

# **PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS**

## **SEMESTER AT SEA PR PROPOSAL**



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## **DEFINING THE PROBLEM**

### **1. The Problem, Concern or Opportunity**

Semester at Sea (SAS) needs to reinvent their image in order to bring their academic success to light. SAS has been devoted to student success since their first voyage. This floating university has educated students using the globe as their classroom, giving them a unique, culture-rich education that has yet to be matched by on-land universities. By bringing together students from all over the world, SAS has provided their students with rare opportunity of exposure to new ideas and perspectives scattered amongst the diverse onboard community. Additionally, the 7 core values held high by the Institute for Shipboard Education further confirms the true commitment that SAS has to offer their students-- global engagement, academic quality, health and safety, commitment, integrity, diversity, and organizational excellence. SAS wants to foster the education of students truly prepared and eager to become leaders of the world by incorporating their university education with global knowledge and cultural awareness. The students make up the program, and it is through them that SAS' public image is built.

To cast SAS' net into a sea of dedicated, hardworking students, the party boat image must be shed. There is a deep relationship between the students involved with the organization and the image SAS holds with the public. SAS needs to be associated more with educational excellence, rather than a booze cruise. SAS need to tighten the reigns on the application process, as well as the onboard rules, to further ensure the students coming aboard are devoted to their success. The mission of student success can only be obtained through mutual efforts by the student as well as the education provider. SAS' image is primarily threatened by the students who choose not to take full advantage of the opportunities SAS provides. To fully reinvent the SAS image, it must be confirmed that the students hold their educational integrity high, bringing the focus to its backbone: quality college education provided in the ultimate classroom, weaving together classroom academics and real-world experience.

### **2. Situational Analysis (Internal and External)**

### *A. Strengths*

Semester at Sea offers students a once in a lifetime opportunity to study abroad in multiple countries. Students are able to take classes on a floating classroom from prize-winning faculty while experiencing so many different parts of the world. SAS works just like any other study abroad experience, where a student is able to transfer these credits back to their home campus. This prestigious opportunity is something that students will appreciate for the rest of their lives.

### *B. Weaknesses*

SAS is one of the best ways to broaden and enlighten a participant's individuality and enhance their learning skills. Although this is one of the best ways to also brighten student's people skills for the future, there are some "downfalls" that may come up that might push away people from joining. One of the weaknesses that SAS have encountered are financial budgets and requirements. The number one problem SAS seems to face currently, is the "party boat" or "booze cruise" image. In a variety of ways, this experience is what one makes of it.

### *C. Opportunities*

SAS provides a great amount of opportunities that other study abroad programs can't offer. For example, a student is not just stuck at one place when they are studying abroad. SAS provides the opportunity to go to multiple countries in just one semester. A participant is able to stop at different ports and interact with many other cultures and communities. Being on a ship, students are in an environment where they are closer with each other. This allows one to have greater connections and interactions with fellow students and professors and enables greater connections and relationships that can last a lifetime.

### *D. Threats*

Like many organizations, SAS has a few threats, the biggest being its reputation and party boat image. Thankfully, there have been very few official articles (aside from blog posts) that publish any definitive proof of SAS living up to its party boat reputation. However, there are a couple negative open forums, stories and nicknames that are associated with the cruise ship. These often reinforce this negative imagery that parents cannot shake off. SAS is doing its best to prevent any misconduct from happening so as to shed its negative image. There has been a point system installed that reinforces the “no alcohol” rule and other rules of conduct to students onboard. Some SAS students’ blogs discredit the party image, which helps to a lesser degree.

### 3. The Problem Statement

People view SAS as a “Party Boat” when in reality it is an organization for expanding cultural education amongst college students. SAS is a nonprofit organization that takes students on a voyage around the world. This organization challenges students to go beyond their comfort zone to explore different cultures as well as broaden their individuality. SAS is dedicated to every student’s success and expands global understanding necessary to address the challenges of our interdependent world. Students who voyage with SAS not only gain experience from exploring the world, but the education that is offered to them on ship. These classes that are provided for students on board are transferable back to their universities. Despite the educational opportunity this voyage offers, it has an undeserved reputation as a party boat. Some have even gone as far as calling it as the “booze cruise.”

## **PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING**

### 1. Program Goal Statement

The main goal in this proposal is to change the public opinion of SAS. It is always difficult to change public opinion and takes much time. In entirety, it would take approximately one year to fulfill the entire process. A good way to start would be to create a social media campaign. Currently, SAS has approximately 7,000 Instagram followers, 2,000 Twitter followers, and 41,000 Facebook likes. These numbers need to increase to create an impact. SAS

needs to work on gaining more followers and posting more often. All posts must be very positive and professional. For example, creating a “Spotlight Sunday” where one student on-board is quickly profiled and quoted to prove how serious of an organization SAS is. SAS also needs to create a stricter application process. This would be done during the application process and when screening possible applicants. The 10 point rulings need to be very publicized so that it becomes common knowledge that SAS has this strict rule. SAS should have all students keep an online blog during their time on board. SAS would be able to pick and choose which student’s blogs are very professional and put SAS in a positive light and then create a link on the SAS website. SAS needs to do a better job of reaching out to local journalists to reinforce positive stories. Their goal should be to reach out once a month and hope to be picked once every two or three months. It would be very good if these stories were published so that regular people became more familiar with SAS. One example of a positive story for hopeful publishing would be when the two Indian sisters in poverty were awarded with financial scholarships to attend SAS. There should be alumni testimonies posted on the blog at the end of every voyage. Another important thing would be for student/ adult representatives to meet with students at study abroad offices when a student is interested in attending SAS. These representatives would be able to stress that this is a very prestigious and serious program to students. This would hopefully weed out students that would not take this opportunity seriously. This is a lot of long-term work, but that is how the re-branding would be solved.

## 2. Target Publics

### *A. Parents and Grandparents*

- Nontraditional: Parents and grandparents are nontraditional because child/grandparents could have been on SAS before.
- Latent: They are latent because they don’t have first hand experience being on the SAS boat.
- Non-intervening: Non-intervening because parents and grandparents are not the target to get on the SAS boat.

- Secondary: Parents and Grandparents they aren't the one wanting to go on the boat, but they would need to help their son or daughter financially so they can attend SAS.
- External: Parents and grandparents do not work on the boat or for SAS.

We would need parents and grandparents to have a full understanding of what SAS is and how prestigious of a program it is. It needs to be common knowledge that SAS is an academic program that their child/ grandchild would gain great knowledge from. These parents/ grandparents are potentially paying for their child to attend SAS and we would need them to approve of the program in itself.

### *B. Alumni Students*

- Secondary: Alumni students are secondary because they been on SAS in the past.
- Domestic: Domestic because they can share with their friends and other college colleagues about life on SAS.
- Active: They are active because they know what happens on the boat. They know the daily routine of the boat.
- External: Alumni students are external because they don't work on the boat they were just there for a short period of time.
- Traditional: Alumni students have been associated with SAS for a long time. Since they belong to the alumni group SAS keeps in contact with them.
- Intervening: Alumni are intervening because they can share the experiences.

The information we need from the alumni students are their testimonies. How they felt about SAS for example, what did they like about it and what they didn't like about it. Also, ask them if they really do think the SAS boat is a party boat. I would like to get connected with alumni students by emails, also by emailing them a survey, asking to give us feedback on their experience. I would persuade the alumni students with foot in the door technique, also with door in the face technique as well.

### *C. Study Abroad Offices*

- Non- traditional: Student abroad offices they are non- traditional because they have direct access to the students and the teachers and they are willing to pass along the message.
- Latent: Study abroad offices are latent because they just pass on the information that SAS gives to them to hand out to potential students that want to go on SAS.
- Intervening: They are intervening because they are relay the message to students and teachers.
- Secondary: They are secondary because study abroad offices can't promote students to go on SAS but they just give them information.
- External: They are external because they don't work for SAS but they help SAS recruit students.
- International: Study abroad officers are international because SAS tries to promotes students around the world to join SAS for the study abroad trip.

It is important to target study abroad offices because they have direct access to students and teachers. Teachers are also messengers because they could pass along information to their students. Hopefully, SAS can set up meetings through study abroad offices to screen and inform students. Study abroad offices would be able to help provide SAS with demographics of students and teachers and the current opinions of SAS by their university. SAS would be able to be in contact with study abroad offices through email, telephone, and meetings. It would be very beneficial to give study abroad offices brochures on SAS that clearly state all the rules on the ship. It is important to widely educate students on the point system and stress that SAS is a serious company.

### *D. Press*



- Traditional: We would want to have a traditional relationship with journalists that publish stories of SAS in a positive light.
- Latent: It would be more beneficial if SAS had a positive latent relationship with the press.
- Intervening: The press passes along the message from SAS or about SAS to other publics.
- Secondary: The press has minimal capacity to affect an organization's ability to achieve its goal.
- External: The press is not a part of SAS' organization so it is external.
- Domestic: Most contacts with the press are going to be made in the United States because that is where SAS is located.

We believe this public is important because they share their thoughts, opinions, quotes, and multiple sources of information on the given subject. In addition to this, they are an intervening public, which means all of what they record and publish is shared with the general population, which can formulate opinions of individuals who have yet to be part of the issue at hand. We would need any journalist that may or may not have a good report with a member of the SAS organization. The statistics of their readers/viewers/general audience would help gauge if we would want to work with them. Emailing professional journalists and keeping in contact with ones that publish stories would be very important to keep in communication with. The main goal is to persuade journalists to write a positive image review about SAS.

## 6. Objectives

In order to shed the party boat image that has been associated with Semester at Sea, SAS must reinvent their image to the public. Academically devoted students must be recruited. In order to ensure only educationally passionate students are admitted, the GPA requirement in the application process must be raised from 2.75 to 3.0. Additionally, SAS alum must be willing to

give positive testimonials, vouching for their culturally and educationally rich experiences that SAS has provided. This will bring SAS' academic focus to light, as well as the future successes that their students have went on to have. SAS must also have a strong presence in various study abroad offices, in order to directly reach students on their campuses. It is also vital to reach out to the public through journalists and social media. This can be made possible by advertising important SAS events and dates through social media (i.e. tweeting, tagging pictures, etc.), as well as student success stories. The point policy onboard must also be brought to the public's attention so that the seriousness of the program is not questioned. By reaching out to social media as well as SAS' internal community, the SAS image can be successfully rebranded.

#### 7. Action Strategy and Tactics

The SAS program should be adequately exposed on the Study Abroad website through the universities. Brochures should be made available at the offices and posted on boards outside of the office throughout campuses. The brochures should have bullet points and direct the readers back to the website. Social media portals should also be used to bring great awareness and participation.

The information available should include the time frame of the trip, necessary passports, and cost of the trip. A list of behavioral expectations and guidelines with possible consequences should be noted. A link to the behavior point system should be included. Staff, teachers, and mentors should be introduced along with their expectations and goals of the program.

A list of the subjects available for study should be included. Expectations of what a student could find during the voyage both on and off board should also be included in the brochures.

#### 8. Communication Strategy and Tactics

Semester At Sea is a program that can strive to have a well pronounced way of communicating. Being able to communicate to others such as people who are unaware of this voyage will have them be more informed about what Semester At Sea is all about. The target public for Semester At Sea are the study abroad offices in every college campus. To best reach the study abroad offices, we should well inform them through brochures, emails, and customize a mailing list for college campus' to keep them updated of any information of Semester At Sea. Being able to continuously inform the study abroad offices means that there is a higher chance of students, as well as parents, being best informed about the program. Another strategy through the study abroad offices on campus is to suggest them to advertise Semester At Sea and to broaden everyone's idea of types of study abroad programs. To be able to communicate and achieve the goal of altering the idea of the "Party Boat" image of Semester At Sea, SAS needs to provide the facts and make it a huge fact that there are rules and regulations every student must follow upon entering the ship. Making note of the 10 point ruling system is one of the greatest ways to inform the public about how serious this study abroad program is. To accomplish such a goal, we have provided the idea that emails, brochures, and mailing lists is one of the best ways to achieving this goal. Along side this plan, we suggest the idea of enhancing and collectively getting more followers on Instagram and Twitter, and more likes on Facebook. Using these sources will be the best way in reaching out to potential students as well because social media is a fast growing and developing community. Another idea with social media is having the school's Facebook, website (and study abroad website), and instagram follow SAS through it's journey and advertise it through those medias. The budget implemented within this program has accumulated to being a low budget process. Using social media sites are free and the only cost that may come up is through the cost of the brochures.

### **Taking Action and Communicating**

#### **1. Coordinating Action and Communication**

To successfully shift the SAS image in the public eye, all organizational actions must be consistent with the 12 -month process and all internal members must follow through with the discussed strategies and tactics. The main goal of SAS' new image is to highlight both their

unwavering focus on student success and their unique, worldly education to the public. It is important all actions in accordance with the rebranding process coincide with what SAS must bring into the public eye. Looking over the process, it seems all plans of rebranding are well-focused on bettering SAS' public image, as well as incorporating real-life SAS student experiences with it. SAS is starting off well with incorporating their early actions into the long-term goal. However, the process needs to move faster. For instance, social media campaigns are fairly easy and can be followed through with at any point in time. Additionally, SAS may want to consider publicizing their academic policies as soon as possible. (i.e. GPA requirement and point system). Regardless, SAS' overall plan seems to be in line with their organizational mission, as well as the purpose of rebranding. Their early actions seem promising to fulfill the reimagining goal, but they must go through their process more quickly.

## 2. Program Implementation Plans

The overall main goal of this proposal is to change the public opinion of SAS. Rebranding a company is difficult task and takes a lot of time. For SAS there are a couple crucial steps that have been well thought out and are shown below.

**Social Media Campaign:** SAS' social media presence needs to increase in order to create an impact. Targeting current college students that are interested in studying abroad would be a positive way to increase internet popularity. Posting more often on these sites (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) would be important. These posts must be very positive and professional. For example, creating a "Spotlight Sunday" where one student on-board is quickly profiled and quoted to prove how serious of an organization SAS is. It would be smart to advertise important SAS events and dates through social media (i.e. tweeting, tagging pictures, etc.) SAS should require that all on board need to create and upkeep a blog. SAS would be able to screen these blogs and post them on the blog at the end of every voyage. This is something that would need to be implemented as soon as possible and be kept up throughout the years.

**Application Process:** A stricter application process is needed for SAS. It would help screen applicants to make sure that they are up to SAS' guidelines. Academically devoted students

must be recruited. In order to ensure only educationally passionate students are admitted, the GPA requirement in the application process must be raised from 2.75 to 3.0. The 10 point rulings need to be very publicized so that it becomes common knowledge that SAS has this strict rule. The point policy onboard must also be brought to the public's attention so that the seriousness of the program is not questioned. Additionally, SAS alum must be willing to give positive testimonies, vouching for their culturally and educationally rich experiences that SAS has provided. This will bring SAS' academic focus to light, as well as the future successes that their students have went on to have. This would be implemented during the entire application process and kept up for future semesters.

**Press:** SAS must reach out to local journalists to reinforce positive stories on a more regular basis. Their goal should be to reach out once a month and hope to be picked once every two or three months. It would be very good if these stories were published so that regular people became more familiar with SAS and the great company it is. One example of a positive story for hopeful publishing would be when the two Indian sisters in poverty were awarded with financial scholarships to attend SAS.

**Study Abroad Offices:** Reaching out to study abroad offices and having good relations with them is very important. This is how the message of SAS is passed along to students and professors. Representatives could be sent out to meet with study abroad offices and have meetings with students interested in attending SAS. These representatives would be able to stress that this is a very prestigious and serious program to students. This would hopefully weed out students that would not take this opportunity seriously. The SAS program should be adequately exposed on the study abroad website through the universities. Brochures should be made available at the offices and posted on boards outside of the office throughout campuses. The brochures should have bullet points and direct the readers back to the website. These are all steps that would be made throughout the entire semester, but focuses during the time that students recruitment is happening for study abroad.

These steps are all very necessary to be made to change the public opinion of SAS. After these main steps are taken, change will be made through word of mouth. It will become common knowledge that SAS is a very serious and prestigious company.

Each of these steps should have their own director that focuses on them to make sure that they are being carried out to the full extent. If these steps are not kept up, it is possible that there will be no change in public opinion. Overall, these steps will take one year to implement, but after that year it is important to follow through with these new plans.

## **Evaluating the Program**

### **1. Evaluation Plans**

SAS' 12-month process will be internally evaluated for effectiveness as well as its success in fulfilling their plan's goal of rebranding the organization. The most vital part of the process is student quality. Over the course of the application process, applicants will be examined by the SAS administration office and their quality will be determined by their academic profile, as well as the way they present themselves through their personal essay. Letters of recommendation, which will be made into a requirement, will also help administrators gauge the quality of the applicant. With higher quality students applying, it will be further confirmed that the internal process is effective in getting more serious students to apply. During the voyage, the number of students being kicked off will be recorded. A lower number of students sent home will also prove that the stricter application process is effective. As far as the social media campaign is concerned, a greater influx of followers on any social media platform will prove that the public eye is not only aware of SAS, but they also take SAS seriously and are interested in what it has to offer.

### **2. Feedback and Program Adjustment**

After the 12-month program, all feedback will be measured through careful and periodical observation. By examining the change in social media followers (steep decrease or

increase after and throughout the year-long period). The measurement of student quality will take place during the application process as well as during the semester-long trip. During the application process, students' academic profiles will be examined to see if a change in regards to applicants has occurred. For example, if there is an increase in students with higher GPAs applying to the SAS program, it will be evident that the process was successfully executed. Additionally, if less students are removed off the boat during the trip, we would have evidence that student quality has visibly improved. Hard copies and e-mail check-ins will be sent to management to keep them updated on the process . Should the feedback not be as strong or as positive as expected, SAS can decide what to do when the time comes. As the process goes, any and all changes and suggestions will be shared with SAS.

## **Appendix**

### Appendix A: *Press Release*

#### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**



#### **Semester at Sea Students to Sail in More Ambitious Waters**

Charlottesville, VA, United States. March 9, 2015 – Semester at Sea has been dedicated to students' success and is taking strides to tighten the reigns when it comes to the application process. The SAS admissions office has announced their decision to increase the minimum GPA requirement for students planning to join their program, starting in the Fall 2015 semester. With a higher GPA requirement for incoming applicants and a stricter application process, SAS will ensure that only students dedicated to learning will be brought aboard their ship.

SAS has been facing backfire from a circulating "party boat" reputation. To assure prospective students and their parents that "comparative global education" remains the heart of their vision statement, the organization will be shifting their GPA minimum from a 2.75 to a 3.0.

By increasing their minimum GPA requirement, the likelihood of educationally-nonchalant students coming aboard the SAS cruise ship will decrease. Students already meeting the new GPA requirement will have proven that they take academics seriously and are mature enough to use the world as their classroom

The self-proclaimed "floating university" has been doing what they can to provide the global education they promise their students. "While this may seem like a long vacation, Semester at Sea isn't all play. The program requires students to take a minimum of 12 credits during their study," writes Chelsea Dudek in her article, "Semester at Sea Gives Global Perspective" for the finance advising site, Young Money. They also make it easy for students to transfer their credits to their colleges and easy to fit into 4 years of college—"[SAS] offers the course requirements you need for your major."

SAS's site publicizes their commitment to student success, and so do their students. "You'll find the emphasis of Semester at Sea isn't on binge drinking but binge learning. While a select few treat SAS like a traveling party, the vast majority of students have other priorities in mind," recalls Lindsay Clark of NoMadderWhere.com. Another student blogger simply known as "Beth" says, "I think SAS has a reputation for being a party boat that lacks educational value. I'm here to disprove that. I learned so much this past semester. I've always been told that the world is my classroom. Never has that been more true."

Despite the reassuring words and memories of SAS students, some still doubt the organization's credibility. An SAS alum admits that the partying is inevitable. "You put 800 college students on a boat sailing around the world and they are going to party. There are a lot of people on the ship who party so much they sacrifice their cultural experience." On an open forum, two anonymous commenters reiterated SAS's "booze cruise" and "floating mattress" reputations. These negative connotations with SAS are another part of why they are making their application process stricter.


Visit [semesteratsea.org](http://semesteratsea.org) or contact the SAS Office of Admission at 1.800.854.0195 or [admission@semesteratsea.org](mailto:admission@semesteratsea.org) to learn more about the Semester at Sea program.

###




Appendix B: *Brochure*

MISSION STATEMENT:  
To educate students with the global understanding necessary to address the challenges of our interdependent world. With the world as our classroom, our unique shipboard program integrates multiple-country study, interdisciplinary coursework, and hands-on field experiences for meaningful engagement in the global community.




**SEMESTER AT SEA**



Our mission, vision, strategy, and core values are rooted in student success and global comparative education. We take pride in our participants' achievements, spanning back to our first voyage in 1963.


SEMESTER AT SEA  
Charlottesville, VA 22904-4885  
(800)854-0195

SEMESTER AT SEA



SEMESTER AT SEA®

"To be the leader in comparative global education."



## HISTORY

1926: First around-the-world voyage led by Prof. James Edwin Lough of NYU.

1977: First Semester at Sea (SAS) voyage is launched aboard the SS Universe. The University of Colorado-Boulder named academic sponsor.

1981: The University of Pittsburgh assumes academic sponsorship.

1988: Students meet Presidents Mikhail Gorbachev (USSR) and Corason Aquino (Philippines).

1992: Students meet Mother Teresa.

1994: SS Universe is the first ship of U.S. passengers to visit Vietnam after the U.S. embargo is lifted.

1999: First trip to Havana, Cuba, where Cuban President Fidel Castro met with students.

2000: First SAS summer voyage.

2005: University of Virginia becomes new academic sponsor.

2009: SAS celebrates 100th voyage.

2015: Colorado State: Fort Collins becomes new academic sponsor.

## SEMESTER AT SEA

"While discussing our differences, we have often come to realize that we in fact have more in common than we were aware of, as we all left our homes and comfort zones to join this community of foreigners. For me, this is what makes Semester at Sea the experience of a lifetime." -Juliette Chevalier



### ACADEMICS:

While discovering the world, our students are able to take a full class load (transferable credits) on our floating university. The faculty on ship are hand-selected to make sure they are up to Colorado State University's high academic standard. Students have a once in a lifetime opportunity to learn not only from our nationally renowned faculty, but also from off board experiences.



Colorado State University:  
Fort Collins



Gathering of students and  
faculty.

### STUDENT LIFE:

Students are able to have a room on ship to retire to at the end of their long day of exploring. There are many extracurricular activities for students to participate in during their days at sea. Some of these activities are intramural tournaments, group exercise, game clubs, musical and theater groups, and many more. There is an on-ship student support staff that focuses on well-being.



Students participating in a  
volleyball tournament.



Students creating bonds  
while working together.

### PROGRAMS:

There are many programs that Semester at Sea offers. There are innovative and specialized voyage programs, a Lifelong Learning Program for adults, and Enrichment Voyages for learners of all ages. Some programs offered are Social EntrepreneurSHIP, Presidential Scholars Programs, and World Change.



Lifelong Learning Programs



Social EntrepreneurSHIP

# SEMESTER AT SEA

Institute for Shipboard Education



## Meet Nicole! (current student)

Hi, my name is Nicole Pipp and I am a junior on Semester at Sea! My home campus is Sonoma State University. My time at SAS has been incredibly life-changing. I have gotten to experience different cultures and lifestyle. SAS has truly given me a global understanding in their global classroom. (Talk more about specific situations the student has experienced)

## Hey, Parents!

Visit our website to contribute suggestions for our students' success.

<http://www.semesteratsea.org>



## Colorado State University Partnership

After much thought and deliberation, we are proud to announce our new school sponsor, Colorado State University: Fort Collins. Our main goal in choosing a sponsor was to pick a university who shared the same central value as us: our students' success. Colorado State University is as invested in our program and students as we are.

With this major change, there will be many new things coming to Semester at Sea! We will be getting a new boat to sail around the world in. This new boat is an exciting change that our whole organization is looking forward to seeing.

Colorado State University is very serious about our students' success. We are looking to strengthen our policies regarding alcohol and drug abuse. Our current policy is a point system which has been successful and we are planning on reinforcing this system.

With our new partnership, we intend to have an educationally purposeful and disciplined community.



## SEMESTER AT SEA