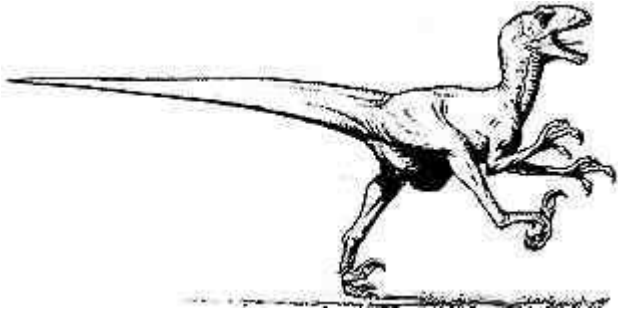


# How to Become a Velociraptor

by Michael Erard

In W.J.T. Mitchell's most recent book, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, he argues that the history of depictions of dinosaurs matches changes in how capitalists organize their money and their workers. His thesis makes sense: we don't know a lot about how dinosaurs looked or behaved, so we fill in the gaps with culturally-based suppositions, some of which have their origins in business. Mitchell, an art historian at the University of Chicago, points out that back when ponderous corporations were considered virtuous, dinosaurs were also envisioned as solid, monolithic, serene, and, importantly, herbivorous. (The Mobil Oil mascot was a brontosaurus.) In our current era of networking, outsourcing, reengineering, downsizing, fast and nimble companies that are "flexible" to the "needs of the market," we prefer our dinosaurs small, fast, smart, running in packs, and bloodthirsty. In retrospect, that cud-chewing Mobil mascot, a corporate logo plastered on its dingy green hide, hollers "EAT ME," while nowadays we clearly prefer the velociraptor *a la* Spielberg.



Not surprisingly, the image of the ideal graduate student has followed the same trajectory as the dinosaur depiction. Until very recently, the prevailing ideology held that excellence at scholarship came if you sacrificed other goals, sublimated desires, and otherwise reneged and eschewed in order to claim one small part of the world as your very own -- and then be prepared to defend your microfiefdom for the rest of your life. You acted like a docile, solitary herbivore. After all, to have the ideal academic career, you specialized; you didn't teach; you didn't apply, imagine, or outreach; you didn't approach the public, and you never went outside. Who had to? As a grad student, your department justifiably put you through apprenticeship hell,

because you'd be awarded a job when it was over. And what a place to get a job: universities were flush, because the higher ed industry (helped by defense research funds) boomed; colleges were run by their faculties, not athletic directors, development professionals, stock portfolio managers, or technology transfer officers, so tenure was secure and a privilege, and the curriculum (not to mention the library) always came first.

If you expect that these rules still hold, you're probably on your way to becoming a fossil fuel.

This is not to say that my degreed, tenured colleagues are all petroleum on the hoof. However, I'm often surprised to hear who ignores the realities of the Job Market. I'm also surprised how the "current state of the Job Market" is a wash-n-wear explanation for what goes wrong in higher ed. In fact, we need to develop a more productive response, one based on individual lives, not a disciplinary monoculture. One based on an individual's ability to adapt, not on conformity to a cult of self-sacrifice. This is what I mean by becoming a velociraptor.

**Velociraptors have mobile organizations.** We have to be flexible, multi-skilled, and interdisciplinary; you can't only be talking to the people who check out the same books, and you have to do it within the time limit unfairly allotted by Texas legislators' dinosaur expectations.

**Velociraptors will change the role of academia in American life.** More graduate programs should follow the lead of the Office of Graduate Studies, which recognizes "success" and "professionalization" in broader and more healthy ways. We shouldn't be unthoughtfully reproducing the system of higher ed in its current form -- graduate school should be a place where students are given the space to innovate and confront conceptual challenges in any arena of work.

**Velociraptors are translators.** Two years ago, our Texas legislature demanded "accountability" from Texas professors, and they instituted post-tenure review to get it. In this new environment, if you're a teacher or researcher, you'll have to spend more time justifying and explaining your work to an increasingly pragmatic, market-oriented public. If your advisor wonders why you're serving on a departmental committee, organizing a conference, attending Graduate Student Assembly meetings, tutoring local kids or UT staff, creating a summer writing program for girls through the City of Austin, or guest lecturing about the stars to elementary school kids, simply say "post tenure review" and she'll get it. So sorry, it's not just about "getting the dissertation done" -- there's more varied work to be done, the work of openness and exchange. Either we define the terms by which we "matter" to the public, or the self-serving agents of the public will do it for us. And if graduate students don't teach themselves how to do this, no one else will.

**Velociraptors live their own ambition.** Grad students have another responsibility: to live whole lives. I know some people who identified so strongly with their academic futures that when they got nothing, even when they did what the job market demanded, they had to shoulder a burden of perceived failure and a bitterness for those lost years. I know other people who are studying dance and yoga, learning languages, travelling, getting married, having families. Like their friends in industry, they'd rather have more vacation time than salary. They are happy, and they're doing their work. This isn't a culture of slack. Rather, we're inventing and sustaining a new ethic of work.