

Borders or Barriers? Why Suspending Youth Travel Jeopardizes Cultural Understanding and Impacts Future Generations

As CEO of the Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA) and the SYTA Youth Foundation (SYF), I have spent my career advocating for the transformative power of travel for young people. I write today out of deep concern prompted by the Girl Guides of Canada's recent, unprecedented decision to suspend all group travel to the United States—directly responding to restrictive policies enacted by the current Trump administration.

This move, effective beginning September 1, comes because of growing uncertainty at the border, heightened by expanded travel bans and immigration rules that now impact citizens from nineteen countries. The Girl Guides' principled stance is rooted in their commitment to inclusivity and safety for all members—some of whom may hold citizenship from “non-Canadian” countries and face new barriers at the U.S. border. We understand that concern.

However, lost in this decision are the lasting, perhaps unintended, consequences for the youth these organizations serve. Recent studies show that risk perceptions—whether about health, safety, or cultural acceptance—start early and are deeply influential. When barriers to travel are raised in formative years, young people may internalize not just a fear of difference, but a belief that borders are walls, not bridges. These persistent anxieties can last a lifetime, influencing future travel and collaboration, and, in the case of these youth, sowing seeds of mistrust between Canadians and Americans during years when openness, not suspicion, ought to be cultivated.

Travel for young people is far more than a vacation—it's education in motion, a bridge between cultures, communities, and minds. Experiences gained on international excursions can expand a young person's worldview, cultivate empathy, and seed lifelong relationships that transcend politics. In fact, SYTA's own research—based on data from thousands of teachers and students—demonstrates that travel provides hands-on cultural learning, accelerates personal growth, and deeply enhances academic and social development in ways no classroom or online module could ever replicate.

When a Girl Guide from British Columbia visits a school in Ohio, she isn't just sight-seeing. She's building connections, sharing perspectives, and, perhaps most importantly, confronting and overcoming preconceptions. These opportunities to interact—face-to-face, heart-to-heart—lay the groundwork for mutual understanding and respect between future leaders of both countries.

When youth are denied these experiences due to the politics of adults, we risk cultivating generations who see their neighbors as “others.” We inadvertently foster negative perceptions of U.S. students and their culture—not through direct interaction, but through absence and imagined distance. By removing opportunities for travel, we forgo the invaluable chance for Canadian youth to see the diversity, optimism, and kindness that are so often found in American classrooms, homes, and hearts. And vice versa – we are denying American youth the opportunity to welcome their Canadian neighbors, learn their culture and keep dialog and relationships between them alive and positive.

Through SYTA, we have seen firsthand how imperative it is to keep dialogue open, borders welcoming, and travel accessible—especially for youth. When political tensions threaten to close doors, we must, as leaders, work doubly hard to open minds. We urge our public officials to remember that today’s border policy is tomorrow’s international relationship, and the world our young people inherit will be shaped by the bridges—or barriers—we build now.

If Canada and the United States are truly “friends, partners, and allies,” our policies must reflect a commitment to nurturing exchanges that build empathy and understanding at every level—not just for adults, but, most importantly, for youth—the travelers and partners of the future

The Girl Guides’ decision is an act of protection but should also be seen as a wake-up call to policymakers and educators everywhere. Closing borders to young travelers may feel expedient, but the cost is staggering - lost opportunities, hardened perceptions, and diminished goodwill. I urge policymakers, educators, and community leaders in both Canada and the United States to actively protect and expand opportunities for young people to experience other cultures firsthand. Together, let’s build bridges strong enough to carry the aspirations, friendships, and leadership of our next generation. The future of North America—and of global citizenship—depends on it.

Carylann Assante, CAE is the Chief Executive Officer, Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA) SYTA Youth Foundation and a member of the Beyond Borders Tourism Coalition