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For Penn student, a matter of (11) degrees

By Susan Snyder

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Benjamin Bolger has become well known in the University of Pennsylvania's organizational dynamics program, where he is pursuing a master's degree.

"He's a great student," gushes Larry Starr, director of the program.

Being a student is something at which the 32-year-old Michigan native has had quite a lot of practice.

On Thursday, Bolger received a doctorate from Harvard University - which he boasts is his 11th graduate degree.

It's unclear whether his future degree at Penn will make an even dozen. By the time he finishes, it could be his 13th. Or 14th, 15th or 16th.

He is enrolled in four other graduate degree programs as well, so it's hard to know which will come first.

Eleven graduate degrees would be a weighty resume for anyone, but making Bolger's feat even more remarkable is that he has earned the degrees while coping with dyslexia.

"When some people are curious about a topic, they will go to the local library or book store and get a book. I guess I take it to the extreme and complete a degree," Bolger said in an interview. "It's my personality. I'm very intense."

Experts say they aren't sure if Bolger - who was in Boston this week for Harvard's graduation festivities - has set the record on number of graduate degrees, but they suspect he has come close.

"It certainly sounds, anecdotally, that that's a very high number," said Tim McDonough, assistant vice president for public affairs at the American Council on Education in Washington.

Bolger's degrees have come in liberal studies, real estate development, sociology, education and related fields. He has earned degrees from four of the eight Ivy League schools - Columbia, Brown, Harvard and Dartmouth - and is enrolled in programs at two others, Penn and Cornell.

Bolger was featured on the front page of The Inquirer in 1995, when he entered Yale Law School at age 19 after earning a bachelor's degree at the University of Michigan. He dropped out of Yale the first year when he found he couldn't handle the copious amount of required reading.

He sought more strategies to deal with his dyslexia. His mother still lives with him in Ithaca, N.Y., and has continued to help him, as well, he said.

As a child in Grand Haven, Mich., Bolger struggled to learn and became a disciplinary problem, so much so that his mother, a teacher, pulled him out of school and taught him at home.

By age 13, he was taking classes at a community college. Three years later, he enrolled at Michigan, where he got his bachelor's.

"He's kind of incredible. He can go in and listen to a lecture without taking a note, which is really important. He has a keen auditory memory," said Kay M. Howell, past executive director of the Michigan Dyslexia Institute, who has known Bolger since he was 7. "He is exceedingly intelligent and he is highly, highly motivated."

(Einstein was dyslexic. So were da Vinci and Edison.)

Bolger says he gets help with spell-checking his papers and has learned how to be "a very effective skimmer of books." He says he still reads at a fifth-grade level.

Bolger's graduate-degree pilgrimage to who knows where began at Oxford University, where he got a master's in sociology in 1997. Next was a master's from Cambridge in 1998, followed by a degree from Stanford in 2000. He then got master's degrees from both Columbia University and Teacher's College at Columbia in 2001, followed by a master's in real estate from Harvard in 2002.

Then came degrees from Brown and Dartmouth in 2004, and Brandeis University and Skidmore College in 2007.

Bolger says he affords the education by teaching simultaneously. He has won recognition for his teaching as a graduate assistant at Harvard.

He says he owes his parents some money, but has no other debt, despite his estimate that he has burned through a half-million dollars in tuition and related expenses.

"That's one reason I taught 10 college classes a semester - to offset the cost of working on all these degrees," he said.

He may have a sleep deficit, however. He only gets four hours a night.

"Some people are born with just a really big battery," he said. "I guess I'm just able to charge it up quick."

Perhaps the biggest toll has been his erratic weight. He put on 140 pounds, about 40 of which he said he has since taken off.

In the summer of 2004, Bolger enrolled in Penn's organizational dynamics program, pursuing the global studies track, which took him to Penn classes around the world. Starr was amazed at Bolger's energy.

"He did Prague, Sweden and China the same summer," Starr said.

Bolger, Starr said, seemed to be able to absorb the education with great "scope and intensity."

Starr said he and Bolger are working on a research project, looking at the project-oriented world and how "people are juggling many, many projects." Starr plans to meet with Bolger in Philadelphia this month.

Bolger's Web site, www.benbolger.com, features pictures of him with people he says he has met over the years during his campus-hopping and beyond: Jimmy Carter at the Harvard Club of Boston, Al Gore at Columbia, Barack Obama at a Democratic convention, Jane Fonda at the Penn bookstore. Mugs with Supreme Court justices and college presidents are there, too.

Lauren E. Clarke, executive director of the master of arts in liberal studies program at Dartmouth College, called Bolger a "renaissance man." But accumulating so many degrees is not advice she'd readily give out to students.

"More is not always better," she said. "It can raise concerns about focus. How they come together will be the test."

Bolger said he will begin a visiting assistant professor's job at the College of William and Mary in the fall. He envisions becoming more a teacher and less a student, but doubts his quest for knowledge will ever be quenched.

"Some people like to go out and see the new Indiana Jones movie and the new *Sex and the City* movie on the weekends, and skip going to the library on Saturday night," he said. "In my view, going to see Indiana Jones and then going to the library . . . is a well-rounded day."

By the way, he said he had seen both movies within days of their debut.

"So," he said, "I'm not a complete nerd."

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