**Still life.** Michelle Martin, 4th year occupational therapy student finds the leaves of autumn provide a perfect pastoral setting for study.

Rob Galbraith

# Bell curve blues

**by Keri Kent**

Midterms and termpapers. How many students are aware that the University of Alberta's grading system is not a stanine system, but is much less rigid than that? Understanding the differences between the stanine system and the nine point grading system in use at the University of Alberta will alleviate some of the worry about grades brought on by midterms and termpapers.

The University of Alberta's grading system is as follows: the professor orders the class work from highest to lowest according to the raw scores. Then, the professor applies the qualitative descriptors (9-8 Excellent, 6-7 Good, 4-5 Satisfactory and 1-2-3 Unsatisfactory) to the work based on his or her view of the difficul-

ties of the course/exam, the raw score earned, and each student's overall ability in the course. The professor then ranks the work and assigns grade points. Professors may use this system in two ways: marking, ordering, and ranking each test and assignment or follow the same procedure for the sum of raw scores at the end of the term.

The main advantage of this system over the stanine system is its flexibility; the exact percentage of students in each grade grouping does not have to conform to a theoretical curve.

Grading according to the bell curve is mathematically exact. The curve indicates, at its center, the number of students with average scores. It indicates the progressively fewer students

achieving lower scores on its left slope, and the progressively fewer students achieving higher than average scores on its right slope. Stanine grades demarcate between groups of students' scores. These groups are statistically proven calculations that 68 percent of students will achieve near average marks, 13 percent each above and below average, and less than 5 percent each above and far below average. If the exam or course is unusually difficult and the average is low, say 33 percent, the curve accomodates the difficulty of the test/course; students with 33 percent receive a six where, on another test/course with an average of 60 percent, a score of 33 percent would be a three. Despite this advantage, the bell curve-stanine system has two major drawbacks which the nine point grading system does not. The difference between stanines is an exact mathematical quantity. For instance,

if a seven stanine fell on 85 percent (raw score), a score of 84 percent would be a six. Also, the system doesn't necessarily indicate the students' abilities accurately. The student with 84 percent may actually be doing "good" work, but because the test was slightly more difficult than usual (though not enough to change the usual relationship between raw scores and stanines) he or she only receives a six.

Though the University of Alberta's grading system is less mathematical, it is somewhat more subjective. This subjectivity, however, "works for the student", for the grades reflect the students' abilities. The nine point grading system is producing a more uniform distribution of grades as the General Faculty Council hoped it would when they incorporated it inot University policy in 1966. There is one problem, however: ensuring a consistent interpretation of qualitative descriptors. Though Registrar David Silzer assures students that among professors of the same department the interpretations are uniform, the problem arises between faculties. This is presently being investigated by the Academic Development Committee.

## Candidates debate

responded saying, "it is a luxury item. We are more concerned with basic products."

Students also expressed concern with the Meech Lake Accord and the special clause given to Quebec. A question was asked by a student, "why the natives did not have a similar clause or any other ethnic group?" Both candidates responded by indicating they supported multiculturalism.

The debate was cut short by the insufficient class time. Freeland concluded by reviewing the issues she addressed in her opening statements. The N D Party had five main points on their agenda agenda: opposition to free trade, womens issues, environmental concerns, economic development, and a new Canadian foreign policy which includes the possibility of eventual withdrawal from N A T O.

Thorkelson, however, did not address specific issues but did stress the point of "confidence" in Canadians. The main points of the Progressive Conservative agenda, derived from the leaflet handed out prior to the debate and from parts of his speech, are: an elected Senate, privitization of industry, support of free trade, tax reforms, lessening of standards for industry and security for seniors. No stand was made by either of the candidates on the issue of abortion.
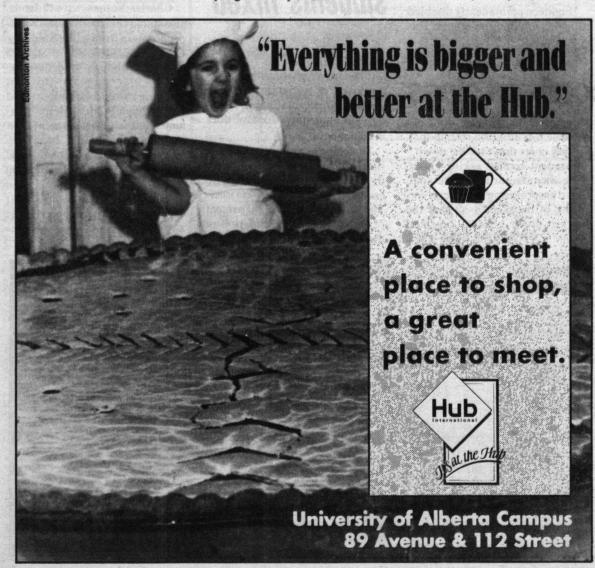
## Correction

In a story from our October 12, 1988 issue, Dr. Jean Lauber's name was spelled incorrectly, and her work was mistakenly referred to as "his". *The Gateway* apologizes for any confusion or embarrassment that may have resulted.