Planning a Return to Short-term Group Travel

COVID Considerations

The following guidelines, posed mostly in the form of questions, are designed to help trip leaders, advisors and sponsors determine whether or not group travel is feasible in light of their planned activities, risk tolerance and finances. This document will be updated regularly to align with emerging best practices in COVID risk mitigation and exposure/infection management. If the trip moves forward, trip leaders / advisers will be required to answer the questions in italics as part of the Risk Management plan included in the International Travel Registry. Refer to COVID-19 Travel Considerations for additional links and resources.

GeoBlue health insurance is required for all travelers. Before working through these guidelines, review our GeoBlue for Students and GeoBlue for Employees benefits in full. Coverage related to COVID are highlighted below.

GeoBlue benefits related to COVID

- Testing: Once abroad, symptomatic testing, tests prescribed by a doctor, or asymptomatic testing due to a close contact reporting positive are all covered directly or by reimbursement, if not covered by the local health authority
- Treatment: All healthcare expenses associated with a COVID diagnosis are covered directly or by reimbursement, if not covered by the local health authority
- Evacuation: COVID-related evacuations are covered, but must be deemed “medically necessary” by the treating authority (not one’s personal physician back home)
- See Travel Health for more information

GeoBlue does not cover the costs for

- Asymptomatic quarantine or quarantine for mild illness
- Testing required for travel

Evaluate the destination-specific Entry / Exit requirements & Consular Support:

1. Is the destination open to non-resident / non-citizen travelers?
2. If the destination requires proof of vaccination for entry, what vaccines are acceptable / not acceptable? If working with a third-party provider, do they require proof of vaccination? What forms of proof are acceptable in locations requiring proof of vaccine (electronic, paper, copy, etc.)?
3. Can the group get there / get back without engaging in an onerous, burdensome, or expensive visa application process?
4. Do travelers need to download and engage with an airline or host government app to share vaccination status, test results or other pre-departure requirements to gain entry to the country and / or other facilities, such as museums, grocery stores, restaurants, etc.?
5. What are the current airline and destination pre-departure COVID-testing requirements, including type of test and timing of test, regardless of vaccination status?

6. For the return trip, the CDC requires all travelers returning to the U.S. (including U.S. citizens) to present a negative COVID-19 test within 3 calendar days of departure or proof of recovery from the virus within the last 90 days. Identify the testing resources available to comply with airline or U.S. entry requirements. What is the cost for such tests?

7. What is the operational status of the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate in all countries under consideration?

Conduct a COVID Risk Assessment:

1. What is the current CDC COVID-19 level for your trip destination?
2. What is the vaccination rate of the destination? If under 30%, what is the projection for the travel time frame proposed? Use Reuter’s COVID Vaccination Tracker for best data.
3. What are the COVID-risk mitigation measures in place at the proposed destination(s)? Are these more or less strict than Northwestern / Illinois? How will the group maintain compliance?
4. Could our traveler be adequately cared for if they experienced a non-COVID health emergency?
5. Would the group be participating in on-site activities that may increase risk (such as visiting elementary schools or health care settings)?
6. What resources will you monitor to stay abreast of local conditions?
7. Have you confirmed with local partner(s) that you will be able to conduct activities as planned?

Short Travel Planning Complications Associated with Positive Test Results

1. What is your plan if a traveler tests positive as part of their pre-departure requirements and is thus barred from boarding aircraft at the start of the trip? Will they re-test and join the group later or abandon the trip. Anticipate expectations for a full refund, which may not be possible.
2. What is your plan if a traveler tests positive on arrival or during the trip, which will likely, result in mandatory quarantine and follow-up testing? Who will pay for various costs not covered by GeoBlue insurance?
3. What is your plan if the traveler tests positive at the end of the trip resulting in mandatory quarantine and a delayed departure? Will someone stay behind to support the traveler?
4. What is your plan if one or both trip leaders test positive for COVID?
5. How will the traveler(s), now separated from the group, be supported, academically, socially, medically, logistically? If they are “sprung” within a few days and the group has moved on to another location, how will the separated traveler(s) join up?
6. How will planning change if the traveler(s) has serious symptoms?
7. What if a traveler learns that a close contact at home has tested positive, and their program roommate no longer wishes to share a room with them even though they tested negative? Will the program cover the costs of a single room for both?

Financial Contingency Planning (including H&S Emergencies)

1. What financial resources are available from the sponsoring school, unit or department to cover a last-minute change-of-plans that impact the entire group?
2. Will you consider asking travelers to purchase trip interruption or cancellation insurance?
Group Travel Planning Tips

Pre-departure planning

- If traveling to a lower-resourced country, investigate the operational status of healthcare using the IHME COVID19 projections, especially the “hospital resource use” data. If concerned that a traveler will divert limited resources away from local residents or if inadequate health resources may impact your travelers, contact Beth Osterlund (graduate trips) or Pat Maloney (undergraduate trips) to assist with further research using our security assistance or health insurance provider.
- Clearly set COVID expectations and limitations in-advance through orientations and presentations (sharing protocol can help travelers feel more comfortable, knowing their classmates are being held to certain expectations).
- Consider scheduling the return a few days in advance of classes starting on campus to accommodate any short-term delays associated with testing.

Proof of vaccination, passports & visas

- If the destination(s) requires proof of vaccine, provide travelers with a list of approved types, so they can confirm entry eligibility – you cannot ask for this information.
- While U.S. passport holders don’t typically need visas for short-term trips, other nationalities may need one and processing times make be longer than in the past.

Financial Planning

- Create a small “emergency fund” to support students who may experience some financial hardship during unexpected, even short-term, quarantine to cover food, toiletries, etc.

Insurance

- Explore the value / feasibility of asking travelers to purchase (or provide) a Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) policy.
- Consider tacking on 2-3 extra days of GeoBlue coverage in the case of a departure delay, or have confirmed plans / process to extend coverage for affected individuals.
- If students are traveling independently before or after the group trip, they can extend their NU GeoBlue coverage for a week before or after the trip. If traveling for longer, they should purchase a GeoBlue commercial product.
- Work with Beth Osterlund in OGSS to consider how various coverages may or may not apply for travelers who are not member of the Northwestern community, or employees who do not fall under GeoBlue’s eligibility criteria.

Support for COVID-positive travelers

- Use the U.S. DOS website COVID-19 Country-Specific information to find local testing resources.
• Work with partners on-site to obtain or encourage travelers to bring at-home tests to accommodate symptomatic travelers when testing sights are closed or appointments unavailable.
• Consider working with a third-party provider or partner with staff living permanently in the host destination to help stay abreast of local conditions and give support to students who test positive and need to quarantine beyond end of program.
• Ask the trip leader or local contact to identify the food delivery apps (that accept foreign credit cards) and testing facilities/process in advance so that if a traveler tests positive, the information is already known.
• Consider assigning and training a peer leader from among the students to assist if a faculty or staff trip leader(s) becomes ill.
• Assign someone to serve as the support contact for an individual(s) who test positive in case of mental health/isolation concerns.

Unvaccinated Travelers
In alignment with university policy, all members of the Northwestern community (students, faculty and staff) are expected to follow University guidance on vaccinations, which are required for all community members with limited exceptions, prior to commencing any university-affiliated travel.

The CDC strongly recommends postponing international travel until fully vaccinated. Travel will increase one’s exposure to the COVID-19 and may result in severe illness, resulting in separation from the group and a delayed return to the U.S (or one’s country of residence). Furthermore, an increasing number of countries may not admit travelers without proof of an approved COVID-19 vaccination. It is up to the traveler to determine whether they can access their planned destination. Furthermore, vendors and activity venues may have their own requirements which may be stricter than NU and the local destination. Students granted vaccine exceptions by the university may not be able to participate fully in all activities. Northwestern students, faculty and staff cannot ask prospective or confirmed travelers about their vaccination status.

Countries permitted travel by unvaccinated travelers will likely require pre- and post- negative COVID tests, quarantine upon arrival for up to 21 days, mask-wearing, social distancing and periodic testing while abroad, all of which can interfere with one’s ability to engage in group activities.

Schools, units or departments where international group travel is an integral part of the curriculum should consider offering U.S.-based alternatives to those unable to travel abroad. If unvaccinated community members do participate, such travelers should plan carefully in order to adhere to numerous requirements and expectations, including additional costs. Furthermore, Northwestern may require such individuals to undergo testing during and after the trip. Contact the OGSS for more details.

Travel Registry Risk Management Plan
As mentioned earlier, if the trip moves forward, trip leaders / advisers will be required to answer the questions in italics as part of the Risk Management Plan included in the International Travel Registry. Contact OGSS to move forward with the registration process.