



*Student Parents: Transitioning to College  
with Children. Transitioning to Parenthood in  
College*

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# Student Parents By the Numbers: A Growing Population

- 26% of undergraduate students nationally are parents, this does not include newly pregnant
- Close to 1000 undergraduates at the U of M list dependents on their FAFSA
- When grad students are included the number is much higher
- Typically 300 of these undergraduates are registered with the SPHC and using our services





## Basics About the SPHC

- Have existed at the U of MN in some form since 1967
- Have served undergraduates with children exclusively since 1984
- Formerly college based, now housed in Office for Student Affairs
- Undergraduate program, but will provide referrals and consults to graduate students in need



# Program Model

- Social Work Model
- Strengths based approach
- No strings attached, students can pick and chose services they wish or none at all
- Weekly Parents as Students Support Group (PASS)
- Family friendly, centrally located, dedicated SP space
- Strong collaboration with Office of Student Finance built around shared management of MN based Post Secondary Child Care Grant
- Go beyond borders of campus to serve students



# SPHC Services and Programs

- Large amount of child care assistance money available to students through the Post Secondary Child Care Grant
- Campus based centrally located, all purpose center with SP lounge and computer lab with *free, unlimited printing*
- Weekly professionally facilitated, *Parents As Students Support (PASS)* Group with free lunch
  - Student satisfaction surveys rank this portion of our programming as high as the child care money we give them.



# SPHC Services, cont.

- All staff are social workers and are also trained in basic academic advising practices and intensively trained on financial aid issues that impact our parents
- Walk-in and appointment based service delivery model
- “Onestop” model, with SPHC staff able to provide campus or community based referrals and address most family or academic needs either on-site or through appropriate, on the spot referrals
  - The community based referrals are significant as most of our parents do NOT live in on campus family housing



## SPHC Services, cont.

- Family friendly activities
  - Homecoming party
  - SP specific End of Year Celebration
- Center opened for extended hours
- Crises intervention: we are often the first place students turn, we then refer as needed
- All programs are designed to assist students in creating a community of other parent learners
- Staff members advocate for student parents on the micro and macro level





# Population Served

- Financial aid eligible
- Undergraduate to receive full program services.
- Serve mothers and fathers, single, divorced, married, culturally married students
- Largest percentage of our students are single mothers, typically at least 70%
- Most SPHC registered students have only 1 or 2 children
- Typically 300 students registered with us at any given time
- This is not every undergraduate parent at the U of M
  - Typically a gap between who we serve and the number of students with dependent on FAFSA



# Population Served, cont.

- Most at-risk portion of the students we serve are the youngest, first time parents
  - These are also the hardest to identify and refer
  - New to college, new to parenting
  - Typically have lost their family support and their partner as a result of the unexpected pregnancy
  - Want to find them early as they often need services the most and yet they are the hardest to recruit/refer
- More and more, the rest of our population are entering as transfer students, which is a new trend for us



## Population Served, cont.

- Many of our students are also first generation college attenders
- Ethnically we tend to be more diverse as a population
  - We typically hover around 50% students of color, incoming freshman class for U of M this year was 20%



# Culture of Parenting

- Need to see parenting status as significant as racial, gender and other identities
- Impacts all aspect of their college experience
- Student parents have a different language, way of being in the world and to some extent different academic needs than non-parenting students





# Culture of Parenting

- Typically aged, non-parenting students are not the peers of student parents
- Our experience is that “peer advising” does not go well with student parents
- Parenting involves much more than simply having a child, it is an all encompassing, life altering experience



## Student Parent Identities

- Mothers and fathers first, students second
- More likely to have multiple competing identities, *parent, spouse, employee, student*
- Already have established lives beyond the borders of campus
  - Often are not living on or near campus
  - Already attached to another community
  - Have more obligations and less time



## Horn's Findings

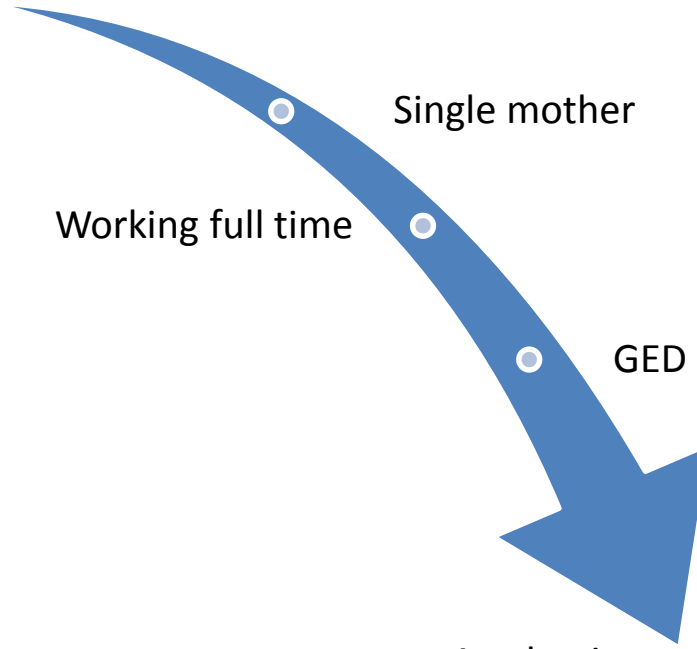
- *“Students who were only minimally nontraditional were much more likely to have earned a bachelor’s degree (42 percent) than were moderately or highly nontraditional students (17percent and 11 percent, respectively).”*

*Horn, L. (1996). Nontraditional Undergraduates, Trends in Enrollment From 1986 to 1992 and Persistence Among 1989-90 Beginning Post-secondary Students. U. S. Department of Education, NCES. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office*



# Academic Performance and Nontraditional Characteristics

Attends part time



Single mother

Working full time

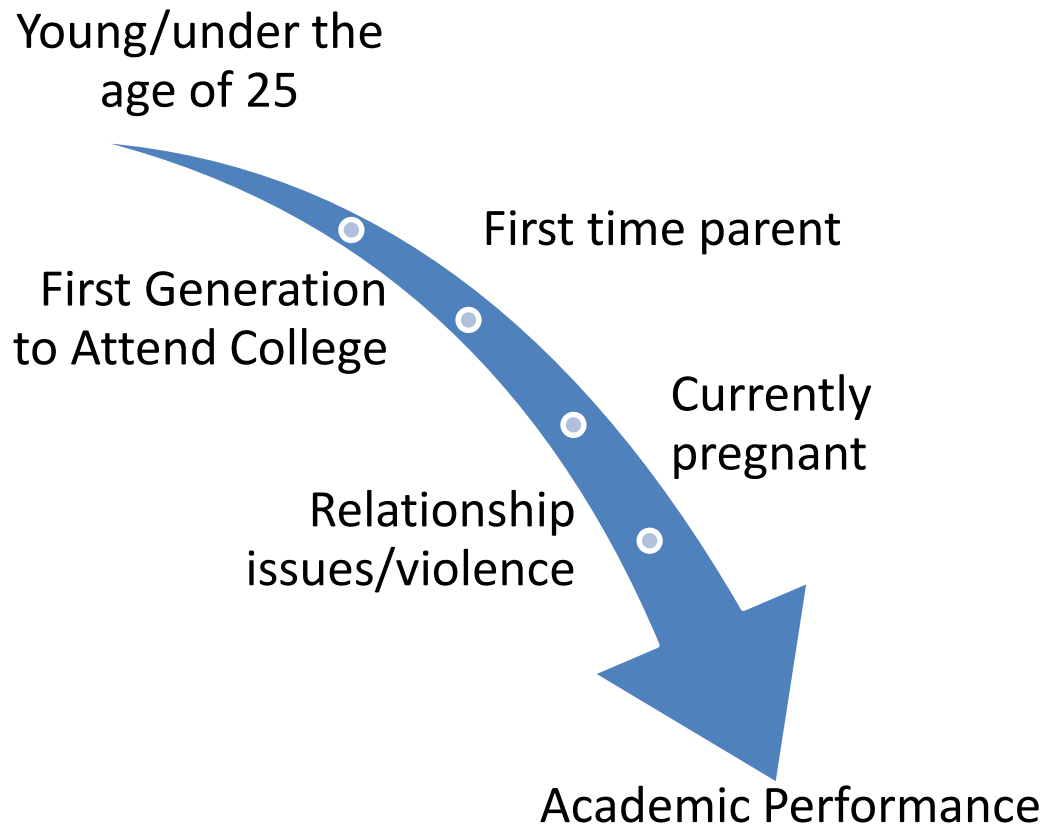
GED

Academic outcomes decline  
as characteristics increase



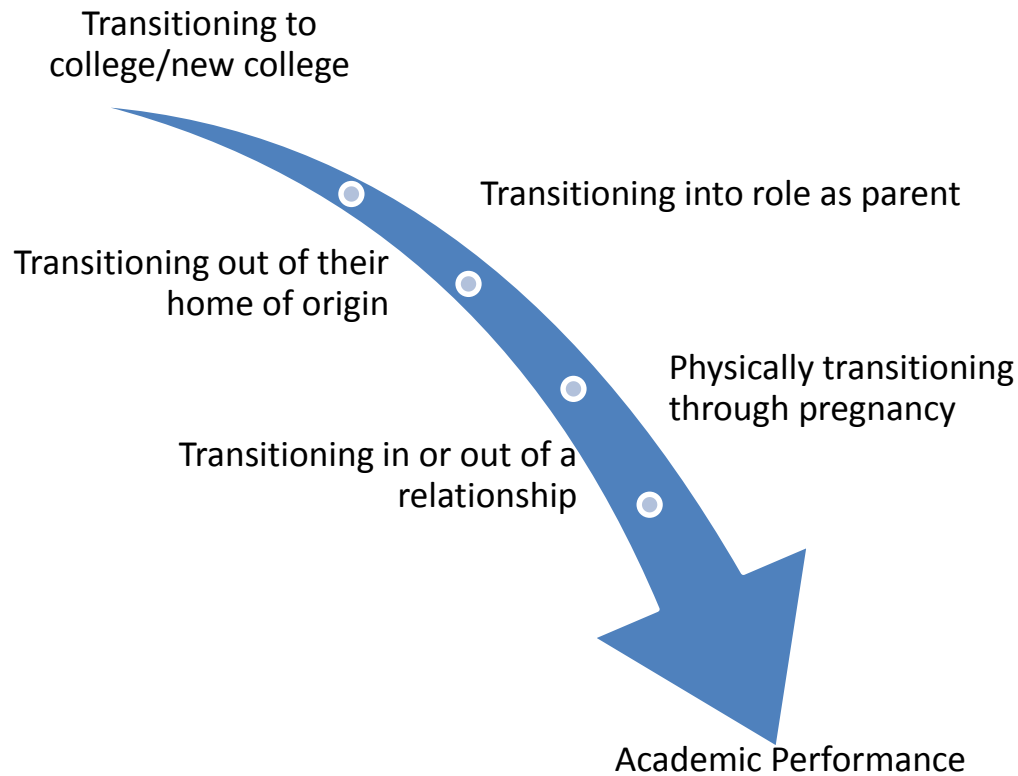


# Our Model: Risk Factors for Student Parents





# Entire Life May Be In Transition





# Academic Outcomes

- The average GPA for Student Parents (both SPHC and non-SPHC registered) has consistently been almost identical to the average for all U of M undergraduate students
- Student parents in general, both at the U and elsewhere do tend to take longer to graduate
  - This is typically due to pregnancy related leaves, finances, and other parenting responsibilities.



# Academic Strengths

- Tend to be more committed to their studies than other students
  - Children are great motivation to set a positive academic standard, focus on degree acquisition, find a career that pays well and do it **quickly**
  - Take less time to decide on a major
- Tend to have excellent time management skills, if they do not they usually do not last long





## Academic Strengths, cont.

- Tend to be more mature and self-directed
- Tend to have more life experience they can bring to the table, even above and beyond their parenting experience
  - Have often worked prior to coming to college
  - Many have already learned how to navigate systems : welfare, legal systems (family law, etc.)



# Academic Strengths, cont.

- They are resilient or they would not be here
  - No one has forced them to go to college or picked their college for them
  - They have made the choice themselves and tend to be immediately invested because of this fact
- Many have made huge sacrifices to be here and they want to finish
  - They give up time with their young children
  - They are faced with significant debt, almost all of them are **independent**, financial aid recipients and are acquiring their own debt to get the degree



# What Our Parents Tell Us

- Will not always self-identify as a parent
- Single mothers and young parents especially feel judged
- Afraid others will feel they are wanting special treatment
- Younger single mothers already face a great deal of criticism from society, expect to get the same in college
- Fear social stereotypes they have faced for years, afraid one more person will tell them they can't make it



## What Parents Tell Us, cont.

- When they first learn of an impending pregnancy, they may still be exploring all their options and may not want anyone to know they are pregnant/have a pregnant girlfriend
- At 4 year institutions everyone assumes every UGs is typically aged, dependent on parents and childless
- There is never really an opening provided for them to speak about their parenting status





# What Parents Tell US, cont.

- NO ONE EVER ASKS THE QUESTION.....
- They may have already been treated badly and judged by others by the time they get to college: family, welfare system, high schools, etc.
- Have sacrificed so much to be and stay here they can be very disillusioned if things don't go well



# Common Issues Faced

- Parents First, Students Second
  - We often expect students to put class and college above everything else in their life
  - That is absolutely not possible when you have children dependent on you
  - This at times does not sit well with professors or others
- It is very hard for them to ask for support or assistance even when they have a legitimate need



# Relationship Transitions

- We do see quite a bit of domestic violence, it can arise in this population at higher rates
  - College can often be the catalyst that causes them to acknowledge the abuse
- There can be custody or divorce cases that unexpectedly throw off a student's attendance or entire term
  - At times an abusive partner will use repeated custody filings specifically to interfere with a student's academic plan or life in general
  - These will hit without warning and are nothing that a student could plan for.
  - **Partners are subpoenaing students entire academic records!  
Be careful of your notes**



# Health and Wellness

- They are facing illnesses and other emergencies two and three times that of a single, non-parenting student
- They cannot afford to take their child to a doctor every time they are sick enough to have to stay home with them, so they often cannot legitimately produce doctor's excuses for absences
- They are among the most stressed student populations



# University of Minnesota Attendance Policy

*“Students will not be penalized for absence during the semester due to unavoidable or legitimate circumstances. Such circumstances include illness of the student **or his or her dependent**, medical conditions related to pregnancy, participation in intercollegiate athletic events , subpoenas, jury duty, military service, bereavement, and religious observances. Such circumstances also include activities sponsored by the University if identified by the senior academic officer for the campus or his or her designee as the basis for excused absences. Such circumstances do not include voting in local, state, or national elections. Instructors are expected to accommodate students who wish to participate in party caucuses, pursuant to Board of Regents resolution (see [December 2005 Board of Regents Minutes](#), p 147.)”*



# Transition from Dependence to Independence

- Many of our students do not have the option of leaving the children with their spouse or other family members when emergencies arise
- They are doing it completely on their own
- They need those working with them to understand they have less time than their non-parenting peers





# Transitioning to or from Welfare Dependence.

- Many student parents have been working full time
- Some are transitioning off or onto welfare.
- More impacted by debt they incur at the U than a typical student dependent on parents might be
- Financial emergencies can be significant and can lead to academic issues and vice versa



# What Does This All Mean?

- Credit load is critical in most cases SPs should not go above 15
- Combinations of classes critical
- Major selection is more challenging
  - In most cases our parents have to get a job immediately post ***grad-there is no moving back in with parents***
  - Advising has to be tied to marketable job acquisition or honest assessment of need for graduate work



# Seeing the Whole Picture

- Number of children, age of children, work status and hours, support network, all need to be considered when working with SPs
- Getting a clear picture of their “transition status” overall is critical
  - Entering freshman or transfer?
  - First time parent, more experienced?
  - Divorced, married, single?



# The Whole Picture

- Typically aged or adult learner?
- Financial aid status? Welfare benefits?  
Working?
- Family support? Abandoned by lover? Newly married?
- Other social supports?
  - Did they lose their entire network of friends due to pregnancy/parenting status?



# The Whole Picture: Unique Circumstances

- Are they parenting a sibling or other family member?
  - These students often do not even have luxury of a 9 month pregnancy to adjust
- Are they veterans or married with a deployed partner?



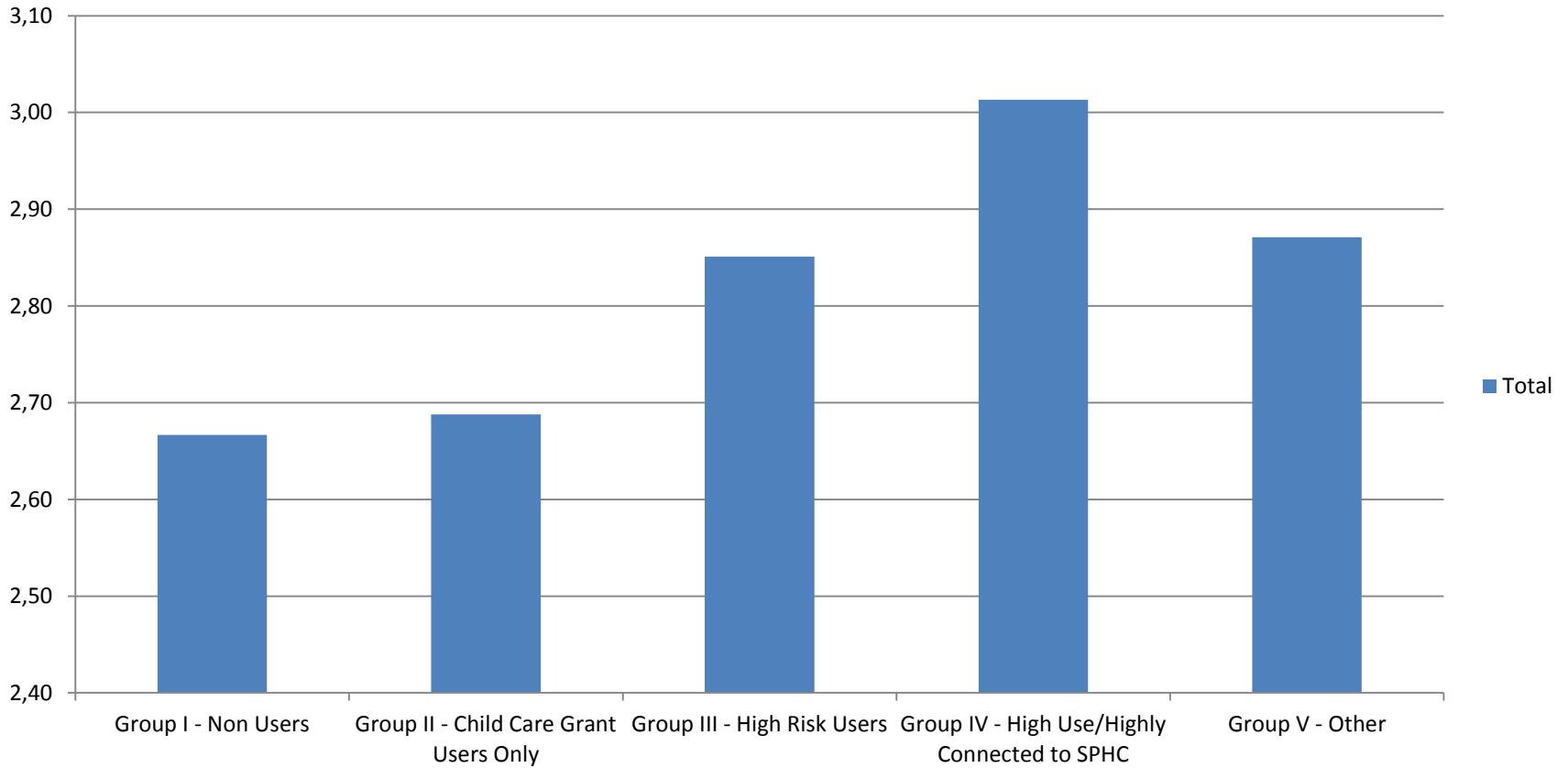






# SPHC Outcome Data

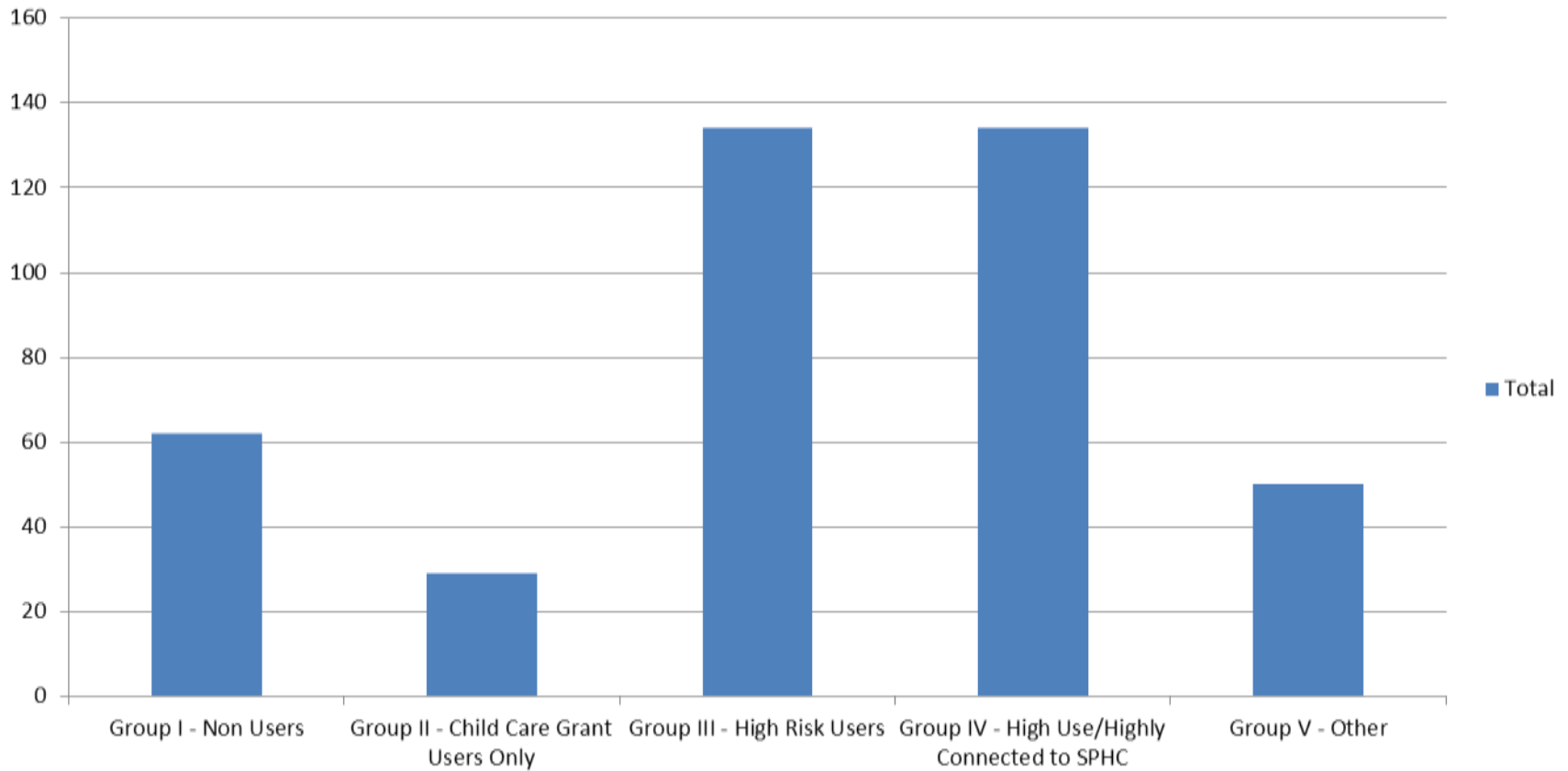
## GPA





# SPHC Outcome Data

Degree





# Title IX Protections

- Title IX
  - DOE Office for Civil Right, *Dear Colleague* letter released in June 2013
  - Specifically states that pregnant and parenting student protections apply to **post secondary** not just secondary education
    - **Ability to do make-up work and absences hot items for filed complaints**
- Several law suits filed nationally since *Dear Colleague* released and students are winning
  - Community based advocacy groups are pushing the info hard



# Literature Review



# Connection to Campus

- Students with children often have a greater need for community and support than traditional students, but are often less likely to get what they need in these areas.

*(Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002)*



## Connection to Campus, cont.

- Campus activities are often designed to meet the needs and interests of traditionally aged students, are not family friendly, or are held at inconvenient times for adult learners or students with children.

*(Alhassen, 2012)*





## Connection to Campus, cont.

- Many nontraditional students are not interested in planned activities which are not family friendly and inclusive.

*(Alhassen, 2012 & Wyatt, 2011 )*



## Connection to Campus, cont.

- Adult Learners have many non-academic obligations, resulting in less time and less interest in campus events.

*(Wyatt, 2011)*



# Family Friendly Campus Culture

- Do you specifically include family members in invitations to college events?
- Do you ask how their kids are doing?
- Are images of children or adult learners included in your marketing materials?
- How do you schedule events? AM, PM?
- What are your assumptions? Your language?



# Summary

*“The 3.9 million student parents pursuing postsecondary education in the U.S. face a number of challenges to success. They are less likely to have a parent who graduated from college, enter college with lower standardized test scores, are more likely to work full-time, and are more likely to take remedial classes (U.S. Department of Education 2009a).”*

*Improving Child Care Access to Promote Post Secondary Success Among Low Income Parents, Kevin Miller, Barbara Gault and Abby Thorman, Institute for Women’s Policy Research, March 2011*



# Q & A





# Contact Information

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