

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 23, 2014

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan,

We are writing to express our concern about the safety of students traveling abroad as part of educational programs sponsored by our K-12 schools and institutions of higher education. Study abroad programs offer our students tremendous opportunities to broaden their world views, step outside their comfort zones, and experience personal growth. At the same time, study abroad trips involve a certain amount of risk. We must ensure that our students and their families have relevant information about safety concerns to inform their decisions about where to study and what to do when dangerous circumstances arise. Further, we must have clear safety guidelines for study abroad programs, especially in countries where the U.S. Department of State has active warnings and where U.S. Fulbright Program participants are not permitted to remain.

We urge you to take steps to ensure that K-12 and postsecondary education institutions whose students participate in study abroad programs are informing their students about safety and security concerns related to studying abroad, and providing oversight to the programs and locations where their students are studying.

More than 280,000 U.S. citizens studied abroad for postsecondary education in 2012 and received academic credit. Data are limited on the number of K-12 students who study abroad. It is estimated that hundreds of U.S. students have lost their lives while studying abroad over the past fifteen years, but data on this subject are limited, as well. Privately operated and school-sponsored study abroad programs have disparate guidelines regarding the safety and protection of students traveling abroad. These disparate guidelines can result in a lack of communication with students and families regarding issues of safety in foreign countries.

The Department of State has guidelines for participants in State Department-sponsored academic exchange programs regarding relocation or evacuation when conditions become unsafe. However, there is no link between these guidelines and those of privately-operated or school-sponsored study abroad programs. Students participating in privately-operated and school- or university-sponsored programs can study in countries where the U.S. Department of State does not even permit family members to accompany American embassy staff. If certain countries are not safe enough for family members of American embassy staff, who are often behind walls and gates, then students from our K-12 and postsecondary institutions are certainly at risk.

We recommend the following four actions to better inform students and their families about safety concerns when studying abroad:

1. Develop a mechanism within the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for students who intend to study abroad to sign up for the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) operated by the Department of State;
2. Direct K-12 and postsecondary institutions that receive Federal financial assistance and that offer study abroad programs or accept academic credit from study abroad programs, including third-party organizations, to encourage students who study abroad to sign up for the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP);
3. Provide relevant, up-to-date, and readily available information on the website of the U.S. Department of Education regarding student safety concerns while studying abroad as well as information about, a link to, and advisement to sign up for the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP); and
4. Develop guidelines for K-12 and postsecondary institutions to ensure that the programs for which they accept credit or affiliate with follow the same or more stringent safety guidelines as those sponsored by the State Department, such as the Fulbright Program.

We must do everything we can to ensure that our students have the information they need to stay safe when studying abroad. We urge you to take the steps listed above to provide critical information to students and their parents, and we thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Kirsten Gillibrand
Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Al Franken
Al Franken
United States Senator



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator