Hi again!

I am back to let you guys know all about academics at Vrije Universiteit and, from my first-hand experience anyway, you will definitely need all the help you can get! Now, before I freak you out, you should know that once you adjust to the Dutch academic system (and with my shared knowledge, I am hopeful that this adjustment will not be as hard!), you will be able to exceed academically during your Semester in Amsterdam, while also, at the same time, having the time of your life. :)

Back home at the University of Denver, I am on the quarter system and usually take four classes per quarter. Here at Vrije Universiteit, though, we have semesters divided into three periods each. For your Semester in Amsterdam, you will likely take classes in two periods, just like I did. Since I am in Amsterdam from mid-August to late-December, I am participating in period 1 (September 2 to October 25) and period 2 (October 28 to December 20). In each of these periods, I am taking two classes at a time. For me, accepting this new academic schedule was hard. Not that I would ever complain about only taking two classes at one time, instead of four like I would regularly, but getting used to the rapid pace of a seven-week class period is a bit tough at first. However, now that I’ve experienced it, I absolutely love it. While classes are taught at a slightly faster pace to make up for how short the periods are, I am finding that I am still able to handle my readings, studying, and time-management much better than back home. Having my focus on only two classes, rather than juggling four, allows me to get the most out of them and truly immerse myself in the subjects.

Besides this difference in the structure of academics at Vrije Universiteit compared to back home, the two biggest challenges have been the way that classes are structured and the way that the grading system works. In most of my classes at the University of Denver, I have regular essays and homework assignments throughout the quarter, and a big final paper or exam to finish the class off with. Here, however, there are much fewer assignments (at least in the classes that I have taken). In my Diversifying Philosophy class, I have three smaller assignments and a big final essay; while this is still a lower load than I would have at DU, there are enough opportunities to raise up your grade. However, in my Robot Law and Artificial Intelligence course, the only grade is a final
exam. This is not at all uncommon at Vrije Universiteit. However, back at DU, this is practically unheard of. Although I attend my lectures regularly and do the assigned readings, it is still unsettling to not know where I stand in my class until exam week. However, while this class structure has led to some elevated stress ahead of my exam, I’ve noticed that throughout the period, I have actually been able to get more out of my class, since I have been focused on actually learning, rather than just getting a good grade.

The grading system here at the VU was also a bit unsettling to me at first. Everything is graded on a scale of 1-10, where a 5.5 and above is a passing grade. However, a common saying here in the Netherlands is, “8 is for the best student, 9 is for the teacher, and 10 is for God.” As a self-proclaimed over-achiever, I hated the idea that it may be virtually impossible for me to get the highest grades during my Semester in Amsterdam. However, just like the class structure I described above, I think that in the end, this grading system is actually preferable for me, since it places even more emphasis on real learning over just getting the perfect grade.

To sum up, the academic system here at the VU is likely very different than the one that you have experienced at your home university. However, just like anything that takes you out of your comfort zone, all it takes is a little time to adjust until you thrive and succeed. In the end, you may find yourself to love the new academic system so much that you are unwilling to go back home…After all, who wants to take four classes at a time when you can take two instead?!

Until next time,
Julia :)

P.S. After weeks of searching around town, my friend and I finally found the IAmsterdam sign – it was in front of the Olympisch Stadion, a.k.a. right under our noses! (Here it is with a bunch of local kids playing on it!) I highly recommend you seek it out when you come to Amsterdam, too :)