

Developing an Institutional Travel Warning Policy: "Tripwires" and Other Challenges

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Where We Started

“Northwestern University will not operate, pay for, supervise, direct, or otherwise support a study abroad program, research program, or other course or program for any students (undergraduate, graduate, professional) in a portion of a country where a Department of State Travel Warning (“Travel Warning”) is in effect.”

The Good

- Simple, clear and easy to implement
- Safety judgment made by external expert, US Dept. of State



Problems and Dissatisfactions Mount

- What to do about Israel – policy contortion

“... any student who wishes to travel to an area subject to a Travel Warning in connection with a study abroad program or other course of study or research may do so under these conditions: (i) the program or other course of study or research is not operated or funded by Northwestern or supervised or directed by Northwestern faculty or staff, and (ii) the student has signed the Student Travel Form (available through the Office of Risk Management) indicating that he or she understands the risks involved in travel to this location and releasing the University from any liability. If the student is an undergraduate, at least one of the student’s parents (or the student’s legal guardian) must also sign the completed Student Travel Form. During the time that the student is engaged in travel under this paragraph, the student will not be enrolled at Northwestern.”



The No Guidance if No Warning Problem

- Ad hoc concerns raised about a program in Uganda – not safe
 - What is being decided?
 - What are the criteria for making a decision?
 - What information and authorities needed to make decision?
 - Who makes decision?
 - Who is involved in the process?
- Consistency – which other programs to review?



As a Result

- Standing Risk Assessment Committee Formed to Review Programs – conversation begins
 - General Counsel
 - Risk Management
 - Assoc. Provost for Undergraduate Education
 - Dean of Students
 - Study Abroad Program Offices (3)
 - Health Services
 - Mental Health Services
- Discovery and Hiring of External Security Information and Travel Advice Providers (International SOS)



Some Principles Start to Emerge

- Operating a program does not equal guarantee of student safety
- Individual student need to make their own decisions about their risk tolerance
- We have a responsibility to share what we know so they can make an appropriate decision for themselves
- Need clear message to students that their behavior and decisions a very large component of their safety



Growing Frustrations with Existing Policy

- Too Blunt - All or nothing
 - Mexico
- Inconsistencies between State Department and Travel Security Information Provider
 - State Department Travel Warning too Permissive:
 - 30 countries and locations to which ISOS rates as High or Extreme security risks, without State Travel Warning
 - State Travel Warning too Restrictive:
 - 20 countries and locations that ISOS rates as relatively low security risk, but have State Travel Warning



Goals for New Policy

- Continued reliance on the recommendations of highly qualified, credible, external security professionals
- Creation of an internal NU process for resolving conflicts in the travel advice between the State Department and ISOS for the best interest of student safety and education.
- Consistent decision making process across cases.
- Ease of administration.



Emerging Undergraduate International Travel Policy

1. Undergraduate travel for educational experiences abroad is allowed provided:
 - a. The country in question is not subject to a U.S. Department of State Travel Warning, and
 - b. The locations traveled in have an ISOS security risk rating of Insignificant, Low or Moderate.
2. Undergraduate travel for educational experiences in locations with an ISOS security risk rating of High or Extreme is prohibited without exception.
3. Undergraduate travel for educational experiences in locations subject to a U.S. Department of State Travel Warning, but with an ISOS security risk rating of Insignificant, Low or Moderate requires application and special permission in advance (see “Travel Exception Application Process”). Applications shall be reviewed by the University International Travel Risk Review Committee, which will make recommendations for final decision by the Provost.
4. The University also reserves the right to withdraw its approval at any time should the ISOS security risk rating change to High or Extreme or should conditions presented in an application for approval materially change.



New staff position

- Associate Director for International Student Travel
- Chair and Coordinator Review Process
- Monitor for Changing Conditions
- Oversee response and decision making process when crisis
- Chief Liaison with ISOS
- Outreach to spread awareness of policy
- Develop and run training programs for staff



Committee Composition

- Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, the Dean of Student Affairs, and the Director of the Office of Risk Management.
- Representatives of the Study Abroad Office, the Office of International Program Development, and the Buffett Center for International and Comparative Studies shall serve as non-voting, *ex officio* members of the committee.
- A representative of the Office of General Counsel shall advise the Committee.
- Standard common sense based on advice of experts.



Application for Going to Countries with State Warning

- Description of educational or research activities to be undertaken and the locations in which the student would be studying, including locations they would transit through.
- Statement of why the student wants to undertake this program, research or educational activity in this location and at this time.
- ISOS Security Report for that location and the surrounding areas.
- State Department Travel Warning for the location and surrounding areas.
- A security risk amelioration plan. This document would identify the specific security risks identified by ISOS and the State Department and plan of measures the program or student would take for ameliorating those risks. Examples of such measures include avoiding travel to certain neighborhoods in a city or regions within a country, not traveling alone after dark, avoiding public protests, avoiding crowded public entertainment establishments such as restaurants, etc.
- Evidence of other US universities and colleges that have programs or students carrying out study or research in the locations in question.



Range of Decisions Committee Can Make

After reviewing the application materials and conducting its review, the committee could make one of several recommendations to the Provost:

- Approve travel to the location for a specific study aboard or research program only.
- Approve travel to the location for a specific student for a specific project.
- Standing Conditional Approval for additional programs or students traveling to a given region so that as long as the security ratings by ISOS and the State Department did not change other academic programs could operate and students could travel to a given location without individual review by the committee.
- The Provost receives the committee recommendation and makes the final decision on individual cases as well as Standing Conditional Approval.

