

## Strengthening Regional Inter-Library Collaboration: A Proposed Revitalization of the Bicol Consortium of Academic Libraries (BCAL)

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### ABSTRACT

The Bicol Consortium of Academic Libraries (BCAL) was established in 2018 but remained largely underutilized because of the absence of a formal governance structure and resource-sharing policies. This study assessed the status of BCAL and developed a proposal for a governance structure and a digital resource-sharing policy to revitalize it and strengthen regional academic library collaboration. Using a descriptive case study design, fifteen academic institutions from the Bicol Region participated through a survey questionnaire. Results revealed that there is limited awareness of governance documents, undefined member duties and the absence of conflict-resolution policies. Despite these gaps, member institutions still expressed strong interest in collaboration, with all policy-related questions rated as Strongly Agree (from 5.00 to 5.73 in a six-point scale). The study proposed a framework addressing organizational structure, membership rights and duties, leadership qualifications and financial management. Along with it is a digital resource-sharing policy covering access, cataloging standards, licensing, technology infrastructure, quality assurance, and data security. Findings reveal that while interest in collaboration is present, formal structures are essential for sustainable and improved consortium operations.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature on regional academic library consortia in the Philippines. It investigates governance and resource-sharing gaps within a dormant regional consortium. Its primary finding is that structural absence is the central barrier to the Bicol Consortium of Academic Libraries (BCAL)'s operationalization.

## 1. Introduction

Academic libraries are critical for teaching, learning, research, and community engagement in higher education institutions. Hubert (2023) notes that academic libraries serve as essential infrastructure for scholarly activity, providing not only access to information but also services that directly support student success and faculty

productivity. With the increase of digitization of information, collaboration among libraries has become essential to maximize access to information and minimize costs. A library consortium is a great tool for resource sharing, professional cooperation, and collective development of member institutions. Consortia have been shown to reduce per-unit costs of electronic resource licensing, improve service delivery, and strengthen the professional capacity of member library staff (Anglada, 2014).

In 2018, the Bicol Consortium of Academic Libraries (BCAL) was established following the findings of a study on the academic library profiles, practices, and prospects for enhanced interlibrary cooperation within the Philippines' Bicol Region. The consortium was created to develop a regional network that can facilitate cooperation among the regional academic libraries, however, the absence of a formal constitution, strategic development plan and clearly defined governance structure has meant that the BCAL has remained largely unused since its inception.

Without organizational policies, member institutions had unclear roles, inconsistent participation, and limited implementation of collaborative programs. In addition, the growing dependence on digital resources necessitates a structured policy that can define resource sharing among member institutions. The lack of a governance framework and digital resource-sharing policy prevents BCAL from fully realizing its potential in improving access to information and enhancing library services it was designed to do.

This study aims to assess the status of BCAL, and develop a proposed governance framework and digital resource-sharing policy. The results are expected to provide a sustainable basis for consortium operations and increase regional collaboration between academic libraries. They also align with the call of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2019) for libraries to build cooperative structures that promote equitable and sustainable access to information, specifically in underserved regions.

### **1.1. Research Objectives**

The purpose of this study is to develop a governance structure and a digital resource-sharing policy for BCAL. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) determine the status of BCAL in terms of organizational structure, membership participation, and cooperative activities; (2) identify issues and challenges affecting BCAL operations; (3) propose a governance framework to strengthen BCAL; and (4) develop a digital resource-sharing policy to support collaboration among member libraries.

### **1.2. Significance of the Study**

Academic librarians benefit from a clearly structured governance framework that provides the organizational footing needed to coordinate consortium activities with confidence. Students and faculty gain access to a broader range of materials and services through effective resource sharing. Schools and universities benefit from reduced costs of redundant acquisitions and improved consistency of library service delivery. BCAL gains a formal structure it has lacked since its founding. Additionally, the study contributes to the still-thin body of literature on regional academic library consortia in the Philippines.

### **1.3. Scope and Delimitation**

The study focuses on the BCAL and its member institutions. It considers the consortium's organizational structure, membership participation, and collaborative practices. The study is limited to developing a proposed governance framework and digital resource-sharing policy and does not include implementation and impact evaluation of the proposed policies.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Library Consortia and Resource Sharing**

The rising cost of information resources and the growing demand for access to scholarly materials have led academic libraries to take a collaborative approach to manage resources. Library consortia are effective in enabling libraries to share their collections, services, expertise, and technological infrastructure. Libraries can then maximize resource utilization while minimizing their operational costs by joining such consortia. Recent literature has emphasized the importance of library consortia to provide equitable access to information. The major benefits of consortium membership as identified by Ravichandran and Abraham (2024) were resource sharing, collective bargaining, technological collaboration and professional development. Their findings indicate that consortia continue to be a significant approach for libraries with budget restraints and shifting information needs.

Burke (2021) then observed that library consortia empower member institutions by offering support to collaborative acquisition of resources, improving service delivery, and strengthening institutional partnerships. Consortia provide opportunities for libraries to achieve objectives that may otherwise be difficult to accomplish independently, particularly in environments of limited funding and increasing user expectations.

### **2.2. Academic Library Collaboration**

Collaboration among academic libraries has been gaining importance as it helps to support teaching, learning and research activities. Today, academic libraries are no longer isolated institutions, but players in networks of interconnected information, thus benefitting from collaboration and shared expertise.

Liu and Fu (2018) found that libraries collaborating on systems saw real gains in operational efficiency and resource access. The shared systems they researched on allowed for standardized workflows, better-coordinated collections, and improved user experiences across member institutions.

The Philippine context adds another layer. Fresnido and Yap (2014) noted that local consortia do benefit from shared subscriptions, professional networks, and resource-sharing arrangements, but they also wrestle with persistent challenges around governance, funding, and whether these collaborations can last. Well-defined policies and structures are important in ensuring effective collaboration between library programs.

### 2.3. Digital Resource Sharing

Advances in information and communication technologies have transformed the nature of resource sharing among academic libraries. Digital resource sharing is much more than traditional interlibrary loan services.

Digital technologies increased the opportunities for resource sharing among Philippine academic libraries (Garcia and Peñaflor, 2019). Their research revealed that digital resource sharing initiatives enhance information accessibility and reduce redundancy of acquisitions between member institutions. The researchers emphasized that technological readiness, policy support, and institutional commitment is essential in sustaining digital collaboration.

Open access has quietly reshaped how libraries think about collaboration. Consortia have also found new common ground in sharing costs and building the infrastructure to make open content findable and sustainable as more scholarly resources move out of traditional subscription models. Zhang and Johnson (2024) have documented this change in practice, as they followed the development of shared principles for the management of open access resources by one consortium.

The benefits of resource-sharing extend to print and specialized collections too. Ostos and Gardinier (2018) examined collaborative collection development across academic consortia and found it consistently effective. Member libraries acquired specialized materials they otherwise could not have afforded to purchase on their own and avoided duplicate purchases that stretched already tight budgets. It is a pragmatic system; one that becomes more important as the cost of acquisition increases and institutional budgets tighten.

### 2.4. Interlibrary Loan and Collection Development

When a library's own collection falls short, interlibrary loan can fill that gap. It is one of the oldest forms of resource-sharing in academic libraries, and it remains one of the most practical by giving users access to materials that no single institution could afford to hold comprehensively.

The economics are hard to argue with. Simard, Priem, and Piwowar (2020) reviewed the interlibrary loan literature extensively and found that borrowing materials on demand is frequently more cost-effective than purchasing items that are rarely requested. Beyond the savings, their analysis showed that well-run loan programs genuinely improve user satisfaction and meaningfully support research.

Coordinated collection development takes this logic a step further. Rather than each institution independently deciding what to acquire, libraries in a consortium can divide the work wherein one library builds depth in one area, another covers a different specialty, while the whole network benefits. This kind of deliberate coordination stretches acquisition budgets and gives users access to more materials than any member library could provide on its own. As user needs shift and budgets tighten, this kind of flexibility becomes increasingly more valuable.

## 2.5. Governance and Sustainability of Library Consortia

Governance stands as one of the most consequential factors in determining the long-term relevance of library consortia. Without clearly defined structures for decision-making, accountability, and conflict resolution, even well-resourced collaborations risk stagnation and eventually, dissolution. Liu and Fu (2018) observed that successful consortia consistently maintain their governance frameworks that articulate roles and procedures with precision that members clearly understand their obligations and expectations. Transparency and trust among consortium members are not incidental outcomes but are products of deliberate organizational design.

Sustainability then presents a distinct but closely related challenge. Financial stability does not determine on its own whether a collaborative initiative endures. Mathiasson and Jochumsen (2024) argue that long-term viability requires sustained strategic planning, genuine institutional commitment, and an organizational capacity to adapt alongside the evolution of technological and operational environments. A consortium that cannot respond to changes will exhaust its initial momentum regardless of its resources.

Loach and Rowley (2022) extend this analysis by framing sustainability across cultural, organizational, and operational dimensions simultaneously. Libraries embedded in strong collaborative networks are demonstrably better positioned to absorb disruption and maintain consistent service delivery. A well-constructed policy addresses immediate operational requirements while establishing the structural foundations necessary for sustained institutional collaboration.

## 2.6. Libraries and Sustainable Development

Libraries have always served purposes that extend beyond lending books, and that social function has become more pronounced as collaborations mature. Bangani (2024) examined how libraries contribute to sustainable development through community engagement, knowledge sharing, and expanding access to information resources. Resource-sharing arrangements are more than operational conveniences; they strengthen a library's capacity to fulfill its public and institutional responsibilities.

Witt (2024) develops this point further, positioning libraries as active agents of sustainability rather than passive repositories. Information literacy programs, community partnerships, and shared resource initiatives all represent methods of how libraries shape educational and societal outcomes. When libraries coordinate their efforts, rather than work in isolation, their collective impact grows considerably beyond what any single institution could achieve independently.

## 2.7. Synthesis of Literature

Taken together, the literature makes a consistent case for library consortia as practical and proven mechanisms for improving academic library services. The benefits documented across studies are concrete: broader access to information resources, stronger cost efficiency, more coordinated collection development, and greater capacity for technological innovation. At the same time, the studies are clear that these benefits do not materialize automatically. Governance structures, institutional commitment, sustainable funding, and adequate technological infrastructure all shape whether a consortium actually delivers on its potential.

The Philippine context adds a layer of urgency to these findings. Local studies point toward a genuine need for stronger institutional partnerships and more formalized resource-sharing arrangements, yet the literature has not kept pace with that need. Comprehensive resource-sharing policies designed specifically for regional academic library consortia remain notably underdeveloped as an area of scholarly attention. This study addresses that gap directly. By developing a digital resource sharing policy for the Bicol Consortium of Academic Libraries (BCAL), the research aims to strengthen cooperation among member institutions, improve access to information resources, and lay the groundwork for sustainable regional library collaboration.

### **3. Research Methods**

This study adopted a descriptive case study design, chosen for its capacity to support in-depth examination of BCAL's organizational structure, membership participation, and collaborative practices. Case study methodology is particularly well-suited here because the research did not simply measure outcomes but also sought to understand a specific institutional context well enough to propose workable governance and policy frameworks.

#### **3.1. Research Locale and Participants**

The study is situated within the Bicol Region, covering academic libraries that currently hold BCAL membership as well as those that have expressed interest in joining the consortium. Participants included librarians, library administrators, and institutional representatives from BCAL member institutions. The study used purposive sampling to ensure that selected participants brought direct knowledge and experience relevant to consortium operations.

#### **3.2. Research Instruments and Data Gathering**

Data collection required two instruments: a survey questionnaire and a document analysis checklist. These tools gathered information on organizational structure, membership participation, collaborative activities, existing challenges, and participant recommendations. Data gathering proceeded through the following stages: securing approval from relevant authorities; coordinating with BCAL member institutions; administering survey questionnaires; conducting interviews and focus group discussions where needed; gathering and reviewing existing consortium documents; consolidating and analyzing data; developing the proposed frameworks; and presenting proposed outputs to stakeholders for validation.

#### **3.3. Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations**

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequency counts, percentages, weighted means, and rankings, to establish the current status of BCAL and surface priority concerns. Qualitative data from interviews and document reviews underwent thematic analysis, tracing recurring patterns, issues, and recommendations across responses. The study adhered to standard ethical research practices. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and responses were treated with strict confidentiality. All data collected served exclusively academic and research purposes.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Current Status of BCAL

Fifteen (15) academic institutions participated in total. Eleven (73.33%) of respondents were existing BCAL members, while the remaining four (26.67%) were non-members who expressed interest in joining.

The members' awareness regarding BCAL's governing documents is notably limited. When asked about the Constitution and By-Laws, only six out of fifteen respondents (40%) confirmed awareness, while five (33.33%) reported having no knowledge of these documents and four (26.67%) were unable to answer because they were not yet members. One respondent noted explicitly that no documents were available for reference within their institution.

Uncertainty extended to specific governance provisions. On membership categories, voting rights, and criteria, four respondents (26.67%) confirmed that clear definitions exist, while seven (46.67%) reported being unaware, unclear, or indicated that none existed. The remaining respondents either could not answer or described the existing provisions as only partial. On conflict resolution, ten respondents (66.67%) reported that no policy exists or that they were unaware of one, with only one respondent confirming a policy was in place. The pattern is consistent: BCAL currently lacks a governance framework that members can reliably access and reference.

On membership recruitment and withdrawal, only two respondents (13.33%) confirmed that a clear policy exists, while eight (53.33%) reported no policy or no awareness of one. One respondent described the situation as only partially addressed, wherein they specified that withdrawal procedures exist in the MOU, but recruitment criteria for new members remain undefined.

What is needed is a formal constitution that defines organizational structure, membership rights and responsibilities, leadership qualifications, conflict resolution procedures, and processes for member recruitment and withdrawal.

### 4.2. Membership Participation and Cooperative Activities

Member institutions expressed a generally positive attitude toward consortium participation. Most respondents indicated willingness to engage in collaborative activities and resource-sharing initiatives. Many of them emphasized the importance of librarian involvement, administrative support, and clearly defined member responsibilities.

On potential reasons for withdrawal, ten out of fifteen respondents (66.67%) provided substantive answers. The most frequently cited reasons were financial constraints or budget limitations, cited by five respondents (33.33%), followed by inactivity and poor program implementation, cited by three respondents (20%). Two respondents (13.33%) pointed to misalignment of goals or program offerings between member institutions as a potential trigger for withdrawal. These responses suggest that sustaining participation depends not only on goodwill but also on ensuring that membership delivers tangible, consistent benefits.

### 4.3. Support for Digital Resource Sharing

Support for digital resource sharing among member institutions is strong. The statement "Creating shared digital resources is BCAL's number one priority" received a mean rating of 5.27 on the six-point scale, reflecting broad agreement across all fifteen respondents. All respondents also expressed openness to adopting standardized cataloging practices (mean = 5.13), signaling readiness for the kind of harmonized operations that effective resource sharing requires.

Table 1 presents mean scores across specific policy components. All items received ratings interpreted as Strongly Agree, with no component falling below a mean of 5.00.

Table 1: Mean Scores for each Survey Question

Policy Component	Mean Rating	Interpretation
Librarian involvement in consortium activities	5.73	Strongly Agree
Policy review and updating	5.67	Strongly Agree
Clear statement of policy purpose	5.67	Strongly Agree
Defined duties and responsibilities of members	5.67	Strongly Agree
School administration support	5.60	Strongly Agree
Quality assurance measures	5.60	Strongly Agree
Continuous process improvement	5.53	Strongly Agree
Resource-sharing evaluation	5.47	Strongly Agree
Customer feedback integration	5.47	Strongly Agree
Regular policy audit	5.47	Strongly Agree

The consistency of these ratings across all fifteen respondents points to broad consensus on what a future BCAL policy framework should prioritize.

### 4.4. Funding and Sustainability

All fifteen respondents expressed support for establishing sustainable funding mechanisms, including membership fees, shared contributions, and income-generating projects (mean = 5.20). Fourteen respondents (93.33%) agreed that the policy should include clear provisions on financial obligations of members (mean = 5.07), and prioritization of subscription licenses and electronic resource acquisition received strong support as well (mean = 5.40). Across these responses, a clear picture emerges: member institutions understand that financial sustainability is not peripheral to consortium operations but central to them.

### 4.5. Qualitative Responses

Open-ended responses offered a more detailed picture of what respondents want from a revitalized BCAL. On governance, recurring themes across twelve substantive responses included clear membership acceptance procedures, transparent governance mechanisms, conflict resolution policies, defined institutional responsibilities, accountability measures for officers and members, and regular policy review processes.

On programming, respondents across thirteen institutions proposed future consortium activities. Joint training and professional development were the most frequently cited,

appearing in eight responses (53.33%), followed by shared electronic databases and collaborative research initiatives, each mentioned by six respondents (40%). Information literacy programs, resource-sharing networks, and emerging technology training for librarians were also raised by multiple respondents. The breadth of these suggestions reflects a membership that is engaged and has concrete expectations, not simply a general desire for the consortium to become more active.

#### **4.6. Proposed Governance Framework**

Drawing from the findings, the proposed governance framework for BCAL addresses: clearly defined organizational structure; membership categories and qualifications; rights and responsibilities of members; election and qualifications of officers; financial management provisions; conflict resolution mechanisms; membership recruitment and withdrawal policies; monitoring and evaluation procedures; and periodic policy review and amendment processes.

#### **4.7. Proposed Digital Resource-Sharing Policy**

The proposed policy covers eight core areas: access and sharing of digital resources; standardized cataloging and metadata practices; licensing and copyright compliance; technology infrastructure requirements; quality assurance measures; data security and privacy protection; user support and training; and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

### **5. Conclusion**

The findings point toward several interconnected conclusions about BCAL's current state and its path forward.

BCAL holds genuine potential as a regional academic library consortium, but that potential remains unrealized. The absence of a ratified constitution and clearly defined policies has left membership participation, leadership responsibilities, and organizational processes without a common framework. This is a gap that respondents across institutions consistently identified as a barrier to meaningful collaboration.

The willingness to collaborate, however, is clearly there. Academic libraries in the Bicol Region expressed strong readiness to participate in resource-sharing initiatives and to adopt common standards and cooperative practices. What is missing is not motivation but structure. A formal governance framework would establish the accountability, transparency, and operational consistency that meaningful consortium work requires. A digital resource-sharing policy, developed alongside it, would translate that structure into equitable access to information resources and improved service delivery for member institutions.

Sustainability is not guaranteed by goodwill alone. Long-term consortium viability depends on active member participation, reliable administrative support, regular policy review, and sound financial management.

## 5.1. Recommendations

Based on the findings, BCAL should: prioritize the development and ratification of a formal Constitution and By-Laws; adopt the proposed governance framework addressing membership categories, voting rights, leadership qualifications, conflict-resolution procedures, and financial policies; establish and formally endorse a comprehensive digital resource-sharing policy governing access, licensing, technology standards, and quality assurance; conduct regular orientation programs to ensure member institutions are familiar with consortium policies, rights, and responsibilities; institutionalize sustainable funding mechanisms including membership fees and collaborative funding initiatives; implement capacity-building activities, professional development programs, and collaborative research projects on a regular schedule; establish a monitoring and evaluation system to track consortium performance; and conduct future research to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the proposed frameworks following their adoption by member institutions.

These recommendations can be operationalized through a structured action plan presented in Table 2, which maps each objective to a specific activity and assign responsibility to the appropriate BCAL body. Governance must be formalized by the BCAL Executive council by ratifying the Constitution and By-Laws, while resource-sharing and the adoption of policies must be handled by the member libraries. The BCAL Secretariat must then coordinate annual assemblies to facilitate participation, while the Training, Finance and Monitoring Committees will each have their own roles. This arrangement makes a deliberate effort to distribute responsibility across the consortium rather than concentrating it in a single office.

Table 2: Proposed Action Plan

Objective	Activity	Responsible Office
Formalize BCAL governance	Ratification of Constitution and By-Laws	BCAL Executive Council
Strengthen resource sharing	Adoption of Digital Resource-Sharing Policy	BCAL Member Libraries
Improve participation	Conduct annual consortium assemblies	BCAL Secretariat
Enhance professional competencies	Organize training and workshops	BCAL Training Committee
Ensure sustainability	Implement membership and funding programs	BCAL Finance Committee
Monitor effectiveness	Conduct annual policy review and evaluation	BCAL Monitoring Committee

Taken together, these recommendations outline a concrete path for BCAL to move from a largely dormant structure to a functioning regional consortium. The groundwork is already there, and what the findings make clear is that formalizing it is no longer optional.

## Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researcher used the research ethics provided by the Research, Extension, Production and Enterprise Development (REPED) of Bicol State College of Applied Sciences and Technology (BISCAST). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional

research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173) of the Philippines.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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