Tips for Developing a Coherent Research Plan

- **Ask important and interesting questions.**
  What are the important questions related to your areas of interest? How might you go about trying to answer these questions? Use these big questions to help frame your own research agenda and to anchor your work in a broader context of your field, education, and society.

- **Develop a focus or coherent theme for your research and stick to it.**
  Look to establish yourself as an expert in a particular domain. Whenever possible, relate your work to this focus or theme. Pursue studies that are theoretically or disciplinarily related. Resist the urge to get involved in projects that are not closely aligned with your interests/expertise. It’s tempting as a new faculty member to say “yes” to every request that comes your way, but doing so can detract from your focus. It’s important to choose wisely.

- **Think about and describe your focus/theme in broad terms.**
  Use relatively “broad” terms to describe your focus. Instead of saying you’re interested in something like “peer feedback in online learning” consider a broader and more encompassing description such as “online learning strategies.” Broader terms allow you to “fit” smaller projects/ideas (e.g., “facilitating interaction in online learning,” “supporting critical thinking in online learning,” etc.) within the same general focus.

- **Look for the connections among your lines of work.**
  Most faculty members develop more than one thread or line of work within an overall area of focus. When you have different lines or threads in your work, look for the connections between them and try to make them explicit when you describe your work. You may not set out to overtly include all of your work under a single umbrella, but in most cases you can include different lines of work within an overarching theme by thinking about the connections you can make between them. Connections may be at a broad-brush level (e.g., research on writing) or at a more specific level (e.g., research on primary grade English language learners, including their development of writing skills).

- **Consider exploring your focus/theme from multiple perspectives.**
  Within your focus or research theme, look for ways to explore the topic(s) from multiple perspectives. For example, if your work focuses on education in a specific content domain (e.g., science education, social studies) you might examine it from both the perspective of learners (students) and teachers. You could explore learning with different types of learners (e.g., males/females, high-/low-achieving), at different grade levels, and in different settings. You could use different methodologies. You could look for applications across disciplines. In short, build a variety of work around your core focus.
• **Create a visual illustration of your focus.**
  Create a concept map or visual diagram to illustrate your focus and the threads of your work and how specific products of your scholarship (e.g., journal articles, book chapters, grants, presentations) contribute. Put your primary focus (or two) in the center and determine how your other interests relate to this. Put this graphic in your preliminary promotion document, and keep it posted in a prominent place in your office. As new projects come along, see how they map onto it. If they don’t fit, it may be time to say “no” or it might be time to reconceptualize your focus.

  ![Overarching scholarly focus](image)

  Thread 1
  • Publication
  • Presentation
  • Presentation

  Thread 2
  • Publication
  • Grant
  • Publication

  Thread 3
  • Publication

• **Consult with more senior colleagues for examples.**
  Talk to more senior colleagues about their work, how they describe it, and how it grew and evolved. Ask to see examples of promotion documents from recently promoted colleagues. Because they are confidential, the department cannot provide these documents, but the individual faculty members are often willing to share them. These documents provide good examples of how to frame one’s work.