

Exploring Inclusive Education Initiatives of Community Colleges in Region V in Addressing Inequality

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Abstract

This study investigates the practice of inclusive education (IE) within community colleges in the Bicol Region, Philippines, specifically assessing the forms of inequality present and the institutional initiatives designed to mitigate them. Using a mixed-methods convergent parallel design, data were collected from 204 respondents across the provinces of Albay, Camarines Sur, Masbate, and Sorsogon. Quantitative analysis reveals that inequality is most pronounced regarding geographical location, particularly concerning internet connectivity and transportation costs. While inequalities related to disability, socio-economic status, and age are moderately evident, those concerning gender and religion are only slightly evident. The findings indicate that while community colleges have implemented various IE initiatives (Overall Weighted Mean = 2.94), these efforts are primarily concentrated in Curriculum and Instruction. A significant gap exists in specialized support services, notably the absence of Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs) and centralized, accessible disability support. The advancement of inclusive education in these institutions is severely hindered by three primary barriers: financial and resource constraints, a shortage of specialized personnel, and a lack of accessible learning materials. The study concludes that the current IE framework at the tertiary level remains fragmented. To foster a truly inclusive academic environment, a more harmonized regional policy must be established among community colleges. Strategic priorities should include modifying admission policies, resolving resource gaps, recruiting specialized staff, and integrating inclusive education indicators into institutional assessments to support marginalized student populations for accreditation and funding purposes.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Community College, Educational Inequality, Inclusive Initiatives, Inclusion for All

1. Introduction

Education is recognized as a vital human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development, guided by a global framework of combined mandates. At the forefront is United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which emphasizes a collective commitment to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." This mandate is intrinsically linked to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), which seeks to eliminate gender inequalities in education and empower all women and girls, and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which targets the reduction of systemic gaps based on age, disability, and socio-economic status within and among nations (UNESCO, 2024; Taghap & Pabalan, 2025). UNESCO defines an inclusive educational system as one that "leaves no learner behind," valuing every student regardless of background. Historically, this concept emerged from the 1994 Salamanca Statement, transitioning the focus from narrow disability inclusion toward an "inclusion for all" philosophy (Arcidiacono & Baucal, 2021; www.righttoeducation.org, 2023). Today, inclusion serves as a practical strategy to mitigate multi-dimensional inequality, enhance social cohesion, and ensure that diverse learners are adequately prepared for the modern workforce (World Bank, 2025).

Despite these global objectives and the clear academic and social benefits of inclusive schools, significant inequalities persist. As of late 2024, approximately 251 million children and youth remain out of school globally (UNESCO, 2024) due to economic, gender-based, or disability-related barriers. Furthermore, even within higher education, marginalized students still struggle to finish their studies; only 43% of bachelor's students worldwide graduate on time (OECD, 2025). Academic institutions continue to struggle with learner diversity, resource scarcity, and instructional methods that remain inaccessible to disadvantaged backgrounds (Goyiboya et al., 2025; Boyle & Allen, 2023).

In the Philippines, a strong legal foundation for inclusion exists. Republic Act (RA) No. 11650, or the Inclusive Education Act, mandates the integration of learners with disabilities into mainstream classrooms and entitles them to support services across all educational levels. This is supported by a holistic legislative landscape, including Batas Pambansa 344

(Accessibility Law) and RA 7277/9442 (Magna Carta for Disabled Persons) for physical and specialized support, RA 9710 (Magna Carta for Women) and RA 11313 (Safe Spaces Act) for gender equity, and RA 10931 (Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act) to reduce financial barriers.

However, the existence of these laws has not translated into the elimination of educational inequalities at the tertiary level. While the Department of Education (DepEd) has seen significant reforms in basic education, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) under the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) remain underrepresented in policy frameworks and research. The absence of a comprehensive national inclusive education policy for tertiary institutions has created systemic gaps in readiness and implementation. This fragmentation is worsened by the institutional autonomy of State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), private HEIs, and Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) or community colleges. In the case of LUCs, dual leadership between LGUs and CHED often results in governance gap, where local budget priorities conflict with national inclusion mandates (Custodio, 2025; Factor & Saenz, 2025).

Current literature indicates that Philippine HEIs continue to struggle with limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of faculty training in inclusive pedagogies like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). Even the implementation of free tuition under RA 10931 has failed to fully address the cultural and geographical barriers facing marginalized students. As global systems move toward unified "inclusion for all" frameworks, Philippine tertiary efforts remain inconsistent, hindering the nation's ability to fulfill its obligations under SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), and 10 (Reducing Inequalities).

Given that the majority of Philippine literature focuses on basic education, there is an urgent need for research into the specific institutional experiences of community colleges. This study, "Exploring the Inclusive Education Initiatives of Community Colleges in Region V in Addressing Inequality," addresses this critical research gap. By illuminating the localized landscape of the Bicol Region, this research seeks to identify progress and challenges in dismantling educational inequalities, ultimately proposing policy guidelines to uphold inclusive education and encourage social cohesion within Philippine higher education.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed simultaneously to provide a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon, which allowed the researcher to leverage the strengths of both methods, providing a more detailed and insightful perspective on inclusive initiatives and their challenges.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted across the Bicol Region (Region V), specifically targeting twenty-nine (29) accredited Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) identified by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) for the 2025 academic year. These institutions, which are eligible for the free higher education program under Republic Act 10931, are distributed across four provinces: Albay with twelve (12) colleges, Camarines Sur with nine (9), the rural island province of Masbate with five (5), and Sorsogon with three (3). Operating under the supervision of their respective Local Government Units (LGUs), these community colleges serve as vital providers of accessible tertiary education for the region's marginalized and rural populations.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents from this study is from across the four provinces in the Bicol Region, totaling 204 participants. The largest contingent comes from Albay, which accounts for 91 respondents, consisting of 16 administrators and 75 instructors. Camarines Sur follows with a total of 75 respondents, including 11 administrators and 64 instructors. Sorsogon and Masbate contribute smaller groups to the study, with 20 respondents (7 administrators and 13 instructors) and 18 respondents (4 administrators and 14 instructors), respectively. Overall, the study includes 38 administrators and 166 instructors, reflecting the diverse academic landscape of the region's community colleges.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

This study utilized total enumeration, a purposive sampling technique, to examine all twenty-nine (29) accredited community colleges across the provinces of Albay, Sorsogon, Camarines Sur, and Masbate. By including the entire institutional population, the researcher aimed to eliminate sampling bias and ensure that the diverse geographic and operational challenges of each province were fully represented. Within these institutions, respondents were purposively selected based on their roles as college administrators or instructors, ensuring that data was gathered from those directly responsible for institutional leadership, GAD initiatives, and pedagogical implementation. While a multi-stage follow-up

protocol was implemented to maintain the integrity of this comprehensive analysis, the study acknowledges a limitation in the potential non-response from certain community colleges due to scheduling conflicts or administrative constraints, which may slightly affect the total data volume. Nevertheless, the final group of respondents provided a robust and inclusive cross-section of the region's community college system.

2.5 Research Instrument

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using researcher-developed survey questionnaires and semi-structured interview protocols to explore inclusive education initiatives in Bicol Region community colleges. The survey was structured into three parts: evaluating the prevalence of seven forms of inequality (Gender, Disability, Religion, Socio-Economic status, Language, Geography, and Age); assessing four domains of implementation (Policies/Planning, Support Services, Curriculum/Instruction, and Accessibility); and identifying fifteen institutional barriers, such as resource constraints and personnel shortages.

To provide depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups: administrators, focusing on high-level strategic planning and resource allocation, and instructors, focusing on pedagogical challenges and student interaction. All instruments underwent expert validation by a panel of research directors, professors, and seasoned practitioners to ensure the reliability of the data. This combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews aimed to ground policy recommendations in the actual lived experiences of Bicolano educators and administrators.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The data-gathering process followed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, utilizing a triangulation strategy that combined quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and secondary data analysis to minimize bias and ensure objective assessment. Initial phases involved rigorous content validation of instruments by experts, followed by securing official endorsements from CHED Region V and local college administrators to access the 29 accredited community colleges. Quantitative data focused on seven dimensions of inequality—gender, disability, religion, socio-economic status, language, geography, and age—while qualitative data were captured through recorded semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders to explore lived experiences and systemic barriers.

To maintain data trustworthiness, interview responses were documented for participant verification, and all collected data underwent multiple accuracy checks during tabulation and interpretation. Ethical management was prioritized throughout the study; participants provided informed consent, and their identities were protected through anonymization. Finally, quantitative results were processed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis, with both datasets merged to identify strategic intervention points and develop evidence-based policy guidelines for the region.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study utilized a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach, analyzing quantitative and qualitative datasets independently before integrating them for a holistic interpretation of inclusive education in Bicolano community colleges. Quantitative data from survey questionnaires were processed using descriptive statistics, including Weighted Means, to evaluate the prevalence of inequalities and the level of initiative implementation. These results were assigned Verbal Interpretations based on a Likert scale, while Frequency Counts and Ranking were employed to prioritize common institutional challenges.

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and document reviews underwent a systematic six-step Thematic Analysis—comprising familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and reporting—to capture the lived experiences and barriers faced by participants. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher utilized member-checking to verify that identified themes accurately reflected respondent perspectives. The final phase involved a side-by-side comparison to identify data convergence or divergence, ultimately informing the development of a Contextual Universal Design Theory grounded in both statistical trends and institutional realities.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured informed consent from all participating community colleges by providing comprehensive details regarding the study's objectives, risks, benefits, and the nature of involvement. Participants were granted the freedom to ask questions and withdraw from the study at any time without facing negative consequences. To ensure privacy and voluntary participation, the researchers allowed participants to thoroughly review all documents and maintained a respectful, culturally sensitive environment free from pressure or undue influence. Furthermore, the study upheld academic integrity by avoiding biased or misleading representations and disclosing all potential conflicts of interest. To guarantee data confidentiality, access to gathered files was restricted to the researcher and adviser, with all data being deleted upon the study's conclusion.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Assessment of Inequalities

Inequality in Region V community colleges was found to be moderately evident overall, with varying prominence across domains. Geographical Inequality (Mostly Evident, WM=3.52): This was the most pronounced barrier. Students from remote areas face high transportation costs, long commutes, and a lack of reliable internet for blended learning. Disability Inequality (Moderately Evident, WM=2.89): Barriers include inadequate ramps/elevators, lack of specialized supports like note-takers, and faculty lacking training for diverse learning needs. Socio-Economic Inequality (Moderately Evident, WM=2.72): Low-income students face "total cost" barriers, including food and housing instability, which are not covered by free tuition. Language Inequality (Moderately Evident, WM=2.51): A "linguistic mismatch" exists for students whose primary language is not English or Filipino, leading to reduced potential in understanding lectures. Gender and Religion (Slightly Evident): While less prominent, issues include a lack of gender-neutral facilities and scheduling conflicts where exams coincide with religious observances (e.g., Friday prayers for Muslim students).

3.2 Inclusive Education Initiatives

Respondents "Agreed" (WM=2.94) that initiatives are being undertaken across four domains: Curriculum and Instruction (WM=3.12): Most strongly implemented, focusing on culturally sensitive reviews and alternative assessments. Support Services and Programs (WM=2.99): Primarily scholarship and financial assistance. Policies and Planning (WM=2.81): Foundational frameworks are present but often lack localized guidelines. Physical and Digital Accessibility (WM=2.72): The lowest-rated area, indicating a reliance on classroom-based reforms over systemic infrastructural changes.

3.3 Challenges Encountered

The implementation of inclusive education (IE) in Bicolano community colleges faces a significant implementation gap where institutional intent is hindered by systemic and structural barriers. Respondents across the region identified fifteen (15) primary challenges, ranked by their severity and impact on the academic environment. The most critical challenges involve foundational resources and personnel constraints. The first in rank challenge met is Financial and Resource Constraints (Rank 1st). A pervasive lack of sufficient budget prevents necessary upgrades to physical infrastructure, technology, and specialized support services. Second (2nd) in rank is lack of specialized personnel, institutions report an insufficient number of qualified staff, such as special education teachers, counselors, and sign language interpreters, to meet diverse student needs. Third (3rd) in rank is lack of accessible learning materials: scarcity of required learning materials. There is a critical lack of resources available in accessible formats, such as Braille, large print, or specialized digital text. Participants noted that these gaps are often worsened by environmental factors, such as class disruptions due to typhoons. Operational difficulties further complicate the realization of an inclusive environment. Technology and Training Gaps ranks fourth (4th) and fifth (5th). Insufficient access to and training on assistive technology, coupled with low-quality faculty training on inclusive teaching strategies, leaves instructors feeling ill-equipped to handle diverse learning needs. Infrastructure and Policy Deficits ranks sixth (6th) and seventh (7th). Physical spaces remain largely inaccessible, and the absence of clear, mandated institutional policies creates a fragmented approach to inclusion. Issues such as the lack of clear referral processes (Rank 8), overburdened staff with excessive caseloads (Rank 9.5), and limited community involvement (Rank 9.5) hinder consistent support. Lower-ranked but still significant barriers include inadequate monitoring and evaluation (Rank 11), peer exclusion and bullying (Rank 12), poor inter-departmental coordination (Rank 13), and curriculum rigidity (Rank 15). These findings highlight an "Identification Gap"; without a strong data-gathering systems or accessible infrastructure, institutions struggle to identify and support students with non-visible disabilities. Ultimately, while community colleges demonstrate a commitment to inclusion, the persistence of these financial, structural, and human resource challenges—compounded by a lack of localized guidelines—prevents the full realization of equitable educational environments in the Bicol Region.

3.4 Proposed Policy Guidelines

The Proposed Strategic Policy Framework for Inclusive Higher Education in the Bicol Region will serve as a comprehensive roadmap to bridge the gap between institutional intent and operational reality in community colleges. Grounded in the study's findings that geographical inequalities and resource constraints remain "mostly evident," the framework transitions from reactive planning to a structured, multi-faceted approach. Specifically, to resolve educational inequalities in the Bicol Region, CHED and local government units (LGUs) should prioritize governance and policy harmonization by establishing a Regional Inclusive Education Committee to synchronize local funding with national mandates. This collaboration should include the implementation of unified inclusive admission policies that utilize affirmative action to ensure standardized exams do not marginalize diverse students. Furthermore, institutions must integrate specific Inclusive Education Indicators (IEIs) into their procurement plans and quality audits to track the progress of marginalized populations. To address resource and infrastructure gaps, policy should mandate the creation of Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs) and require regular physical and digital accessibility audits funded through Gender and Development (GAD) budgets. In addition, a regional cooperative procurement hub for

assistive technology could further alleviate financial constraints by lowering the costs of specialized tools for smaller community colleges.

In terms of human capital, a standardized, region-wide training certification in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) should be required for all tertiary instructors to enhance pedagogical capacity. This should be accompanied by mandates for minimum ratios of specialized personnel—such as sign language interpreters and trained counselors—and the integration of sensitivity training into institutional onboarding processes. Finally, a unified student tracking system is essential to monitor the academic and post-graduation outcomes of marginalized sectors, including Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and students with disabilities. These efforts could be reinforced by evaluation-based funding incentives, where local and national subsidies are tied to an institution's verified progress in meeting established inclusive education benchmarks. Finally, to ensure sustainability, the policy will be integrated into local governance structures through formal adoption by Boards of Trustees and CHED. Effectiveness will be measured by a statistically significant reduction in current inequality ratings. Additionally, a dedicated Grievance and Suggestion Committee will act as a feedback loop to resolve procedural inconsistencies and service coordination difficulties, ensuring that inclusive education moves from theoretical commitment to immediate institutional action.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

4.1. Conclusion and Outcomes

The study concludes that while community colleges in the Bicol Region have established a foundational commitment to inclusive education, significant inequalities persist across multiple dimensions, particularly in geographical access, socio-economic status, and digital infrastructure. The overall outcome reveals a "compliance gap" where institutions often meet administrative requirements on paper—such as establishing Gender and Development (GAD) plans—but struggle to translate these into functional support services like multidisciplinary teams or accessible digital learning materials. Ultimately, the research indicates that for inclusive education to be effective in the tertiary sector, it must transition from a bare minimum physical compliance to a more holistic contextualized universal design that addresses the various needs of Bicolano tertiary learners.

4.2. Recommendations for Action

To bridge the identified gaps, it is recommended that the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and Local Government Units (LGUs) collaborate to develop a standardized, integrated policy framework specifically tailored for tertiary institutions. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should prioritize the proactive adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to move beyond reactive accommodations, ensuring that curriculum and instruction are flexible enough to serve diverse student populations. Furthermore, future steps should include the mandatory establishment of fully operational Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs) equipped with specialized personnel, alongside targeted faculty development programs that foster inclusive pedagogy and perspective-taking to reduce subtle inequalities.

4.3. Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study are subject to several constraints, most notably the exclusion of students and non-teaching staff from the respondent pool, which may limit the perspective on the lived experience of inclusion on campus. The study is also geographically and institutionally delimited to accredited community colleges in the Bicol Region, meaning the results may not be generalizable to state universities or private HEIs with different funding structures. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported surveys and interviews introduces the potential for social desirability bias among administrators and instructors, and the lack of prolonged ethnographic observation may have prevented the capture of more minute, day-to-day operational challenges.

Compliance with ethical standards

The research was conducted in strict adherence to the institutional ethical standards of the participating community colleges, ensuring that all procedural requirements for ethical approval were met prior to data collection. Ethical compliance was centered on the principles of voluntary participation and informed consent, with all respondents briefed on the study's objectives and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To protect the integrity of the participants, a rigorous protocol for the confidentiality of information was maintained, ensuring that personal identities and institutional affiliations remained anonymous in the final report. Regarding authorship responsibility, the study includes a transparent conflict of interest declaration, confirming that no personal or financial biases influenced the findings. Proper acknowledgment of contributions has been given to all individuals and entities that provided technical or administrative support, while copyright ownership is clearly defined in accordance with academic and institutional policies. Every phase of the inquiry was guided by a commitment to research integrity, ensuring that the exploration of inclusive education initiatives was both socially responsible and ethically sound.

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