Information on Essential Travel and the International Travel Policy

On March 24, Chancellor Blank released a revised policy on outbound travel to broaden the definition of “essential” travel for UW–Madison students, faculty, and staff. The revision allows some students to travel abroad to conduct research under an exemption to the current suspension of university-sponsored outbound travel. However, a student whose request for exemption meets the new standard of essential travel and is approved under the Chancellor’s policy must still comply with the UW–Madison International Travel Resources, Guidelines, and Policies, commonly known as the “international travel policy.”

The international travel policy has been in effect at UW–Madison since 2015 and addresses the university’s due diligence on behalf of traveling students. It precludes student travel (including undergraduate, graduate, and professional students) to a location under a U.S. Department of State level 3 or 4 travel advisory or a CDC level 3 warning notice. Within the policy, these characterizations are termed “travel warning” for consistency.

The international travel policy provides a risk threshold for UW–Madison students who travel abroad. It also offers a process by which students can request a waiver to the policy, based on their plans to mitigate those risks identified by the U.S. Department of State advisory and/or CDC warning notice for their intended destination. Each waiver request is reviewed by the University International Travel Committee (UITC) and then presented to the dean and vice provost of the International Division for decision. The waiver process gives due consideration to the experiences and focused purpose of graduate and professional students.

To better support students during the pandemic, the UITC process is streamlined and conducted electronically. The process tries to balance the university’s broader responsibilities with the student’s request to travel abroad. During this historic pandemic, there are some risks that cannot be avoided or mitigated satisfactorily, and so travel to many locations will remain on hold until it can resume safely.

The term “essential” must be applied by academic units with serious consideration for the spirit of UW–Madison’s suspension of outbound travel. The first line of review remains with each advisor, department, and school or college as they should only support requests that truly represent essential travel. Conditions abroad in any location can change with little notice—often at great personal cost to travelers. This is in addition to the serious and potentially critical health risks that may be encountered.

Together, the Chancellor’s revised policy and the international travel policy ensure that high standards of safety and security continue to be met for students’ research travel while also allowing consideration for truly exceptional requests. This approach recognizes the challenging and frustrating conditions for students during the pandemic while also acknowledge its uneven impact around the world.