Understanding the factors impacting students’ choices of what school to attend and/or what major to pursue is a timely and important topic; and is one that holds important implications for researchers, academic programmers, and university administrators. While several studies within the sporting literature have examined the factors impacting the school choice decisions of student-athletes (e.g., Barden et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2009; Judson et al., 2004; Klenosky et al., 2001; Magnusen, 2012; Popp et al., 2011), little has been done to explore the factors impacting school-choice decision-making among graduate students; specifically students pursuing a graduate degree from a sport management program. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine the factors influencing student decisions to pursue a graduate sport management degree.

A useful perspective for studying the factors involved in the decision-making process involves the use of means-end theory. Originally developed to understand the range of meanings individuals associate with the goods and services they purchase and consume (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds & Gutman, 1984), means-end theory is based on the assumption that individuals make decisions based on characteristics that elicit desirable benefits and avoid undesirable costs.

As noted by Klenosky et al. (1993), means-end theory focuses on product meanings at three levels of abstraction. At the first level are attributes, which are defined as relatively tangible or observable characteristic of a good or service. For a sport management graduate program, attributes might include availability of funding, faculty with sports expertise, challenging course offerings, and proximity to a large, sport-oriented city. At the second level are consequences, which are more abstract meanings that refer to the outcomes or benefits associated with purchasing or consuming a good or service. Examples of consequences in the present context include making one more marketable within the sporting industry, gaining real-world experience, and receiving a post-baccalaureate degree. Values, the final level of meaning, refer to highly abstract beliefs about desired end-states of existence that help guide decision making and human behavior (e.g., Kahle, 1983; Rokeach, 1968; Verhoff et al., 1981). For a sport management graduate program, personal values might include a sense of accomplishment, achievement, and security.

In means-end theory, attributes obtain their importance through the consequences or benefits they provide to the consumer; similarly consequences obtain their importance through the values they help reinforce. Taken together, the pattern of associations that connect attributes to consequences, and subsequently consequences to personal values, is conceptualized as a simple model referred to as a means-end chain (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds & Gutman, 1984). Within the context of sport management graduate student school selection decisions, a means-end chain might link the attribute “challenging course offerings,” with the consequences “develop marketable skills” and “obtain a job in sports,” finally to the value “financial security.”

Previous research has used the means-end perspective to examine tourism destination decisions (Klenosky, 2002; Klenosky et al., 1999; Thirkettle et al., 2013), retail store patronage (Thompson & Chen, 1998), and student-athlete school choice decision-making (Klenosky et al., 2001). In this research, the means-end approach is employed to examine the factors underlying the graduate school-choice decisions of students within a sport management graduate program.

Means-end data are typically collected using semi-structured, one-on-one laddering interviews (Klenosky et al., 1993; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). The technique is referred to as laddering because it focuses on eliciting responses that climb the “ladder” of abstraction (i.e., from relatively concrete attributes, to more abstract consequences and finally to highly abstract personal values). In the laddering interviews conducted in the present study, respondents will first be asked to indicate the different graduate programs they considered when they made their school-choice decision;
and then to indicate why they chose their current school over the others. The responses to this initial set of questions will be used to identify the attributes of the selected school/graduate program. Follow-up questions (in the form of “why is that important to you” or “why is that good or beneficial”) will then be employed to identify the consequence(s) provided by each attribute; and the value(s) associated with each consequence. The set of means-end chains obtained will then be summarized across the study sample and for relevant respondent subgroups.

To date, 29 graduate students currently enrolled in a sport management program at a major university in the Midwest United States have been recruited to participate in the study. Thus, the laddering interviews are just recently underway. The anticipated study results should contribute to our understanding of the factors underlying sport management graduate students’ school choice decisions; and as a result, should also assist in efforts to recruit and retain graduate students and improve sport management graduate programs.