North American University administrators and sport management educators realize the need to “facilitate and deliver a high quality preparatory academic experience” (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016, p. 1) for undergraduate students. University administrators experience pressure to create an educational experience that is increasingly relevant for students, given students’ heightened discernment of the quality of education they are receiving. Furthermore, sport management educators acknowledge the highly competitive industry environment to which graduates are entering, spiking their desire to intentionally and continuously examine curricula and pedagogical practices (Spence, Hess, McDonald, & Sheehan, 2009).

Given respective realizations, the importance for sport management educators to examine undergraduate students’ development remains as salient as ever (Spence & McDonald, 2015). Traditionally, educators’ pedagogical practice has been heavily influenced by competency based management education (CBME) (Paglis, 2013), where curricular content and learning activities emphasize students’ skill development in areas including: analyzing, adapting, decision making, presenting, and leading, among others (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1993; Spence et al., 2009; Spence & McDonald, 2015). Educators predominantly centralize CBME curriculum within both experientially based courses (e.g., internship, practica, field placements) and within traditional lecture style courses (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Jowdy, McDonald, & Spence, 2008). In this manner, educators’ focus is associated with building students’ lateral development, through which they may acquire new, subject-specific knowledge, behaviours, competencies and skills, while learning from pre-existing levels of cognitive and emotional complexity (Brown, 2012; Cook-Greuter, 2004).

While educators’ use of CBME is extremely useful, we contend that such an orientation within learning activities and curricula is insufficient to meet the ever-changing and increasingly complex work environment that characterizes the sport industry (McDonald & Spence, 2016). As such, Cook-Greuter (2004) contends measuring students’ vertical development (i.e., how students’ interpretations of experience and view of reality change and transform through their development of ever-expanding and deepening capacities to take on more perspective over time) is a complementary—and even more valuable focus—to developing students’ lateral development, given the realities of the increasingly complex and interconnected business environment. When students vertically develop, their mental, emotional and behavioural capacities expand and deepen, whereby they ultimately improve the manner by which they consider and interpret their own and others’ perspectives, strategically think, deal effectively with ambiguity and manage conflict (Brown, 2012; Cook-Greuter, 2004).

The primary purpose of this presentation is to share findings from an exploratory mixed-methods longitudinal project, in which we assess the association between students’ vertical development and their leadership efficacy (LE) across their first three years of a 4-year undergraduate sport management program. Leadership efficacy (LE) is a concept derived from self-efficacy and refers to one’s “belief in their capability to lead others and fulfill whatever roles necessary in that capacity” (Quigley, 2013, p. 580). Given one’s LE can be vital in determining ambition for leadership or managerial positions (McCormick, Tanguma, & Lopez-Forment, 2002), sport management educators are well advised to be interested in students’ LE, especially considering the extremely competitive sport industry within which many will enter.

In this study, we utilized a case study methodology. As Eisenhardt (1989) discusses, a case may be chosen to extend emergent theory and provide a baseline for theoretical development in an area of inquiry. We conceptualized
students’ vertical development from the ego development framework, pioneered by Loevinger (1979) and further extended and applied within managerial and leader samples (Cook-Greuter, 2004; Rooke & Torbert, 2005). To determine students’ level of ego (vertical) development, we collected completed Sentence Completion Tests (SCTs) (Hy & Loevinger, 1996) from 15 students in their freshman (January 2016) year and had them analyzed by a certified scorer to determine their baseline level of ego development for further analysis.

In addition, we collected qualitative data from these 15 students in their sophomore (2016-17) year, through use of a semi-structured interview guide we developed with questions related to both ego development and LE constructs. Questions pertained to topics including: challenges students face in their personal and academic lives, sources of support from which they draw during challenging times; and self-perceptions of their development during their freshmen year. Upon transcribing verbatim the interviews (i.e., duration of 25-46 minutes), the first two authors adopted inductive analysis, using the interview guide as a framework to initiate coding. We analyzed these raw data line by line, noting emergent themes. To ensure inter-coder trustworthiness, we created and shared an in-depth summary table of themes from which we further discussed discrepant coding schemes until we reached consensus. In so doing, we assessed students’ discussion of their self-perceptions, as related to both ego development and LE constructs.

Participants were found to measure predominantly at Expert and Achiever stages of ego development, with their self-perceptions of their relationship to LE varying through our sample. In analyzing students’ interview data, according to the stage-specific ego development framework, we could place the variability we found regarding the LE construct in context, thereby helping us to understand what makes students “tick”, in terms of their desire and belief in themselves to be sport industry leaders in the future. Thus, a secondary purpose of this presentation is to present key stage-specific ego developmental characteristics as aligned with our analysis of students’ qualitative data to outline how such characteristics may be integrated when developing consciously targeted learning activities and curricula.

These research findings have significant implications for sport management educators toward curriculum development and timely interventions at touch points through students’ 4-year undergraduate program. In fulfilling the purposes of this presentation, the implications to the sport management education literature are three-fold: first, these findings help to address DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove’s (2016) recommendation that educators understand and address the “development” of sport leaders so they may fulfill the needs of a competitive and rapidly changing industry, through advancing research informed curricula. Second, these findings help us better understand the presence and impact of the critical incidents students incur and their influence their ego development and LE during their undergraduate experience. Third, these findings have implications for how educators may further construct curriculum that is informed by the findings and that strategically includes specific pedagogy (e.g., experiential learning) with intents to both stimulate students’ vertical development and attract and retain a more diverse (e.g., gender, race) student population.