

May 5, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We, the undersigned, collectively represent thousands of professionals dedicated to international education and global engagement. We write to share our concerns regarding the April 19, 2021, travel advisory update that significantly increases the number of countries at “Level 4: Do Not Travel” to approximately 80 percent of countries worldwide.

The field of education abroad regards the importance of health and safety of our students as paramount. Many of our members’ student travel policies are informed by the Department of State advisories. We note that the Department’s travel advisories do “not necessarily indicate a change to the current health situation in a given country” (April 19 Travel Advisory Update: Frequently Asked Questions). The policies of most higher education institutions, however, tend to be inflexible, and changing them is often a long-term undertaking. In an April 28 online event with NAFSA, a representative from the Department noted that the travel advisories are not meant to be prescriptive.

Early benchmarking results from a recent survey, however, indicated that nearly one in five institutions have already decided they cannot send students to any country that the Department has assigned as Level 4 rating, and nearly one in three are still grappling with how to process these changes in their own policy contexts. Such an outcome could have a catastrophic impact on work and study opportunities for thousands of students, faculty and staff in the higher education and exchange sectors. Despite the Department’s intent, the current Level 4 Travel Advisories will likely result in many colleges, universities, and exchange sponsors who rely on those Advisories feeling compelled not to send their students abroad.

We appreciate that the Department and the CDC have more closely aligned their rankings. The new advisories, however, seem to ignore vaccination rates and the status of individual travelers. The result is that including 80 percent of the countries around the globe in a Level 4 Travel Advisory means that tens of thousands of opportunities for students to travel abroad may be eliminated. This change could impact not just the fall 2021 semester, but also study abroad opportunities for the foreseeable future. This would have a manifest effect on the global readiness of college graduates entering the US job market in the next few years. Additionally, it may mean that graduation rates decrease in the United States because study abroad experiences are associated with an increase in graduation rates. Moreover, the updated advisories could deepen the economic crisis facing the many organizations that administer study abroad and other sending programs. Thus, elevating the consideration of one risk factor (COVID-19) overwhelms all other considerations and is causing serious concern at institutions of higher education across the nation.

As our members turn now to other sources, it would be helpful for the Department to state unequivocally that the travel advisory should not be considered the sole criterion for determining whether or not to send students to study overseas. The Department should also specify which additional sources institutions should consider in making their decisions on student mobility and risk. The Overseas Security Advisory Council has provided guidance that directs entities to incorporate the information provided by Travel Advisories into their travel safety protocols *alongside other indicators* from other governments and travel security providers. That advice would seem to presume that all institutions have resources dedicated to compiling data across multiple sources or to subscribe to private travel security services. Many of our members simply no longer have the same levels of staffing or budgets as before the pandemic to perform this analysis. In spite of this, universities work carefully to prepare their travelers and often rely heavily on the U.S. Department of State's travel advisories as their primary source of information.

It is clear that the Department of State values global engagement for students, as exemplified by your recent issuance of the National Interest Exceptions for Certain Travelers from China, Iran, Brazil, South Africa, Schengen Area, United Kingdom, and Ireland. We urge that the Department incorporate more nuance in its advisories to better help students, their families, and higher education institutions make educated decisions about travel abroad. As of now, it is difficult to discern why advanced democracies that are making progress vaccinating their residents are in the same category as failing and war-torn states.

We request a meeting with the Department so that we can discuss why the Level 4 advisories do not indicate a change in risk; suggestions for other sources of information; possible changes in the Level 4 advisory that acknowledge differences among those countries with that rating; and the need for a rapid, 30-day review to determine whether states that were recently moved to Level 4 should be moved back to Level 3 and/or whether the alignment with CDC's rankings is beneficial.

Our goal is to preserve the opportunity for so many of our students to study abroad in the coming academic year while also increasing confidence in the tools and resources that the Department of State provides.

Sincerely,

Alliance for International Exchange
American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers
Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U)
Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA)
Community Colleges for International Development (CCID)
Diversity Abroad
Gap Year Association
NAFSA: Association of International Educators
National Association of Independent Colleges & Universities (NAICU)
Pulse: International Safety and Security Professionals in Higher Education, Inc.
The Forum on Education Abroad