On Tuesday, November 27, 2007, an e-mail message was sent to the Executive Committee of the
Psychology Department by one faculty member of that department that contained serious allegations
against another faculty member of the department and also against the College of LSA. Because of this,
Dean Terry McDonald has asked me to respond with this report.

In Professor John Hagen’s work, he has had substantial contact with student-athletes, particularly in his
independent study courses, directly related to his research on understanding differences in learning styles
and how they relate to students’ backgrounds and academic performance. In August 2006, at the time of
the Provost’s initiative to re-examine the oversight of and guidelines for independent study across the
university, I made inquiries with the Psychology Department about the seemingly large number of student-
athletes in Professor Hagen’s independent study courses. After an investigation that included a thorough
examination of the department’s independent study guidelines and oversight procedures, discussions with
sources outside the department having information relevant to the matter, and discussions with Professor
Hagen himself, my office was able to determine not only that there is nothing about Professor Hagen’s
independent study program that should concern us, but that in fact he is performing a valuable service for
the students in those studies and to the university by having them available. We thought that this had
settled the matter.

Apparently not, though, as is evidenced by the e-mail sent on November 27. Although the faculty member
who sent it did not mention Professor Hagen by name, it is clear that Professor Hagen is the target of the
message. It is apparent that these allegations, while baseless, are becoming public knowledge, and thus it is
important to address them. We hope through this report to make known more widely the results of last
year’s investigation, and also provide some additional information gathered since then that reinforces the
earlier conclusion.

The main point to the allegations by the individual faculty member seems to be that Professor Hagen does
not require much work in five Psychology courses that the accuser characterizes as independent studies
with unusually large collective enrollments. However, the evidence does not bear this out. At the end of
the Winter 2007 term, 29 of these students responded anonymously to our standard end-of-term course
and instructor evaluation. On question Q891, asking the students to characterize the workload, 20 of the
students (over two-thirds of them) characterized it as moderate to heavy, while only 9 called it light. From
this, one has to question claims that students generally believe the workloads are light, particularly when
some of those claims seem to originate from comments made to the accusing faculty member by students
based on what they have heard from other students. It appears that when the question is put directly to the

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1 The courses are Psych 200, 218, 323, 327, and 401. Psych 218 and 401 are actually regular courses, not independent studies,
though Psych 218 is a classroom version of 200, and the two courses have the same goals and learning expectations when taken
for the same amount of credit.
students in a straightforward, scientifically sound, non-leading way immediately after they have finished the course, most of them just do not agree that the workload is light.  

It should be noted that these results were on file with the university’s Office of Evaluations and Examinations long before I contacted Professor Hagen as part of my earlier investigation, and certainly before the allegations by this one faculty member surfaced.

Concerning a claim in the November 27 e-mail that the number of students Professor Hagen serves with his independent study program “is staggering compared to all other faculty in the Psychology Department”: That is simply wrong. This claim was checked against the data from Fall 2004 onward, and for the full academic year during this period in which Professor Hagen had the most independent study students, 2006–07, there were still thirteen other faculty in the Psychology Department who had as many or more.

There was also the allegation that because of the number of students Professor Hagen serves in the courses mentioned by the accusing faculty member, he cannot be spending time with them outside the classroom. Our data shows that the students certainly believe he can and does. On the end-of-term survey already mentioned, where the students responded on a scale of 1 (low agreement) to 5 (high agreement) to question Q219, whether the instructor is available to students outside of class, the median response was 4.83, one of the highest numbers I have ever seen given for this, and emphatically not a number earned by someone who sees his students rarely or only briefly in his office.

Incidentally, some other relevant numbers from that survey are for Q3, about learning a great deal (4.69); Q122, about learning to apply principles to new situations (4.65); and the two questions considered to be the gold standard for instructor evaluation, Q1 and Q2 about the excellence of the course and teacher (4.74 and 4.81, respectively). These are the sorts of numbers for which people are nominated for teaching awards, not criticized.

It was also alleged by the same accusing faculty member that students do not complete meaningful work in Professor Hagen’s courses. We can find no substance to this allegation. Psychology has long had substantial guidelines in place for independent studies, with many features that exceed the more recent set of guidelines issued by the Provost in August 2006; for example, in upper level independent study courses, the department checks to make sure all required papers are submitted. The two regular classroom courses mentioned in the criticism of Professor Hagen, Psych 218 and 401, have official syllabi outlining expectations that are typical of courses taught at that level. As with any faculty member, it is true that after Professor Hagen grades his students’ work, nobody then regrades it to see whether he has actually done his job properly. But there has been absolutely no evidence offered that he does not, and it is also

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2 Concerning an ad hoc method for attempting to measure course workload, and why we would never use it in place of our long-standing Likert-scale survey instrument: Most academics have heard, and probably cited, the conventional wisdom that we would like students to be engaged with a course, including time spent in and out of class, about three hours per week for each credit hour given for the course. While this is useful for helping students understand that our expectations of them are high, there are obvious problems with trying to use this as a measure of whether the workload for a course is acceptable. Among them are that (1) it is a shallow one-dimensional measure that does not take into account that some students make more productive use of time than others; (2) asking students to quantify the time they spent on a course is going to produce quite error-prone results, particularly if done long after the fact; and (3) it ignores the obvious fact that different students will need to spend different amounts of time on a course to get acceptable outcomes. Incidentally, there is strong evidence that the time commitment we get from students is, on average, much less than what the conventional wisdom says we would like; see, for example, http://advising.buffalo.edu/firstyear/highschool_college.php. Thus, using the “three hour rule” as a measure of acceptable course workload, rather than as a guideline for an ideal to which we would have students aspire, is almost certainly invalid in the first place.
documentably the case that he does not give away grades. Because of the distribution of his students in the five courses mentioned in the e-mail of November 27, the average grade in them is very slightly (about one-sixth of a letter grade) higher than the departmental average for those same courses, but when one looks on a course-by-course basis, the story changes, and in both upper and lower level courses his grades tend to be below average for the department. 3

Concerning a demand in the recent e-mail that enrollment and transcript data for Professor Hagen’s courses be carefully examined—In fact, that has already been done. In Psych 327, 401, 421, and 423, the majority of students (about 90%) are Psychology concentrators, and their transcripts indicate typical course distributions for Psychology students. Those in the most demanding courses tend to have A/B grades throughout their transcripts. In Professor Hagen’s Psych 200 and 218, grading patterns are more scattered. However, the specific goal of these courses is to teach the students what is academically known about factors that affect academic performance, so that they can apply this knowledge to both themselves and others, and this academic knowledge is particularly valuable for developing success strategies for people with extra-curricular workloads tending to more than ten to fifteen hours a week, such as student-athletes. 4

Substantial research clearly establishes that people with such workloads are particularly at risk of academic failure. Incidentally, these are most certainly not merely “study skills” courses, even if the students do learn academic survival skills along the way. Professor Hagen has shown me some of the material used, and the course has substantial academic content.

Concerning another claim in that November 27 e-mail from the accusing faculty member that someone should investigate “how many credits were taken by the same students because some student-athletes apparently have taken many courses with this same faculty member”: That investigation has also been done, and there is no evidence that this happens except for the few Psychology concentrators who go on to take the advanced research classes—and then, like similar students throughout the department, they have worked their way through two to four other courses that allow them to increase their independence as researchers and scholars over time.

Concerning a handful of other allegations brought up in that same November 27 e-mail about supervision and accountability: The Undergraduate Committee does monitor the independent study situation, and even creates new courses with a more formal classroom component when the number of students in one independent study course gets large; that is how Psych 200 gave birth to Psych 218. The reason for the Undergraduate Office allowing Professor Hagen to enroll the number of students he does, as it also does for the faculty who conduct more independent studies than Professor Hagen, is that the students are well served by the courses. Professor Lee did authorize overrides when appropriate (which she always checked); that is precisely why the Undergraduate Chair has that authority. The statement that there are no records

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3 After the issuance of the preliminary version of this report on December 12, 2007, the Psychology Executive Committee completed an independent investigation, and as part of it did review the work and assessment of 53 students in Professor Hagen’s Psych 200, 218, 327, and 401, including student-athletes and others. Among its other conclusions the report states that, based on this sample and a further examination of grading patterns in Professor Hagen’s independent study courses and the others in the department, “we find no evidence to suggest that the work is not being done, or that the requirements for student-athletes are different from that of non-student-athletes,” and that “the overall department (grading) pattern (for both student-athletes and others in independent study courses) is remarkably consistent with that of Professor Hagen’s.”

4 In a recent article in The Chronicle of Higher Education (“Athletes’ Hours Renew Debate Over College Sports”, vol. 54, no. 20, January 25, 2008, pp. A1, A23), it was stated that “Major-college football players reported spending an average of 44.8 hours a week practicing, playing, or training for their sport, the survey (of 21,000 student-athletes by the NCAA) found, with golfers, baseball players, and softball players not far behind.”
of the work students performed or papers they wrote is simply wrong. And Professor Hagen was placed in charge of Student Services precisely because he has decades of experience working with undergraduates at all levels, is calm, firm, and provides an understanding of student needs while holding a firm line on appropriate academic behavior, and was trusted to do an excellent job and to be able to work closely with the staff in the SAA office as the graduate and undergraduate staffs were merged.

It was also alleged by this one faculty member that Professor Hagen could have used “non-accredited” people to supervise students, but that, too, is incorrect: All such supervisors meet university, college, and departmental guidelines. He is certainly not rounding up people off the street to do this, but is using graduate students, postdocs, laboratory managers, and other appropriate personnel of this type, as do his peers in the department.

On that accusing faculty member’s allegation that Professor Hagen should be required to produce “visible evidence” of the work his undergraduate students do: The evidence is certainly there, in departmental files as well as in the student academic poster presentations stacked high in Professor Hagen’s office.

Concerning the further allegation by that faculty member that “(The pattern of Professor Hagen’s behavior) has reached new levels this year, even after the LS&A Curriculum Committee discussed the situation in 2006–2007”: The Committee never had any such discussion of Professor Hagen’s independent studies. The only discussion of independent studies at all was about the Provost’s new guidelines and LS&A’s general position on them, with no reference to Professor Hagen, Psychology, or, so far as I can remember, any other department. Furthermore, the number of independent studies Professor Hagen was conducting when the accusing faculty member made this charge in November 2007 was actually lower than during any other term of the regular academic year since Fall 2004.

Finally, concerning the claim by the accusing faculty member that there is something ominous about Professor Hagen’s serving on the UM Board in Control of Intercollegiate Athletics: Many other faculty from across campus have also served on that board, including the accusing faculty member.

One more item should be mentioned concerning the data included in the November 27 e-mail: Care should be taken before citing it. The author states that “I do not have precise information,” and that, at least, is one matter on which we can agree. The data contains serious errors.5

LSA appreciates the information that Psychology has provided so that these allegations can be carefully examined, and we feel that our investigation has been thorough and exhaustive. After the issuance of the preliminary version of this report on December 12, 2007, the Psychology Executive Committee completed an independent investigation of the allegations against Professor Hagen, also remarkably thorough, and on January 18, 2008 issued its own report in which the committee concludes that “we believe that Professor Hagen has not engaged in academic misconduct, and we have uncovered nothing to warrant further investigation.”

Allegations by the accusing faculty member that the college is participating in some cover-up are wrong, because, simply, there is nothing that anyone would want or need to cover up. Professor Hagen is highly respected, both at UM and throughout his profession, and is doing research that both informs and is

5 In late December 2007, the accusing faculty member was asked to provide additional information that the faculty member claimed to have, in his message to the Psychology Executive Committee and in another message to me. At the time of this update on March 12, 2008, the faculty member has not responded.
informed by the type of student served by his independent study courses. We have looked very hard, and have found not a shred of evidence of any wrongdoing on his part. What we have found is a faculty member who continues to do internationally recognized research in the areas directly related to his independent studies, and who cares deeply about students and fully understands (and stresses to others) the importance of holding those students to high standards and then having them understand and apply the research that shows that they are capable of meeting those standards.

When one finally strips away all the window dressing surrounding the allegations, it becomes clear that there is only one point driving the entire argument: The assumption by this one faculty member that there has to be something illicit going on with Professor Hagen’s independent studies, just because so many student-athletes take them. I will say only that I could not disagree more. The Psychology Department itself has faculty who were formerly student-athletes, and those faculty, in particular, should be able to testify that stereotyping our student-athletes in this way is unjust and harmful.

I admit to feeling some frustration about the amount of time this whole matter has taken from other issues, since it was clear almost from the earliest moments of the initial inquiry that there was no basis for any concern about Professor Hagen’s independent studies. Further examinations of the record have only reinforced that conclusion, and I do hope this is the end of these allegations.

Most sincerely,

Robert E. Megginson
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Associate Dean for Undergraduate
and Graduate Education