Emerging 50 years ago, in an environment with a history rich in progressive ideas about how best to educate young men and women, The K-Plan developed from an innovative and pragmatic means of educating students to what it is today, an affirmation of principles guiding Kalamazoo College’s educational quest to promote a life of learning for everyone associated with the College.

Established in 1833 by settlers in the Michigan Territory who valued the role an educated citizenry played in moral and civic life, the institution that ultimately became Kalamazoo College sought to “afford facilities for the improvement of the manners, minds, and morals of the young unsurpassed by any of this section in our country.” Successive presidencies reaffirmed and reinvigorated the institution’s dedication to a life of learning. In particular, James A. B. Stone, president from 1843-63, and his wife, Lucinda Hinsdale Stone, shaped the College’s educational values in ways that persist today. The Stones were progressives who believed in abolition of slavery and education of women alongside men. They emphasized the importance of foreign language and travel abroad and engaged the campus in discourse on the important issues of the day. During their tenure, many great thinkers of the 19th century visited the Kalamazoo College campus including Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Bronson Alcott, and Sojourner Truth.

Several decades later President Allan Hoben, who served Kalamazoo College from 1922-35, reaffirmed the values of lifelong learning espoused by the Stones while recasting them through his own vision, which emphasized a “fellowship in learning” characterized by “interplay of minds both past and present” and “friendly contact with faculty members.” According to Hoben, through this fellowship in learning “students evolve their best selves” and “the scholar’s spirit dedicated to human welfare.”

Building on Hoben’s vision for the College, President Weimer K. Hicks oversaw perhaps the most dramatic reinvention of the College’s educational principles when, in 1962, establishing the Kalamazoo Plan, later referred to as K-Plan. This innovative approach to college retained Hoben’s ideal of a fellowship in learning through close student-faculty interactions while opening up the campus by adding the immersive experiential elements of career internships, study abroad, and the Senior Individualized Project to a rich on-campus liberal arts education. When reflecting on the K-Plan in 1971, Hicks wrote: “A danger lies in our success. The thrust forward of the last two decades will inevitably need to be repeated. Merely to hold the line in the next decade is a posture which can lead only to retrogression.”

Ideals espoused by the Stones, Hoben, and Hicks live on today. In her 2006 inaugural address “A Fellowship in Learning: At Home in the World,” President Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran reaffirmed the past and envisioned a future in which Kalamazoo College continues “to cultivate in learners the ability to think clearly, to appreciate every beautiful thing, and to revere the truth” while “preparing students to cross boundaries in all their permutations.” Achieving this goal in an inclusive setting, rooted in a rich past and branching into an increasingly complex future, calls for a modest re-visioning of the K-Plan so that graduates will continue to possess what Hoben referred to as “the likeness and life of their alma mater.”

The K-Plan articulates ways in which Kalamazoo College promotes a life of learning – for students, faculty, staff, and all other constituencies associated with the College. While parallel with, and developing from, the Kalamazoo Plan, the K-Plan today invites participation by everyone at Kalamazoo College in a rich and life-long educational experience.
After the mid-1990s, when the College changed its academic calendar, in effect disconnecting the K-Plan from the quarter grid, the K-Plan continued to evolve while experiencing somewhat of an identity crisis. Part of that evolution entailed finding more effective ways to integrate off-campus and classroom learning. At the turn of the millennium, service-learning emerged as a key experiential program that dissolved barriers between campus and community, fostering a sought-after integration. Curricular renewal in 2009 introduced Shared Passages Seminars to enhance integration of on-campus and off-campus learning. Conversations during the 2010-12 Self-Study led to a re-visioning of the K-Plan as an explicit set of principles that have served to guide a Kalamazoo College education for a half-century.

Like the original Kalamazoo Plan, the K-Plan has four components:

- Depth and breadth in the liberal arts
- Learning through experience
- International and intercultural engagement
- Independent scholarship

Each K-Plan component has instantiations similar to, and yet broader and better integrated than, the four original Kalamazoo Plan components - on-campus instruction; career service internships; foreign study; and the senior individualized project. Moreover, because the K-Plan today is more a declaration of Kalamazoo College’s guiding educational principles than a list of student activities, each principle can pervade the other three, and what emerges from the synergy is greater than the sum of the parts, for students and for everyone else associated with Kalamazoo College. For example, while attaining “depth and breadth in the liberal arts” is frequently envisioned as taking place on campus and in the classroom, it can certainly occur outside the classroom and beyond campus while carrying out an externship, studying abroad, or working on a senior project. And, it can be attained by others at “K” through teaching, attending seminars, or enjoying a play. Similarly, though “learning through experience” can take place during internships, as originally conceived, it can also occur while on study abroad, when working with a community partner, and when engaged in a wide variety of experiences, both on and off campus, including those encountered in the classroom, in residence halls and in student organizations. “Intercultural and international engagement” and “independent scholarship” also suffuse each of the other three while having clear instantiations for our students as, for example, study abroad and the Senior Individualized Project. Thus, when viewed as guiding educational principles manifested throughout (and beyond) four undergraduate years at the College, instead of a concatenation of singular events in which only students engage, the K-Plan becomes a philosophy of education that can shape learning over a lifetime and help Kalamazoo College function with integrity and distinction.

In his book, The Distinctive College, Burton Clark notes the following: “Participants within many colleges easily overlook the importance of a unifying and motivating theme when they think of improving the position of their colleges in society...What is so difficult, so hard as to occur infrequently, is to put it all together: to realize the necessity of a unifying theme; to formulate one feasible in a given social context; to build the organizational conditions and structures that allow and help a mission to get underway; and to develop and continue structures that elaborate a mission into a rich and encompassing definition of the institutional self” (Clark, 1970; 236). This unifying theme, what Clark calls a “saga,” can help build and sustain integrity in a college community. It “...offers an educationally relevant definition of the difference of the group from all others. And salient elements in the distinctiveness become foci of personal awareness and of a sense of things held in common with others currently on the scene, those who have been there before, and those yet to arrive” (ibid., 256). When viewed in this light, the K-Plan can serve as the College’s “saga” because the emergent whole of these guiding principles has an overwhelmingly positive effect on students and other members of the learning community that has persisted at Kalamazoo College for nearly two centuries.

(Written as part of the 2010-12 Kalamazoo College Self-Study by Paul Sotherland and Anne Dueweke)