Public Administration Field Placements for Online Universities

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Abstract

This paper is a proposal that online universities should establish partnerships with city governments to create field placement opportunities for graduate students of public administration. The research was accomplished by reviewing current articles on field placements for traditional universities and by disseminating a 9-question survey to 100 cities across the United States. The findings from the literature reviewed noted that universities, host organizations, and students all benefit from field placement programs. The data gathered from the 9-question survey found that most city governments are interested in establishing field placement opportunities with online universities, had confidence in the abilities of online students, and would consider hiring online graduates after successful completion of a field placement.

Introduction

Today, most students live within 100 miles of a university, and federal grants and loans are now available to people from all socioeconomic backgrounds. As the Internet evolved, so did access to education through fully online universities. Thus, students no longer need to leave home and live in expensive dorms or apartments to receive a quality education. However, the cause and effect of evolution is always competition for resources. With so many traditional brick and mortar and online universities competing for the same students, online universities must also evolve or go extinct.

Institutions of higher learning, such as the University of Memphis, have partnered with local non-profit organizations, city, state, and federal agencies within their area to offer field placements to their students in many fields of study. Further, a traditional university can simply add online courses or degree programs to its curriculum in order to expand its accessibility and its reputation.

Therefore, it is imperative that online universities adapt their educational models to include the creation of educational partnerships with organizations to compete with traditional universities. This research project proposes that online universities, such as American Military University, should implement field placement programs where possible.

The focus of this study was to demonstrate that by creating partnerships between online universities and city governments, students seeking degrees in public administration would be better prepared to enter the public-sector workforce. As the field of public administration encompasses a wide variety of components spanning human resources, organizational management, leadership development, and health policies, city governments offer numerous opportunities for practical learning. In addition, online universities are actually in a better position to offer field placements than traditional universities. While many students of traditional universities struggle to balance school, family, and employment, online students have a greater amount of scheduling flexibility because classrooms, lectures, and assignments can be accessed anytime, anywhere. This is especially important for non-traditional students, working professionals, and those serving on active-duty in the Armed Forces.

Further, this project will demonstrate that by partnering with city governments, online universities could increase their reputation and credibility by producing higher quality graduates who would be better prepared to enter the public-sector workforce. In addition, this research showed that partnerships between city governments and online universities for field placements of students of public administration programs would be beneficial to the city governments, the universities, and the students. The city governments would gain needed staff augmentation; the universities would gain additional credibility; and, the students would gain the hands-on experience needed to begin successful careers. This was accomplished by using a 9-question survey designed to test the project's hypothesis: "Online universities can create field placement programs for their students of public administration by building partnerships with local governments to ensure online student receive the same learning opportunities as traditional university students." The survey was disseminated to city governments across the United States and analyzed to discover the probability of creating educational partnerships for field placement positions.

Academic learning at the master's level provides an excellent baseline of knowledge for starting a new career in any given field of study. However, classroom knowledge seldom provides the necessary hands-on skills required to be successful on the job in the real world. While many traditional universities offer field placement opportunities for programs such as social work, nursing, public health, education, and public administration, these opportunities are rarely if ever offered to students attending online universities. However, online universities are in a far better position to offer field placements opportunities than traditional universities.

The goals of field placement programs are to help students gain field of focus identity, build self-confidence, and gain first-hand knowledge of the practical application of academic studies in a supervised environment. While textbooks and lectures provide lists, definitions, concepts, and theories on how a given field of study is supposed to functions, they cannot give the student the experience of observing and participating in the use of these competencies.

Background

For decades, these institutions of higher education have offered field placements and internships for most of their programs, such as, social work, education, nursing, public policy, and public administration degrees. In fact, as of this writing 155 traditional universities (see appendix #5) offer field placement programs for students of public administrations in accordance with the standards for master's degree programs in public affairs, public policy and public administration (NASPAA, 2017). Unfortunately, to date, not one online university offers field placement opportunities in any of these fields of study.

On August 6, 1991, the World Wide Web became available to the general-public and the future of information, communication, and education was forever changed. In early 1995, CALCampus became the first organization to offer fully online college courses in real time. In 1999, Jones International University became the first online university to receive regional accreditation and the future of online education was again changed forever. Unfortunately, as with most new things, there are those who will seek to pervert the technology to their advantage and place profit over substance. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the number of online universities quadruple; however, many of these schools hired unqualified instructors, enrolled unprepared

students, and were dishonest about the value of their degree programs (Shireman, 2017). Thus, until recently online universities as compared with traditional brick and mortar universities were often perceived as less reputable or creditable. Congressional investigations and the creation of better regulations over the last two decades have brought online university's standards more in line with their traditional university counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In addition, more working professionals, including active-duty military, have shifted from traditional universities to online universities and with the acceptance of online degrees by more and more employers.

Field placements are the marriage of academic theory and practical application. For decades, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and social work licensing laws in most states have required graduates to earn their degrees from a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited programs, which requires a minimum of 400 hours of field placement work for bachelor degrees and 900 hours for graduate degrees (Social Work Degree Center, 2018). Beyond the academic requirements of field placements is the intrinsic values and professional identity that the students will acquire working beside seasoned veterans in their field of study. The legal requirements governing licensing for social workers has spurred many online universities that offer social work degrees to seek accreditation and adapt their curriculums to stay competitive with traditional brick-and-mortar universities.

Even more than social work, public health and public administration touch every aspect of human existence. Yet, for decades, students of online universities studying public health have been required by the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) to receive a minimum of 120 hours of field experience, while students of public administration have not had this opportunity (CEPH, 2015, p. 114). For example, American Military University (AMU), which is accredited by the CEPH through 2022, has the requirement that, "Students must secure a supervised position prior to beginning this course" (APUS, 2017). 'This course' refers to the final core class of their Masters of Public Health Program, PBHE697 Public Health Practicum. This suggests that APU agrees with Lee and Fortune (2013) that students who participated in hands-on activities are more able to connect the conceptual linkage between academic theory and practical application (p. 656). The facts are that real-world situations are often far more complex than classroom simulations or the 'way it should be' scenarios of textbooks. Yet, to date, AMU has not offered the same standard of learning for students in its masters of public administration (MPA) program.

The most recent data estimates that over 2.9 million students are enrolled exclusively in online degree programs across the country, which is up 3.9 percent from the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2017, p. 4). Much like online pubic administration degree programs, health administration degree programs had also fallen behind when it came to the creation of field placement programs; however, this has been remedied. In 2015, recognizing this shortcoming led to policy changes in the manner in which the Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education (CAHME) required students of healthcare administration to meet their 120 hour face-to-face instructional format (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 634). Other online fields of study, such as nursing and education, have also found their niche in online programs using similar tactics to ensure their students are receiving every opportunity to compete with students graduating from traditional universities. Between 2012 and 2016, enrollment in traditional universities dropped by one million students, yet enrollment in online universities continued to steadily increase (Friedman, 2018).

In a study conducted by Garris, Madden, and Rodgers (2008), 65 traditional universities having public policy and public administration programs were surveyed. Of these, 68 percent offered field placements and 72 percent of those required students to participate (p. 91). In addition, studies conducted as far back as 2008, have analyze the benefits of field placement programs for students of public policy and public administration. These studies concluded that both the students and the organizations benefitted from the experience not only in the short-term, but also, in the long-term (Sprague & Percy, 2014). As noted earlier, today, 155 traditional universities currently require students of public administration to participate in field placement programs (NASPAA, 2017). It would seem that an intersection of time and necessity have finally converged opening a door of opportunity for online universities to advance forward and meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Survey Design

The purpose and design of the research survey was to test the project's hypothesis: "Online universities can create field placement programs for their students of public administration by building partnerships with local governments to ensure online students receive the same learning opportunities as traditional university students." To that end, each of the nine questions had a specific purpose.

Question #1 asked, "Does your city currently offer field placement opportunities for graduate students of traditional universities?" The purpose of this question was to determine how common the practice of using graduate students in field placement or internship programs are within city governments throughout the country and by region.

Question #2 was a follow-up question from question #1 and asked, "If Yes, how many field placement students do you currently have (a)? per year (b)?" The purpose of this question was to determine how invested city governments are in contributing to the educational outcomes of their local universities. If these cities were even slightly invested, then the probabilities may be good that they would entertain the concept of creating field placements for online students.

Question #3 was also a follow-up question from question #1 and asked, "If no, would your city be interested in creating field placement opportunities for graduate students of traditional universities?" The purpose of this question was to identify cities that do not currently offer field placement opportunities but are interested in doing so if the opportunity was available.

Question #4 asked, "Would your city be interested in creating field placement opportunities for graduate students of accredited online universities?" This question began the fundamental shift in focus from traditional universities to online universities. The purpose of this question was to gauge the responsiveness of city governments to online universities. This question may also provide insight into the reputation of online education nationwide.

Question #5 asked, "Do you believe online graduate students can make a valuable contribution to your efforts?" This question was designed to gauge the level of respect that city governments have for both online universities and their students. This question can be seen as a continuation of question #4; however, it drills a bit deeper to fully understand the perceived value and acceptance of online students.

Question #6 asked, "Do you believe current technology can be used to offer field placement opportunities to graduate students of online universities?" This question was used as a two-pronged assessment concerning the understanding of city governments on the use of telecommunication applications. The first prong was to determine if applications, such as, GoToMeeting, Adobe Connect, Zoom, or Skype could be a plausible means for students outside of a given region to participate in city government without actually living near the given city. For example, could a student living in Tennessee participate in a field placement position with a city located in Wyoming? This is keeping with the premise that students can attend online universities regardless of their location. The second prong looked to the future where the use of a personal presence devises could be used by students to virtually participate in field placements.

Question #7 asked, "Has your city used applications, such as, Adobe Connect, Skype, GoToMeeting, or Zoom for meetings etc.?" This was a directional continuation question for question #6. It is one thing to understand the purpose of differing telecommunication devices and applications, it is another to have actually used them. Those cities that have used these types of telecommunication applications may have greater respect for universities that use this technology to promote higher education.

Question #8 asked, "Should an online field placement position be paid or unpaid?" The purpose of this question was to cause the respondent to take a deeper look at the answers they had supplied thus far. It is one thing to answer a survey and say yes to wanting to create online field placement positions, it is another to consider the logistics of such an endeavor.

Question #9 asked, "Would you consider hiring an online student who performed well during a field placement?" The purpose of this question was to re-qualify question #5 in that if a city believes an online student can contribute in a positive manner to the efforts of the city government should that student be offered a job, if available? As the last question, this question was designed to make the respondent rethink all previous answers. It is one thing to say yes to offering field placements, it is another thing to consider offering a job.

Participants

City governments having the following criteria were recruited via an e-mail to participate in the survey. Each city had to have a "council-manager" form of government. A council-manager form of government is one in which the legislative and executive branches of government are not separated. Instead, the political and administrative functions of government are separated, in that the city council makes decisions concerning policy, and the implementation of those decisions is the responsibility of a professional administrator or city manager (Smith & Greenblatt, 2016) .

In addition, each city had to be located within a 50-miles radius of a military installation. This criterion was established to ensure that commute times for active-duty personnel, retired military, and their family members would be within a reasonable distance, given that most active duty and retired military personnel live near military installations. Further, each city had to have an official webpage with e-mail addresses or a 'contact us' page capable of uploading the survey. This criterion was established to match twenty-first century technology; in addition to being faster, e-mail is more cost efficient and timely than sending surveys through the United States Postal Service.

A total of 100 cities were located using the Military.com webpage. Of the 100 selected cities, 31 were located near Army installations, 31 near Air Force bases, 30 near Navy or Marine bases, and two near Unified Command Centers. Seven states were excluded because none of the cities within the given 50-mile radius of a military installation met all the aforementioned criteria. These included Alabama, Arkansas, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, South Dakota, and Wyoming. In addition, eight other states were excluded because they did not have any military installations. These included Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Oregon, Vermont, and West Virginia. Altogether, 35 of 50 states were selected as eligible to be represented in this study. Further, for the purpose of this study, military installations are defined as bases where active-duty Army, Air Force, Navy, or Marine personnel are stationed, thus cities located near National Guard, Air National Guard, and Reserve units were not considered.

Materials and Procedures

Using the Military.com webpage list of military installations within the United States, each installation was clicked on, which provides the user with an interactive map of the area surrounding the installations. Each city within a 50-mile radius was then entered into the Google search engine to locate an official webpage. If an official webpage was found then a search of the city's webpage was conducted to discover if the city met the rest of the criteria of having a manager-council form of government and having e-mail addresses or a 'contact us' page capable of uploading the survey.

Once 100 cities were located each city was sent an e-mail which consisted of a recruitment introduction letter, a general consent form, and a brief 9-question survey. Both the introduction letter and the general consent form made it clear that no personal data would be asked for, that the survey was anonymous and voluntary, and that only the participant's title and the name of the city would be used in the analysis, if needed. For example, the city manager of Goodtown, Tennessee, responded positively to all survey questions. Further, to ensure identifiable markers were removed from all recordings and analyzing data sheets, each city was given a designated number between 1 and 100. For example, on an Excel spread sheet the data would read: city number #1 answered yes to question number #1.

There are several variables that may confuse the positivity of some questions. For example, if question #4, "Would your city be interested in creating field placement opportunities for graduate students of accredited online universities?" was answered 'no' and question #5, "Do you believe online graduate students can make a valuable contribution to your efforts?" was answered 'yes' then while they appear to cancel each other out. For example, while cities may not be interested in creating field placements today, they do believe in the abilities of online students, hence the issue may be current funding restrictions or policy issues. In addition, if question #8 was answered as 'unpaid', while the connotation may seem to have less value than paid, the actual perception should be seen as positive, as whether or not a field placement position is paid or unpaid, the student is still receiving valuable experience.

Results

The following section contains the results and analysis from the 9-question survey sent out to 100 cities across the United States. Each of these cities met the criteria of having a council-manager form of city government, an official webpage with e-mail address or a 'contact us' page capable of uploading the survey, and was located within a 50-mile radius of an active duty military installation. Of the 100 surveys sent out, 30 cities responded resulting in a 30 percent response rate. Of the 30 responding cities, 7 replies came from East Coast cities, 7 from Southern cities, 7 from Mid-West cities, 3 from Western cities, and 6 from West Coast cities (see chart & map below). In addition, of the 30 responding cities the breakdown according to type of military installation is as follows. Of the 7 responding East Coast cities, 3 were located near Army installations, 1 was near an Air Force base, and 3 were near Navy or Marine bases. Of the 7 responding Southern cities, 1 was near an Army installation, 3 were near Air Force bases, and 3 were near Navy or Marine bases. Of the 7 responding Mid-West Cities, 3 were near Army installations, 3 were near Air Force bases, and 1 was near a Navy or Marine base. Of the 3 responding Western cities, 1 was near an Army installation, and 2 were near Air Force bases; of the 6 responding West Coast cities, 2 were near Army installations, 1 was near an Air Force base, and 3 were near Navy or Marine bases (see chart below).

Ratio of Returns by Region and Branch of Service
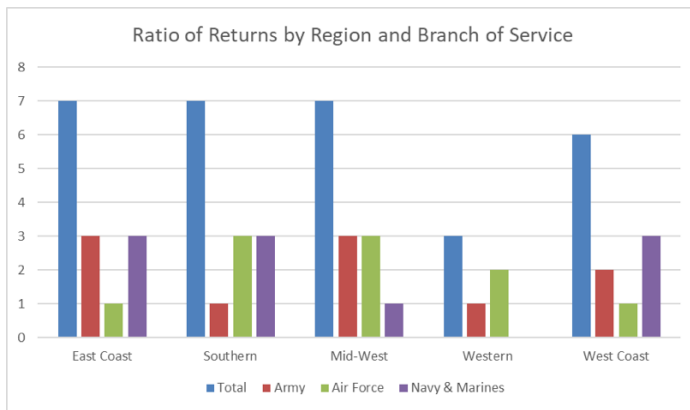
From the data collected on the geographical locations of the responding surveyed cities, it would seem the return rate per region represents an even balance with a mean average of 6 responses per region (see map below). The data sampling also suggests the type of military installation located near any given cities had null effect on return rates, as the number of responding cities near Army installations were 10, near Air Force bases were 10, and near Navy or Marine bases were also 10. As the return rate across the United States is well balanced in both regional and military installation samplings, it seems that the 30 returned surveys represent a well-balanced consensus on attitudes toward the creation of field placements for online students of public administration within city governments.


Regional Survey Map
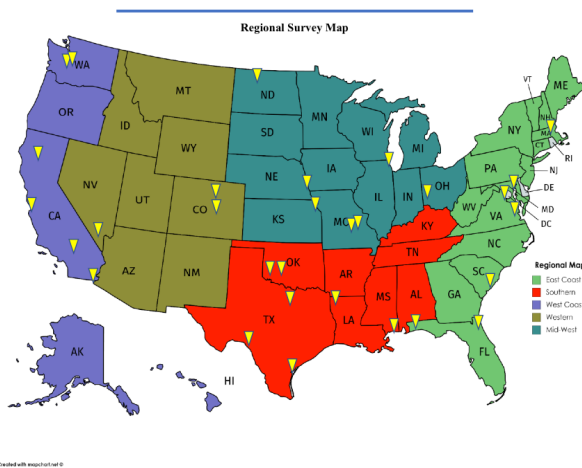
The first question on the survey asked the respondent, "Does your city currently offer field placement opportunities for graduate students of traditional universities?" The data collected indicated that 53 percent of the responding cities currently accept graduate students of public administration for field placements or internships. This information can be used by online universities for strategic marketing and overtures to create partnerships for higher learning.

Questions #2 and #3 were follow-up questions to question #1 depended on whether question #1 was answered yes or no. Question #2 asked, "If Yes, how many field placement students do you currently have (a)? per year (b)?" The data indicated that 53 percent of the responding cities currently have between 1 and 5 students working in field placement positions. This information would seem to suggest that over half of the responding city governments are interested in contributing to the educational endeavors of higher education.

Question #3 asked, "If no, would your city be interested in creating field placement opportunities for graduate students of traditional universities?" The data indicated that 37 percent of responding cities would be interested in establishing field placement opportunities. However, this answer became more significant when taking into account that 9 out of 14 (or 64 percent) of the cities who responded no to question #1, indicating they did not currently offer field placements, were interested in creating this opportunity. This data would seem to indicate that an untapped resource for learning is currently available and awaiting discovery.

Question #4 asked, "Would your city be interested in creating field placement opportunities for graduate students of accredited online universities?" The data indicated that 60 percent of the responding cities are interested in creating field placement opportunities for online students. In addition, of the 14 cities answering no to question #1, indicating they did not currently offer field placement opportunities, 7 (or 50 percent) of those responding indicated that they wanted to create field placement opportunities for online students. This information indicates the presence of an untapped market located in areas surrounding active-duty military installations that would be interested in creating partnerships for online institutions of higher education.
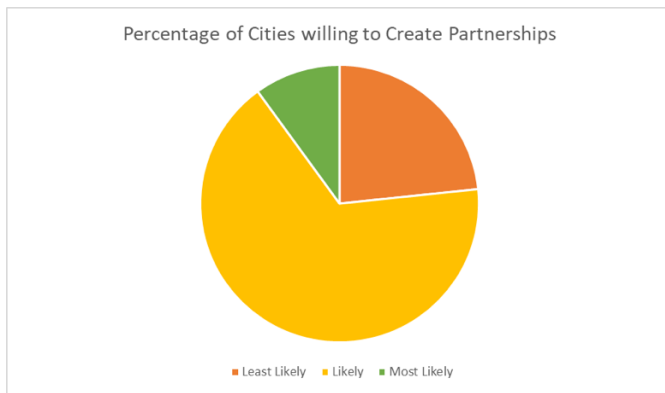
Percentage of Cities willing to Create Partnerships

■ Least Likely ■ Likely ■ Most Likely

Question #5 asked, "Do you believe online graduate students can make a valuable contribution to your efforts?" The returned data indicated that 90 percent of the responding cities believe that online students can make a valuable contribution to their efforts. This data is extraordinary, in that just a decade ago online universities were perceived to be less creditable than traditional universities. In addition, of the 12 cities responding no to question #4, indicating they did not wish to create field placements for online students, 9 (or 75 percent) still indicated they believed in the abilities of online universities and their students. Therefore, their response of no to question #4 may have been due to other consideration, such as, budget restraints or policy questions.

Question #6 asked, "Do you believe current technology can be used to offer field placement opportunities to graduate students of online universities?" The data gathered from this question indicates that 80 percent of responding cities agree that current technology can be used to create field placement opportunities. This information is good news for online universities, as technology is the instrument used to enable distant learning.

Question #7 asked, "Has your city used applications, such as, Adobe Connect, Skype, GoToMeeting, or Zoom for meetings etc.?" From the data collected, 90 percent of responding cities reported that their city has used at least one of these applications. This information is encouraging in that cities that are already using this type of telecommunication will have a much simpler time and be more receptive to incorporating this type of technology into field placement opportunities, which will open the door for online universities and their students.

Question #8 asked, "Should an online field placement position be paid or unpaid?" From the data collected, 80 percent of responding cities reported that students should be paid, while 20 percent reported students should not be paid. However, 50 percent of responding cities report a combination of paid and unpaid positions could be available. This question offers no negative feedback, as whether a student is being monetarily compensated or not, the student is still being afforded the necessary hands-on experience needed for a successful career. In addition, whether a position is paid or unpaid, it is still an offered position to work with city staff.

Question #9 asked, "Would you consider hiring an online student who performed well during a field placement?" According to the data collected 93 percent of responding cities said they would hire a student who performed well in a field placement position. This concurs with the study conducted by Sprague and Percy (2014) which indicated that it was not uncommon for host organizations to offer jobs to students who had completed their field placement within their organization. This information represents a positive aspect for both the student and the university. The goal of a good education is to prepare for and find a great career. Therefore, when a university offers better learning tools for success, the student benefits from the field placement opportunity and the university benefits from producing higher quality students which in turn increases its reputation.

The data collected using this 9-question survey clearly indicates that online universities have moved forward and started to build a reputation of respect and success. Therefore, it is only logical that online universities should continue to move forward by establishing partnerships with city governments to create field placement opportunities for its graduate students of public administration. It is also clear from the data collected that there are cities out there awaiting the opportunity to contribute to the advancement of online education.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to present a proposal that online universities should establish partnerships with city governments to create field placement opportunities for its students of public administration. By creating partnerships between online universities and city governments, students seeking degrees in public administration should be better prepared to enter the public-sector workforce. In addition, this study demonstrates that partnerships between city governments and online universities for field placements of students of public administration could be beneficial to city governments, universities, and students.

The data collected through the review of current literature and the use of a 9-question survey sent out to 100 city governments has produce convincing evidence that online universities are lagging behind traditional universities in the use of field placement programs in all fields of study. The question online universities should be asking themselves is who would employers rather hire; a person with academic knowledge only or a person who has academic knowledge and actual hands-on experience in their field of study or with the organization itself? This is why the creation of field placement programs is crucial to the advancement of student knowledge and for the reputation of online universities. In the field of public administration, this research project has identified a niche from which this can be accomplished.

City governments are not as restrained by the same policies as are federal agencies and have greater autonomy to create both field placements and internships as they see fit. In addition, local governments are more in line with the academic goals of public administration. According to the results from the 9-question survey, 18 of the 30 responding cities are currently willing to create field placements with online universities, 7 of which do not currently host any students for field placements. While this number seems to be small, one must remember that the survey was only disseminated to 100 out of 19,505 cities nationwide. In addition, the survey was limited to cities located within a 50-mile radius of military installations. This means there are likely to be many opportunities to get in on the ground floor with these city governments and build new educational partnerships.

Over the course of this research, it was observed that not one study had been conducted on the partnerships of online universities and city governments or any other entity for field placements programs. However, numerous studies on field placements have been conducted on the benefits to students, universities, and host organizations, as pertaining to traditional universities.

Conclusion

From the literature reviewed during this research project, it is clear that online universities must adapt to the changing standards of higher education.

Accrediting organizations, such as CCNE and CSWE, almost always require universities to include field placements, practicums, or internships under the direct supervision of a qualified preceptor in their curriculum. These field placements afford the students the opportunity to receive the hands-on or practical experience needed to perform outside of academia.

From the 9-question survey disseminated to 100 cities across the country, it is clear there are a number of city governments that are underserved by their local universities in the obtainment of student interns and stand ready to build educational partnerships with online universities. As the field of public administration encompasses a wide variety of components spanning human resources, organizational management, leadership development, and health policies, city governments offer endless opportunities for learning. It is possible for online universities to create educational partnerships with city governments for field placements that will allow online students to receive the necessary hands-on experiences needed to achieve discipline competency. This could also increase the long-term reputation of the university by producing higher quality graduates that are ready for employment.

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