# Leveraging Data to Create Pathways to Lifelong Learning

**By Sam Peterson** | EdSurge Solutions Studio

"We help our students attain both their educational needs and their professional needs," says Chelsea Graham, Data and Assessment Coordinator for Central Arizona College's Adult Basic Education program. "Our program is not just focused on getting the GED; it's about taking students to the next level." This gets directly to the heart of her team's work.

"It's not just, 'Go to class, get your GED, and you're done now.' Really, a lot of it is also coaching," Graham explains. This means asking important questions early on to learn about students' short- and long-term goals: "Do you need employment now? Are you looking to get into a skilled trade? Are you looking to transfer into the college?" The aim is to set up adult learners for a lifetime of professional and personal success.

Graham spoke with us about both the challenges and successes associated with managing an adult education program during a pandemic and how her team's experience with SkillRise's Upskill With Edtech course informed their path forward.

**EdSurge: You started in your current position at the exact same time that the pandemic was shutting down in-person operations at schools around the country. How did that impact your ability to do the job?**

**Graham:** I think it actually helped. The fact that I was completely new to the role—and then COVID happening, and then having to scramble to make things work out—was actually a key component in getting the correct solutions because I wasn't stuck in my way. It wasn't like, "This needs to happen in this particular way." We just needed to make sure that it worked.



Central Arizona College

I think a lot of people were out of their comfort zones, but we needed to do what was best for the students, and that's all that really mattered. All of it was done remotely, and all of it was done on the fly.

**How did that experience help to inform your strategy for communication with students?**

For our previous assessment coordinator, the main method of contact was email. But that assumes that our students have emails and internet access. Before, they might have gone over to our computer lab right after registering. That's not an option now. We're definitely having to think outside of the box to get other forms of contact going because we don't know how our students will be able to respond to us.

There was no online registration previously. There was no phone registration because of all of the state forms that we have to have filled out. Everything was in-person. Now, we register students remotely via video conference. They show us their ID. We make sure we're talking to the student. We verify their email right then and there. If they don't have an email, we identify the modes of communication that they do have access to, notate it on their file.

But the first session that we had, where we had to go online, so many students were still trying to show up to the college. They were there calling their teacher, "Hey, I'm outside. Nobody is here. What's going on?"

Clearly the communication was not there. Somehow they did not get the message that they were supposed to be online. We asked ourselves, "Where did that drop off? How can we make sure to communicate this message so that the student does not have to waste their time and go to the campus again, and get frustrated."

We needed to strategize how we contact the students so that we don't overwhelm them or confuse them. Many already don't know how an online class works. We didn't want to confuse them even more.

Now, they are remotely attending, and we have what we know is the best contact method. So, our "no-shows" have declined because we are actively trying to get in touch with them more than ever before.

**Did the SkillRise course provide any guidance for developing your new strategy?**

One of the biggest things that we took away from the SkillRise course is that we needed to assess our students' technical skills—see where we wanted them to be and determine how we'd get them there. We definitely knew, especially with COVID, that we wanted an online digital literacy workshop, which is what we developed through SkillRise. We just needed to figure out how to make it happen and what we needed to teach.

For example, if we're going to have an assessment, is that going to be taking place during registration? Or, if we're going to have this be mandatory, how does the communication go out? How do we make sure the college as a whole knows that this is a mandatory thing? How do I take that into the front end of the job and streamline it so that the information is sent out the right way?

There was a survey template in the SkillRise course. We kind of took that template and built our own survey from it. Then we built a follow-up survey. That's how we aligned what we needed our students to be able to do to be successful in class.

Now that we feel pretty confident in the workshop's material, I'm trying to put together a schedule for the workshop and make sure that it is noted as a prerequisite and that the registration staff understand how to communicate that. That's our project right now—figuring out how to build the schedule, what staff we need onboard and how to make it mandatory for all new students.

**How is this new approach working?**

We just did our first full pilot in October, so I haven't had conversations with students post-class yet. But they were looking forward to the digital literacy workshop because they didn't feel very confident that they would be able to successfully take an online class. They didn't feel like they had tech skills themselves and were very cautious to join an online class without these basic skills.

I think the workshop really helps build students' confidence and lessen teacher frustration during the first week of class. I have heard that the instructors found it to be a huge relief and a huge benefit being able to actually start the class on time and have instructional time versus just "how to" time. They felt so much more comfortable because they knew that their students knew how to do these basic things.

**Do you have any advice for other organizations doing similar work, especially during such unpredictable times? What lessons have you learned along the way?**

Honestly, all of the conventional ways of doing things are not going to apply anymore. Ask questions. Ask as many questions as you need to. Just because something was a no in the past does not mean it's a no right now. Ask again. It's for the betterment of your students.

Also, right now data is huge. If the data supports a potential decision, there is really no reason why we shouldn't do it. I know there can be pushback when suggesting changes, but if the proof is there, that should be enough during these crazy times to convince somebody that change might be needed.

At the same time, don't make changes just because you heard another program made that change. Focus on your own program—not on what other programs are doing—and what's best for your students. ■

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