



**A**t the beginning of 2018, the U.S. Department of State revamped its system of travel advisories. The new system assigns a risk rating to all countries using the following scale:

- Level 1** Exercise normal precautions
- Level 2** Exercise increased caution
- Level 3** Reconsider travel
- Level 4** Do not travel

“The new travel advisory system now provides a risk picture for all countries, rather than just those with elevated levels of risk,” says Chad Harmon, Analyst with the U.S. Department of State’s Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC). “By having more detailed, country-level security information for each country, university officials who oversee global travel can make more informed decisions about where to send—or perhaps not send—their travelers.”

“It’s a big win when we give people information, they decide it’s an unacceptable risk, and they change locations or change plans to mitigate those risks,” says Patrick Morgan, Senior Advisor of International Health, Safety and Security in the Office of the Provost at the University of Michigan. “The new advisory system was a great move by the U.S. Department of State. There is so much granularity in the new advisories. It’s been a really valuable tool for us.”

NEARLY A YEAR AFTER THE STATE DEPARTMENT REVAMPED ITS TRAVEL ADVISORY SYSTEM, UNIVERSITIES ARE RETHINKING THEIR TRAVEL POLICIES.



# DRAFTING MORE NUANCED **POLICIES**

***While the revised travel advisory system helps universities make better decisions about school-sanctioned travel abroad, it's also created upheaval for some schools regarding policies.***



“Now that every country has an assigned travel advisory, universities have had to rethink [travel] policies and redefine what their institution deems as high risk,” says Harmon. “For some, this was as simple as replacing Level 3 and 4 countries with what used to be ‘travel alert’ and ‘travel warning’ countries. However, other universities have taken this opportunity to add more nuance to their policies.”

Drexel University did just that. “The travel advisory switch provided a great opportunity for us to dive into our policy a little bit deeper and look at what we wanted to use as an indicator for high-risk travel,” says Marcia Henisz, Senior Director of International Health, Safety and Security in the Office of Global Engagement at Drexel.

One of the changes made by Drexel was to tie decisions less to the overall country rating and more to specific regions or locations within each country. For example, the university often sends students to Israel. Under the State Department’s old system, Israel had a travel warning, so students had to go before the Travel Risk Review Committee. The committee would make a recommendation on the travel to the provost, who decides whether a trip to a high-risk area is approved or not.

Israel is now rated Level 2 under the new travel advisory system. Unless students are going to a specific region designated as high risk, such as Gaza (Level 4) and the West Bank (Level 3), they don’t need to submit their plans to the Travel Risk Review Committee. “The new system allows us to be more specific in what we consider to be a high-risk area,” says Henisz.

Another change to the policy allows reviews by the committee at the discretion of the Senior Director of International Health, Safety and Security. “If there’s a situation that doesn’t meet any of our specific criteria, but I feel uncomfortable about it for some reason, then I can say it needs to go through the review process,” says Henisz.

Recently, a faculty-led study abroad program was going to Jamaica (Level 2). During the trip, the advisor planned to take students to places nearby areas of the country that are deemed Level 4 by the State Department. Because of the proximity to danger zones, Henisz requested a review. The faculty member appreciated the information and changed the itinerary to avoid those areas.



# ADVICE FOR NAVIGATING DECISION-MAKING

Because the new travel advisory system isn't as simple as "go or don't go," universities are working through the subtleties of international travel. That can be challenging, admit Morgan and Henisz, who co-chair the OSAC's Academic Working Group (AWG). The AWG is a consortium of experts in higher education who collaborate and benchmark on safety, security and health issues in education abroad. Through their experience in AWG—and in their day-to-day jobs—Morgan and Henisz offer the following advice to universities to help navigate decisions on travel to high-risk locations:



- **Rely on multiple resources to make decisions.**

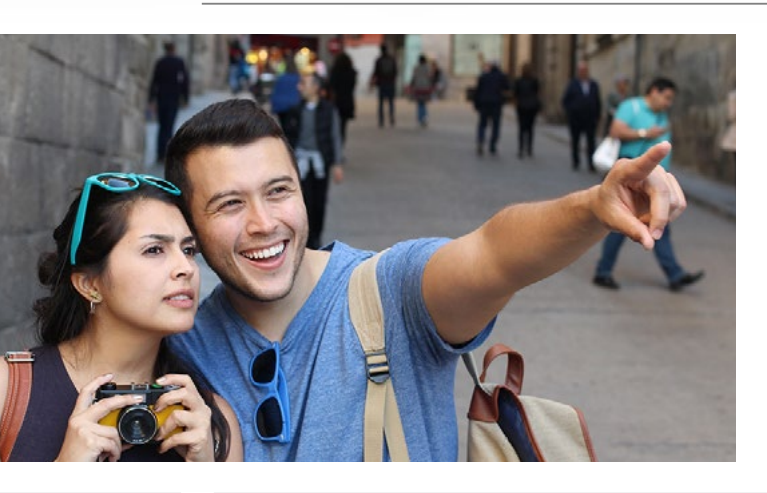
While the State Department's new travel advisory system offers valuable information, both Drexel and the University of Michigan use a variety of resources to make recommendations and decisions on travel. For example, Michigan consults publicly-available advisories from Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand and Australia. The university also considers ratings from its international assistance provider, as well as International SOS. The university then aggregates the information into a new risk score and works with its legal counsel and risk management team to make decisions.

- **Use the information to weigh decisions thoughtfully.**

Any travel to Level 3 or Level 4 countries by Drexel students must go through the Travel Risk Review Committee. "We're looking for a balance between the academic value and the risk that's involved," says Henisz. Michigan's International Travel Oversight Committee gathers as much information as possible, then passes it along to students who make the final decision on whether or not to travel to a high-risk country. "Our philosophy has always been that our students are adults and, as such, they are responsible for making smart choices," says Morgan. "Our responsibility is to inform them of certain concerns and to ensure they recognize those concerns, accept them and have mitigation strategies."

- **Make decisions on a case-by-case basis, if possible.**

Although travel to Level 3 and Level 4 countries involves some risk, circumstances of individual trips will vary. "It's important to consider that different travelers may be willing to take on different levels of risk," says Harmon. "For example, a spring break educational excursion for freshmen who may have little to no previous exposure to the country's language or culture can be very different from a program for doctoral students who have extensive cultural knowledge."



- **Dig deep into the State Department's travel advisories.** Each country has its own web page under the travel advisories tab. If you move beyond the initial page that lists the travel advisory level, you'll find a plethora of information, ranging from health alerts to advice on transportation. "If you don't click and move further into the advisory, you may miss some of the information about particular areas within a country," says Henisz.



*“If you take a proactive approach to travel safety, then you are most likely going to be managing incidents rather than handling crises.”*



- **Educate faculty and staff about travel risks and safety.** “The change in the advisory system is a great opportunity for study abroad professionals to draw attention to this at their institutions,” says Henisz. “I was able to educate a lot of people at Drexel about what the travel advisory is, how it works and what kinds of things we’re looking at.”

Henisz and Morgan acknowledge that they are fortunate to work for institutions with full-time positions devoted to travel safety. Even if your university doesn’t have the resources for a dedicated staff member, it’s still imperative to spend some time examining travel advisories and establishing

policies about high-risk travel. Henisz concludes, “If you take a proactive approach to travel safety, then you are most likely going to be managing incidents rather than handling crises.”



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