

Academics at VU Amsterdam

Throughout my life I have had nineteen “first days” of school. Starting from my first day of preschool in September of 1998 up until this past September of 2016. Some were milestones: the first day of kindergarten, the first day of high school, the first day of college, and the most meaningful one, my first day of school at VU Amsterdam. It was the first time I was starting a new school without knowing a single person, without having any idea how the school system worked, and it was in a brand new country furthermore. I was curious to see what this first day of school had in store for me.

It’s strange because in the United States, I am referred to as a senior (4th year) psychology major in college. I have worked my way up the totem poll of being a wimpy first year to a bold, knowledgeable senior who wants to be a therapist. At my home university I would’ve been in very specialized and small classes with professors I have gotten acquainted with over the years in my major, and would’ve known exactly where to go for each of them. Here at VU Amsterdam, I felt like that wimpy first year again. I didn’t know anyone in my classes, I hadn’t heard of any of the professors before, and I couldn’t and still can’t speak the native language. Also, I was pursuing a minor in political science and I certainly had NO idea where I was going on campus.

It takes a lot to intimidate me, but Walking onto VU Amsterdam’s campus that first day was really nerve racking and intimidating. Everyone seemed so put together: people were socializing within their friend groups outside and in the classroom, and everyone was speaking Dutch (obviously). The majority of students in my classes had a background in political science and answered questions confidently in class. I was basically starting fresh, taking



VU campus main building

courses in something I had never learned before academically. I didn’t realize how intimidating it would be being the odd man out since I was never put in that position before. I didn’t take any time to mentally prepare which led me into the five stages of academic grief:

1. **Denial:** I was in denial of the fact that I was one of the few non-Dutch speaking students in my classes and that I knew nothing about political science. I just sat there, kept my mouth shut, and pretended I knew what people were talking about.
2. **Anger:** I got really mad at myself for not trying to learn any Dutch prior to coming to the Netherlands and also for not looking at a campus map before my first day.
3. **Bargaining:** I began bargaining with myself about all of the “what ifs” and “if onlys”. If only I knew the main political theories before starting this course...What if I spoke Dutch so I could communicate more easily with other students...
4. **Sadness:** I was sad that the makeup of my political background was focused on the whole Donald Trump versus Hillary Clinton presidential race.

5. **Acceptance:** A month into my academic life at VU Amsterdam, I finally accepted the fact that I am an international student and these parts of my experience are normal!!



Other than that, the academics at VU Amsterdam have been great! It's been fun to compare the education system here to America's. Overall it's pretty similar with students feverishly copying down notes, enjoying a break halfway through the class, and referencing the many interesting things professors post on Blackboard. The level of academics here seems to be the same as well. Classes are hard of course but they aren't anything a motivated student can't handle. The nicest thing I've noticed about the education system here is that it seems tailored to students of many backgrounds in their specific course, at least in my classes. At first I was really nervous to take political science classes when I have no background in that type of subject matter, but the professors do a great job of allowing everyone to get accustomed to new information. There seems to be both beginners and advanced students in one big lecture hall which has been comforting! The only thing that scares me about school here is that the final grades in my classes are based on one exam score. ONE. That doesn't give me any wiggle room to adjust to the exam formats here, and I won't be able to judge my professors' grading style. Besides that I feel just like the old me that takes notes in sparkly gel pens, makes insane amounts of flash cards, and wants to get good grades so I can get accepted into an awesome master's program. Hopefully that will be my next, and twentieth, first day school!

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