years of her college activities tracked by the system, Negro got her first Commonplace e-mail during the summer, while she was still at home in Commerce, Mich. The questions she received then were focused on her general expectations for college. Negro said she answered the questions quickly, as directed (“It’s not an essay, just a quick reflection,” says Pixley), anticipating how she would feel when she got to K. After a month or two at school, Negro laughs, “I realized it wasn’t like I expected at all. I wasn’t nearly as homesick as I expected to be.” Her ongoing reflections in the Commonplace will help remind Negro of the changes she sees in herself as her college years progress.

On the other end of the student spectrum is Kari Paine, a senior from Manistee, Mich., majoring in economics. Instinctively sensing the value of a Commonplace vehicle, Paine had journaled her experiences ever since starting at K. When the K-Plan Commonplace was introduced, during her junior year, Paine jumped on board. Having kept track of her many campus and off-campus activities has proved its value as she writes cover letters, crafts résumés, and applies for graduate schools. The Commonplace, says Paine, “helps make my seemingly disjointed experiences into one synthesized whole.”

Over time, the success of the K-Plan Commonplace will be quantified by survey results and focus groups, but students and advisors are finding that its main benefits are more qualitative. From the advisor’s viewpoint, says Pixley, the K-Plan Commonplace is a quick way to see what the student is doing. By offering such insights, the relationship between student and advisor is enhanced, and the advising process can move along much faster.

“The K-Plan Commonplace is, in essence, an expanded transcript.”