



April 23, 2021

The Honorable Ian G. Brownlee
Acting Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs
U.S. Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520
VIA EMAIL

Dear Assistant Secretary Brownlee,

I write today on behalf of NAFSA: Association of International Educators 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% of countries worldwide. We recognize the importance of health and safety when traveling, but urge that the Department be more nuanced when evaluating countries for travel advisories. Unfortunately, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and related travel restrictions, the academic year 2020-2021 has become the “year without study abroad” and we are concerned that this devastation will continue into the next academic year as the U.S. Department of State’s announcement effectively places the majority of popular U.S. study abroad destinations around the world to a Level 4: Do Not Travel.

Like other sectors, the field of international education has been devastated by COVID-19. Because of the halt in travel, many U.S. higher education institutions across the country have reported that they have reduced services, furloughed employees, and eliminated positions. The grim picture extends to staff layoffs at our partners in the private sector who provide essential support to overseas programs. These are the very professionals who work tirelessly to ensure the health, safety, and security of students abroad.

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NAFSA: ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS

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U.S. Department of State products such as Travel Advisories and Alerts have long been resources in the education abroad office’s toolbox to assess risk associated with international travel. NAFSA is fortunate to have worked closely with the Bureau of Consular Affairs over many years to educate and inform our members of these products through in-person presentations, conference sessions, and web resources.

The effect of a Level 4: Do Not Travel will compel many institutions to cancel study abroad, nullify insurance policies, and sour relations with our overseas partners in higher education. These outcomes will occur even as we observe increased skepticism in relying on the Bureau’s travel warnings as they are not updated in a timely manner and it is clear, as indicated in the accompanying [FAQ](#), the increased level “does not necessarily indicate a change to the current health situation in a given country.” Unfortunately, countries that provide more details about their in-country testing and COVID rates are penalized with a higher risk rating than countries who do not report data. These factors and others lead more institutions to turn away from the Travel Advisories as the primary source of travel decisions, and look instead to the risk assessments of other countries and to the private sector.

Study abroad programs run by U.S. college and universities and their colleagues at private-sector providers equip American students with the essential global competencies and experiences needed to succeed in today’s global workforce. Study abroad is a learning opportunity that enables students to develop critical skills including foreign language fluency, strong problem-solving and analytical capability, a tolerance for ambiguity, and cross-cultural competence. Recent studies also show a positive correlation between students who study abroad and higher grade point averages

and degree completion rates. Our 2020 report, [Developing a Globally Competitive Workforce Through Study Abroad: The Value of Study Abroad Skills in the U.S. Job Market](#), *showed* that students acquire and develop skills during their study abroad experiences that are valued by employers.

The current and future workforce of the United States simply cannot afford another academic year without study abroad. To restore the trust of international educators in this key resource, NAFSA urges the Bureau of Consular Affairs to adopt a more nuanced approach to its travel advisory ratings that is indicative of the level of risk based on established indicators, update them in a transparent and timely manner, and establish regular stakeholder engagement to help inform these decisions.

Sincerely,

Esther D. Brimmer, DPhil

Executive Director & CEO