Service and Program Awards
Application Cover Sheet

Category: Psychosocial and Support

Entry Title: ACT Recovery College Trial

Name of Applicant: Dianna Smith

Organisation: ACT Recovery College
A visit by Rachel Perkins OBE, a world leader in Recovery Colleges, to Canberra in 2015 resulted in a groundswell of enthusiasm for a Recovery College in the ACT. Funding for a trial of a Recovery College in the ACT (the College) was secured in the 2018/19 ACT government budget and ran between January 2019 and June 2021. The College operated on four core principles, consistent with the international Recovery College movement, that underlined everything the College did:

- **Learning:** Promoting person-centred education where the voice of the lived experience is heard and respected in equal partnership with clinicians and professionals.
- **Connection:** Enhancing social inclusion and community belonging is central to 'living a good life'.
- **Opportunity:** It's never too late to learn new knowledge, attitude and skills.
- **Hope:** Recovery is possible.

The College promoted and delivered on the aims of person-centred, recovery-based principles. This enhanced students’ confidence to take more effective control and management of their health, enabling them to reconnect with the community and participate more fully in life, potentially moving on to mainstream education, employment or community work.

"I am extremely grateful that the college exists and that the classes are free. What I have learnt as a student is invaluable, and now working as a co-facilitator as well has provided me with career opportunities, I never thought I would have." (Student Feedback)

The College used the processes of co-design, co-production and co-facilitation in all aspects of operation. Courses utilised a 360° learning environment where students, lived experience facilitators and subject matter expert facilitators were equally valued for their knowledge. With a modest staff (2.6 FTE) and tight budget ($880k over 2.5 years), the College trial achievements include:

- established a safe and non-judgemental space for people to learn about and manage their recovery; and where participants could share their experiences, ideas and knowledge.
- completed eight terms with an average of 12 courses each term most of which were fully subscribed often with wait lists.
- enrolled 346 students over the length of the trial with an 80% completion rate for all courses
- co-developed 20 courses specifically for the College
- established numerous collaborations with other organisations to hold existing courses in the Recovery College setting –often resulting in improved courses
- rapid response to COVID 19 - moving courses online quickly (1-2 weeks) and providing extra online opportunities for maintaining connection and belonging.
- developed innovative policies and procedures for student and co-facilitator safety in the online classroom and after leaving it
- established an evidence informed data collection framework and participated in an external evaluation commissioned by the ACT Government.
shows that the College had a markedly positive influence on the lives and mental health recovery of students and made a relatively significant contribution to the ACT Community.

Address the following Criteria (max. 10 X A4 pages).
Judges allocate marks to each criterion

1. Evidence of a significant contribution to the field of mental health on a local, state or national level.

“I was feeling very low and isolating myself before being involved in the College. I felt hopeless and that things would never get better. The College has provided hope and purpose. A place to belong and feel accepted which I haven’t found elsewhere. It has made a bigger difference in my well-being and sense of self than paid therapy. It is accessible as it’s free which means I can have a safe place to go and not be shut out because of cost. I was really struggling and feeling suicidal and the courses at the college have made a real difference. Not just the courses -all the staff are amazing and give so much compassion and acceptance. It’s such a unique place not found anywhere else in Canberra. I have no doubt that it’s saved lots of people and improved so many lives. Mental illness is such a lonely burden and the College lightens the load and shows you that you aren’t alone in your struggle. One main key difference -instead of being so depressed I can’t get out of bed I’m now leaving the house and participating in society and that’s because of the College.” (Student feedback)

The ACT Recovery College has made a significant contribution to improving mental health on an individual, local and state/territory level during its 2.5 year trial. It has offered a unique service to the ACT and region - although recovery colleges have been operating in some other areas of Australia and overseas for around ten years, no service like it has been available in this region before.

The College was a beacon of hope to the ACT community. It offered new and different recovery opportunities for the one in five Canberrans who have lived experience of mental health issues. It provided early intervention for people newly diagnosed, a guiding hand for people trying to manage a chronic condition, and a path to community re-entry for people whose severe ill-health had sidelined them from society.

“Previously I did not know where to get the help that I needed, as I was very unwell however the hospital did not have a bed available for me. To say that the Recovery College provided hope for me would be an understatement.”

“I have a newfound confidence and understanding of my mental health which has allowed me to return to the workforce with enthusiasm and excitement that I was once lacking.”(Student feedback)
Recovery Colleges help ‘normalise’ mental illness, dispel myths and contribute to greater knowledge and understanding of mental illness. The ACT Recovery College trial helped achieve this by welcoming carers, friends and anyone interested in learning more about mental health. This approach allowed for wider and varied discussion and meant people without mental ill health could learn from those who had experienced it. In this way the College can be viewed also as a mental illness prevention service.

The College enrolled 346 students over the trial and courses often had wait lists, indicating there was a definite need in the community for this type of service. Classes were deliberately kept small (under 12 people) to facilitate connection between the students and to allow everyone to share their ideas and experiences. The smaller classes were also less daunting for many of the students who experience anxiety.

“It (the College) has given me the confidence to reach out to study and get involved in activities. The college was so accepting of me it rebuilt my sense of self and also lessened my social anxiety. I’m now studying childcare because of the college.” (Student feedback)

Connection to community and a sense of belonging is a protective factor for good mental health. The College fostered an amazing sense of community amongst the students, staff and educators. It became a safe place when things were not going well, a place to be listened to and supported, without being a clinical service. Past students are still in contact and continue to see each other outside the College.

During the trial, the College contributed to the broader mental health field through the co-development of 20 courses on varied topics to support people in their recovery journey. The titles of the courses are included in the Appendix. The course materials, consisting of a PowerPoint presentation, facilitator notes (Learning Experience Plan) and a student workbook, are available under a Creative Commons license for other mental health organisations to deliver.

The contribution to the mental health field in the Canberra region is clearly illustrated by the feedback from students and educators - some of which is quoted in this submission.

2. Evidence of innovation and/or recognised best practice.

“It (the College) helped me see and feel that I had worth and value as a human being. I have travelled further on my recovery journey in the past year than I had in my life before recovery college. Before RC I was trapped, stuck and hurting. They have shifted my perception to growth and healing” (Student feedback)

Recovery colleges are both innovative and best practice, however there are still very few of them in Australia. They are designed to complement – but be different from – conventional clinical mental health practices.
The ACT Recovery College embraced current best practice by being recovery oriented, trauma informed and person centred. But it also used these principles to build space where lived experience informed learning, co-design provided collaboration, best practices in mental health and adult learning joined forces, and the students, their families, the mental health sector and the community benefited enormously from new opportunities and the realisation of potential. The College aimed to help people with mental illness regain control of their lives, manage their illness, and participate more in the community. To do this:

- we provided an opportunity for self-directed learning at a pace and with a subject selection decided by the individual.
- We provided best practice person-centred support for each student as they navigated their learning and recovery journey.
- each student’s experience was driven by individual preferences, current level of health and needs, not pre-ordained pathways.
- all students met with a Student Support Officer for a New Student Orientation and Wellbeing Meeting where they were able to share as much, or as little, of their story as they wished in a friendly, relaxed and non-clinical environment.
- potential triggers were discussed as were learning support needs, self-care ideas and anything that would make the student’s time at the College more comfortable.
- pertinent information was passed on confidentially to co-facilitators for their courses to ensure their safety and comfort in each class.
- a Student Support Officer was also available during and after all courses to support any student who may become distressed.
- all educators discussed with their classes how best to ensure that the physical environment was comfortable for the students (eg should the door be open, or closed, were students seated where they were comfortable, how often were breaks needed).
- a quiet room was available for students (or educators) to use if they became distressed or needed time alone. This room had soft lighting, soft and textural furnishings, colouring in, blankets and other sensory items. Students were welcome to use the room at any time and a staff member would gently check on them to see if they needed additional support.
- operated under MIEACT’s DoNOHarm Framework (© 2011), a best practice approach to communication about mental illness, with all educators trained in depth and all students having a general familiarity of it.

“My experience as a student at the ACT Recovery College has been really humbling and positive. I have been encouraged to grow as a person in a relaxed and supportive peer setting and given the autonomy and respect that often I don’t receive in the more medicalised model of mental health ‘treatment’.”

The ACT Recovery College was an adult learning centre at which all courses focused on an individual’s understanding and management of mental illness and self-directed individual recovery was promoted. Those who enrolled in the College
were “students” rather than patients, clients or consumers, and this simple difference encouraged self-esteem, learning and engagement.

“Love how we are all referred to as students rather than patients or clients like at other mental health providers. Makes you feel like a real person, helps you feel empowered and valued, not judged or less than for being at the college. The college is such a special place unlike anything else in Canberra - I hope it is able to continue so it can help more people and change and save lives. Such a gentle but powerful place.” – Student Quote

A good example of innovation and in keep with our philosophy of being a space that people can go to when times are tough is the way the College moved online when COVID forced a shut down in term 1, 2020. We had already experienced the heighten concern from students about what was happening around them, with bushfires, hail and smoke, now the added worry of a highly contagious virus that could ultimately shutdown the country and change their lives. Finding a way that we could still keep students safe and comfortable whilst putting something in place that would help alleviate their concerns over reduced connection and interruption to their courses was paramount in our minds over February and March 2020. This meant that the College moved fast, starting to plan and develop policies even before official government stay at home orders were put in place.

Within a week, the first course was moved to Zoom, “How to Zoom” guides and training for educators were developed and regular “Coffee and Chat” and “Mindfulness Monday” sessions were scheduled to maintain the sense of community associated with the College. The remaining courses that were able to be delivered online were moved to Zoom over the next 2 weeks. All staff obtained work mobile phones and the numbers were given to students so that they could be reached easily.

“The College was so incredibly crucial to my recovery journey. The sense of belonging I felt by attending was what drew me to the College, then COVID hit and it felt like our world was falling apart. Having those Social calls on Zoom was like a breath of fresh air to reconnect with those who understood my day to day levels of anxiety before the pandemic. The staff at the College are all so wonderfully supportive and encouraging, it’s a real credit to the whole team and project”- Student Quote

With the safety of students in mind, an online safety policy and procedure was developed. This included:

- adding a “Host” to all online courses whose job included:
  - keeping an eye on how students and educators were tracking
  - following up with anyone who appeared distressed, who turned off their camera, or dropped off.
  - provided support to the educators by keeping an eye on the chat and
  - problem-solving technical issues.
- A safety text that students were asked to reply to was sent after each course.
If no response was received after 2 texts and a call, the student’s emergency contact would be contacted and if they were not reached, authorities would be called to do a welfare check.

The safety text also invited the student to have a staff member call them if they needed support or just a chat following the course.

The Online Safety Policy and flowchart can be found in the Appendix.

The success experienced in moving online was largely due to the collaborative approach that was taken. Educators and staff worked alongside the students to work out how to use Zoom as it was new to everyone. Meet and greet sessions were held to experiment with the platform and what it could do. Individual technical support was provided as required.

Our approach to educator and student safety was shared with other organisations as a model for safe online learning. The ACT Mental Health Consumer Network adapted our policy and procedures for their online courses. The Western Australia Recovery College Alliance is looking at a number of our policies including the online policy when developing their own policies.

3. Evidence of participation of mental health consumers in the planning, implementation and evaluation of mental health service delivery. Evidence of prioritising increased level of engagement and influence of consumers and where higher level participation such as authentic co-design is highly favoured.

There may be exceptions to the involvement of mental health consumers. Some entries may reasonably explain any particular circumstances where the involvement of mental health consumers is different or limited.

“Thank you all for making this place so special. Having the opportunity to co-facilitate a course was an invaluable experience for me and highlighted to me just how much we learn and grow from our experiences even though they are often seen as negative experiences. I no longer see myself as someone who suffers from mental illness, but rather as someone who has a slightly different path through life, and that’s okay.” - Educator Feedback 2021

Recovery Colleges are steadfastly grounded in the principles of co-design, co-production and co-delivery, an innovative approach in which people with lived experience of mental illness are equal partners with mental health professionals. This provides powerful learning for both parties; it breaks down stigma; and improves learning outcomes. Very importantly, it empowers individuals to take control of their lives, including in how they manage their mental health. The ACT Recovery College used the processes of co-design, co-production and co-facilitation in all aspects of our operation, especially course development and delivery.

The College involved consumer insights into mental health from the start of the process of bringing a recovery college to the ACT. Consumers were involved in the
initial submission to the ACT Government in 2015 which resulted in a grant to develop a design of a college. This project was steered by a Design Steering Committee which consisted of over half of its members were consumers. Three workshops were also held with consumers, peer workers and representatives of community organisations to ensure the needs of consumers were met in the design of the College. During the trial, the College was then guided by a Codesign Committee and the ACT Recovery College Oversight Committee both of which had consumer members.

Consumer feedback was absolutely pivotal to the continual evaluation and improvement process at the College. Anonymous feedback was gathered after all course sessions and this was used to inform a review and update of the course materials before the next instance of the course in a continuous co-design process. Consumers were also invited to provide responses in the annual surveys held by the College and the independent evaluation conducted by La Trobe University that is soon to be publicly released.

During our short trial, the College had a total of 30 Peer educators, who identified as mental health consumers, that were involved in co-developing or co-facilitating courses. Several of these began at the College as students and moving into the educator role was an important step in their recovery journey.

“I sensed the wonderful feeling of inclusion and belonging from my first visit as a student and the invitation to work as an educator was a great boost to my self-esteem and confidence. This has been a special place for so many people and a gift to the community.” - Educator Feedback 2021

All staff at the college also had lived experience of mental health issues, allowing them to easily connect with and understand the point of view of consumers during all processes involved in creating and sustaining a recovery college in the ACT.

4. Evidence of partnerships and linkages with all key stakeholders (collaboration for continuity between organisations).

“Collectively, the staff built a safe, inclusive space where all students felt valued as they learnt new skills to manage the issues they faced in their lives. As an educator in the Buried in Treasures program who was very apprehensive about working with Zoom, I always felt very valued and supported. Working as an educator at the College was a growthful experience.” - Educator feedback 2021

An essential aspect of the design of the ACT Recovery College was utilising existing resources and not replicating work undertaken by other organisations. To this end, the College undertook to become an additional resource for organisations to expand their capacity to offer and hold their courses. Over the course of the trial, the College collaborated with 15 organisations and individual professionals to host courses and present seminars. A list of these can be found in the Appendix.
The collaboration between the College and Woden Community Service to present the ‘Buried in Treasures’ (BIT) course highlights the benefits of hosting courses. It allowed a course that is in continual demand but that did not have a permanent home to be delivered to the ACT community in a stable and supported manner. Each organisation brought their strengths and expertise to the relationship to provide a safe environment for participants to explore and understand their hoarding behaviours. The collaboration allowed us to present a course that is in continual demand and there was a list of participants who are waiting to take the course, although WCS had been unable to consistently offer the course. A collaboration with the College was seen as a way to offer the courses in a more stable way. Each organisation brought their strengths and expertise to the relationship to provide a safe environment for participants to explore and understand their hoarding behaviours.

The benefits of this collaboration included:

- students having a higher awareness of the commitment needed for the course ensuring they made an informed decision about starting the course, leading to a better participants retention rate;
- Educators felt supported by the College’s procedures and processes, technical support especially for online delivery;
- the College provided information about student needs (triggers and learning needs) to Educators, this allowed them to be trauma informed and ensure the students’ safety and comfort. This was coupled with the ability to discuss and problem solve conflicting needs with the College Staff;
- during the course, students gained insight into behaviours and mental health issues, being students at the College meant that they were more comfortable in discussing their needs and familiar with the processes to enrol in other courses;
- The BIT course became an introduction to the Recovery College and helped to established trust and rapport with the College staff. Many of these students then chose to further work on their recovery by attending other relevant courses offered through the College;
- regular feedback collected after each session, gave students an opportunity to discuss issues, this also allowed educators to see how students were travelling and discuss with staff, of both organisations, any issues and possible solutions before the next session.

A letter of support for the College to the ACT Minister for Mental Health that outlines the benefits of this collaboration can be found in the Appendix.

Several committees have helped guide the College from its conception through to implementation and the successful conclusion on the trial. The Design Steering Committee, Co-Design Committee and the Oversight Committee all included representatives of stakeholder organisations.

Collaboration and partnerships with key stakeholders is also evidenced by the College being a member of the Recovery College Community of Practice where ideas and initiatives were shared regularly. The College has worked particularly
closely with the new Recovery College Alliance in WA, providing them with policies, procedures, handbooks and course materials to help them get started. The College has also shared its Online Safety policy and procedures with the ACT Mental Health Consumer Network who are now using it for their online courses.

Finally, the College regularly reports to ACT Health and posts updates for all stakeholders on its blog to ensure everyone know what the College is up to and how it is progressing. The blog can be found at [https://www.recoverycollegeact.org/blog](https://www.recoverycollegeact.org/blog).

5. Verification of effectiveness (quality improvement activity, data collection and its use, including graphs and tables, achievement of performance indicators, e.g. attendance figures, outcome measures, number of document downloads, page views, click through rates etc).

"It (the College) has shown me that even when I am experiencing periods of illness, I can still make a positive impact on other people through spending time together or sharing some stories." - Student Quote

The best verification of effectiveness for the ACT Recovery College are the quotes from student and educator feedback already presented. It is evident that the College has profoundly positively affected students.

Over the 2.5 year trial, the College facilitated 100 courses and 5 seminars, enrolled 346 students and worked with 59 educators. Every term there was more interest than places available. There were 906 enrolments in courses over the 8 terms, with 69% of students attending the first session of the course and a completion rate of 80% for these students. Both of these figures are lowered due to the bushfires, smoke and Covid 19 which had an effect on both the completion rates and on the overall attendance rates for the courses, with just over 50% of students enrolled in a class actually attending the class. Attendance and completion rates were slowly coming back to pre 2020 attendance rates of between 86-93%. Given the fact that these were free courses and people often drop out of courses they have not invested money in, as well as the increased level of anxiety seen in the target audience, and the prevalence of physical and mental illnesses in the community, these figures are very good.

Of the 346 students enrolled in the College, 38 were, or became educators. Students were asked to self-identify as consumers (people with lived experience), carers or professionals and the results are shown in the Venn diagram to the right. The diagram shows a majority of the students (71%) identified as consumers.

Student feedback was gathered after each session of a course. For the first and last sessions, students were provided with a number of statements to agree or disagree
with designed to gauge the quality of their experience and the impact it had on them. The following percentages of students who answered each question stated that they agreed with the statement to some degree:

- 87.6% agreed that “I felt like a part of the group today”
- 83.7% agreed that “I related to the personal experiences shared by others”
- 91.3% agreed that “The session and resources were relevant to me”
- 91.5% agreed that “People in the group supported one another”
- 92.4% agreed that “Overall, the session was excellent”
- 75.1% agreed that “I have more ideas for managing my life”
- 81.5% agreed that “I am more aware that I’m not alone”
- 74.9% agreed that “I am more hopeful about my own recovery (or the recovery of someone whom I am close)”
- 69.9% agreed that “I feel better about myself”
- 75.9% agreed that “I feel more empowered to make changes in my life”

The split of responses is depicted in the graph below.

88% of students stated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with how the session was delivered (including educator knowledge, facilitation skills, time management, management of group discussion etc.) and a further 11.2% stated they felt neutral about it.

Students were asked to rate their knowledge of the topic and their mood both at the start and at the end of each session. Across all courses and sessions in the trial, students rated their mood to have:

- Improved 58.0% of the time
- Remained the same 36.0% of the time

And their knowledge to have:

- Improved 73.2% of the time
- Remained the same 21.3% of the time
Almost all students (94.5%) stated that they would recommend the course to others.
The educators were also asked about their mood at the beginning and end of the session. Over the trial, educators rated their mood to have

- remained the same 47.4% of the time
- improved 47.4% of the time
- worsened only 5.2% of the time

La Trobe University is currently conducting an independent review of the College and deidentified feedback data has been shared with them. The report is due to be released soon. Lisa Brophy is the lead researcher and can be contacted at L.Brophy@latrobe.edu.au for further information.

Conclusion (1/2 x A4 page).

The ACT Recovery College has made a remarkable contribution to the field of mental health within the ACT and surrounding area. The College was a beacon of hope for its students and directly improved their mental health by providing opportunities for learning and connection and, for a number of them, the confidence to re-engage with study or employment.

The College provided a unique and innovative service in the region that embraced the current best practice concepts of being Recovery Oriented, Person-Centred and Trauma Informed with genuine individual care of students. When faced with the challenges of a COVID lock down, the College rapidly developed an innovative solution that allowed it to maintain the safety of its students while still providing courses and other opportunities for connection.

Mental health consumer input steered the design and operation of the College with people with lived experience being involved in the planning, oversight, development and delivery of the service. Stakeholders and other community organisations were also involved throughout, particularly in the collaborative delivery of courses and the sharing of ideas, courseware and policies.

The ACT Recovery College was a supportive community where people were comfortable to be themselves, learn about mental health and work on their recovery journey. The 2.5 year trial was a great success and all involved with the trial are looking forward to the College finding a permanent home in the ACT in the future.

Referees (1/2 x A4 page).
Nominate two referees.

Terri Warner
PhD Candidate, ANU Medical School
Lisa Brophy  
Professor and Discipline Lead  
Dept of OT, SW and SP  
School of Allied Health, Human Services and Sport  
Room 321b Level 3 Health Sciences One
Appendix of Support Material (max. 8 x A4 pages).

Courses Co-Developed and Delivered by the ACT Recovery College

- Trauma Awareness and Understanding
- a three hour online course and a one-day face to face course
- Overcoming Self Stigma
- Community Connections and Belonging
- a six week course and six individual online sessions
- Understanding Borderline Personality Disorder
- Learning about Distress Tolerance
- Finding my Way- Drawing on spirituality and meaning for life’s recovery journey:
- Optimising Recovery under the NDIS
- Movement is Medicine
- Healthy Living
- Goal setting for your Wellbeing
- Living well with Grief and Loss
- Yoga, Meditation and Mindfulness
- Food for Thought
- Tree of Life Dream Catcher
- Shining a light on Depression
- Anxiety- it’s not that simple
- A six week face to face and a four week online course
- Understanding Self-Harm

Organisations and Individual Professionals the College Collaborated With

- Peerzone
- Mental Illness Education ACT (MIEACT)
- ACT Consumer and Carer Mental Health Research Unit (ACACIA)
- Carers ACT
- Mental Health Coordinating Council NSW (MHCC NSW)
- Qui Creative
- ACT Mental Health Consumer Network (ACTMHCN)
- Woden Community Services (WCS)
- OzHarvest
- Ben Alexander -ACT Recovery College Ambassador, retired Rugby player.
- Peter Humphries, Social Work lecturer at ACU
- Dr Fatma Lowden, Consultant Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist - ACT Branch Chair of the Royal Australian New Zealand College of Psychiatrists
- Catch the Calm
- StandBy - Support After Suicide
- ACT Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service (ADACAS)
Attached on Following Pages

- Online Safety Procedure Flow Chart
- Letter of support from WCS
- A Poem Inspired by the ACT Recovery College written by a student
Flow Chart for Post Course Safety Procedure

Key
- Responsible Staff Member
- Student Support Officer
- Manager, ACT Recovery College

Safety SMS sent to student after course

Reminder SMS sent
- Template A
- No Contact after 30 min
- Contact within 30 min
  - No Response after 30 min
  - Contact

Call Student
- No Contact
  - Contact within 10 mins
  - No Update after another 30 min

SMS Emergency Contact
- Template D
- No Contact after 10 mins
- No Update after another 30 min

SMS Student
- Template B
- No Contact
- Call Emergency Contact
  - Contact
  - Contact within 10 mins
  - No Update after another 30 min

SMS Emergency Contact
- Template C
  - No Contact after 30 mins
  - No Update after another 30 mins
  - Ask to contact Student and update within 30 mins
  - Student Not Contacted
  - Student Contacted
  - Offer Support as appropriate

SMS Student and Emergency Contact
- Template E
  - No Contact after 10 mins
  - No Update after another 30 mins

Call Access Mental Health
1800 629 354 or 02 6205 1065

Follow Access Mental Health Advises

Update Recovery College Manager

Inform EO MHCACT

Complete Incident Form

Advise Emergency Contact to call Student’s Mental Health Supports or Access Mental Health 1800 629 354 or 02 6205 1065

Hand over Duty of Care
28 January 2021

Ms Emma Davidson MLA
Minister for Mental Health and Disability
ACT Legislative Assembly

Dear Minister Davidson,

Woden Community Service (WCS) would like to inform you of the value of our collaboration with the ACT Recovery College and how this has benefited the ACT community and our desire to see the College continue.

WCS works with people who are struggling with the impact of hoarding behaviours. We are currently implementing the Hoarding Advocacy Support Service (HASS) trial with the ACT Government. WCS collaborated with the ACT Recovery College in 2020 to deliver Buried in Treasures (BIT) courses under the HASS trial. At the beginning of the HASS trial we approached the Recovery College, in the hope we could find a more permanent home for BIT courses. The vagaries of funding have not allowed WCS to consistently offer courses to the community.

BIT is an intensive 16-week course, based in cognitive behaviour therapy principles, that supports people living with hoarding behaviours or challenged by too much clutter. The course provides support as well as a structured program of information to participants. Recovery College and WCS are both committed to including the voice of lived experience so all BIT courses in the ACT have had at least one peer facilitator.

Through this collaboration the BIT courses have been able to continue, providing a significant source of mental health support for all involved to safely participate, explore and understand their hoarding behaviours.

The collaboration between WCS and the Recovery College has assisted the delivery of BIT in the following way:

- The length of BIT (16 weeks), and the complexity that comes with the issue of hoarding behaviour, makes BIT a challenging but rewarding course to host. Both professional and peer facilitators, and participants can be triggered. The College provided an additional facilitator as well as participant support to help respond to issues as they occurred. This meant that any behaviour that evolved from the course process was less likely to impact the other participants or derail the larger group conversation, increasing the safety and wellbeing of all involved.
o Practical and logistical support to the program was supplied by the Recovery College and contributed to the smooth running of the course. They provided administration and logistics before, during and after the course, assisted with IT challenges and maintained open communication with the participants.

o An integral part of the assessment process for the Recovery College was the pre-interviews of the students to ensure their safety and wellbeing, a process that WCS had not carried out in previous years. The information gained through these pre-interviews provided the facilitators with useful information so they could better support the students and the group dynamics.

o Without the collaboration of the Recovery College, the BiT courses would have ceased to be run during the Covid-19 lockdown. The Recovery College worked with students and facilitators to first make the decision to move to a zoom platform and the teach and guide all involved to become familiar with the new technology. This ensured that 7 of the 8 participants transitioned regardless of their concerns with change, and a second course was completely run online.

o An unexpected benefit of the collaboration with the ACT Recovery College was more people continued through the pandemic and completed the course. The support offered by the college and facilitators, allowing participants to ask for support and then discuss any issues in a safe and supportive environment.

Due to the hidden nature and stigma associated with hoarding behaviours, there is rarely support and resources available for those that are experiencing this issue. BiT is a much-needed resource that offers invaluable support for the Canberra community. WCS has constant requests to run this course and a permanent waiting list of potential participants. Our collaboration with the Recovery College proved it to be a potential place to ‘house’ this course and provide a sustainable future.

We ask that you consider the continuation of the ACT Recovery College for the benefit of the Canberra community.

Yours sincerely,

Jenny Kitchin
CEO Woden Community Service
Two Seeds

Said a tiny seed in its earthy bed.
‘I won’t try to grow – I’ll stay here instead. It’s soft and warm and there’s nothing to do I can lie in comfort the whole year through.’

But another seed just an inch away
Grew a little more green and taller each day
Till it thrust itself through the warm brown Earth
And gladly and joyously sprang to birth

The first seed wizened and went to decay
It’s life just perished and faded away
But the wise seed flourished and grew to be
A vigorous, graceful, and fruitful tree.

By Maria Pizzano