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Bolger overcomes dyslexia to earn 11 graduate degrees

by *Erin Zagursky* | **July 9, 2008**

When Ben Bolger was in elementary school, a teacher took his mother aside and confessed she didn't think he'd succeed in academics.

"She said, 'To be honest we're really not that confident that Ben's ever going to be able to complete high school, much less college. We don't have high hopes for him,'" said Bolger.

Now, less than three decades later, Bolger has proven that prediction more than a little wrong. The 32-year-old has earned 11 graduate degrees so far, including a recent doctorate of design from Harvard University, which was ceremonially presented to him on June 5. In the fall of 2008, Bolger will bring all of that education as well as nearly a decade of teaching experience to the College of William and Mary as a visiting assistant professor of sociology.

"I love to learn, but I'm excited to be a researcher and a producer of knowledge instead of strictly a consumer," he said.

"I know the College of William and Mary has a deep commitment to undergraduate education," said Bolger. "I think there are a lot of wonderful colleges and universities that exist, but some tend to focus more on graduate research and sometimes short-change, maybe inadvertently, undergraduate education. I think that William and Mary – while it has great graduate programs – is also well known for having a strong undergraduate focus, and that attracted me very significantly to William and Mary."

Bolger began his schooling when his mother enrolled him in a pilot preschool program for gifted children at Michigan State University. Though he accelerated in many areas of the program, Bolger made very little progress in reading and spelling and fell far behind his peers. With his mother and teachers concerned, Bolger was tested and diagnosed with dyslexia.

"I was very fortunate to have had that diagnosis," said Bolger. "Unfortunately, a lot of students with dyslexia aren't always diagnosed at a young age, so they struggle for many years until they get a name for the phenomena that's affecting them."

Though Bolger now had a diagnosis, it was a struggle to find the child a grade school that could support him appropriately. He was often placed in gifted classes at the beginning of the school year, but, as his dyslexia became a problem, he was moved to special education classes. Tired of trying to find an appropriate fit for her son, Bolger's mother, who was a retired teacher herself, decided to home school him.

"It turned out to be a great experience," said Bolger, noting that his mother used a hands-on approach to learning. "For



Ben Bolger, By Stephen Salpukas.

example, when we were studying history, we got into our pick-up truck in Michigan and drove out to Gettysburg to get a sense of Civil War battles.”

When Bolger was only 12, he started taking college-level classes to supplement his home schooling, and in 1992, he had enough credits to earn his first degree: an associate’s degree from Muskegon Community College in Michigan. He transferred those credits to The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he studied sociology and began taking graduate courses in urban planning. Despite his success, dyslexia remained a hurdle.

“The University of Michigan was a wonderful experience, but I was still reading at a grade school level, so there was a severe mismatch between my reading skills and the demands of my college-level studies,” he said. “So I relied on books on tape, and I also used a reader and a scribe.”

In 1994, the 19-year-old graduated from the University of Michigan with a 4.0 and at the top of his class of more than 4,000.

After graduation, Bolger, who had been involved in politics in Michigan, moved to Washington D.C. and served as an intern with President Bill Clinton’s press secretary, Mike McCurry. Many of the people he met during that internship had either studied law or went to graduate school, and so Bolger figured it would make sense to do the same.

In 1995, he started at Yale Law School. However, Bolger quickly found that the compensation techniques he had used as an undergraduate did not work as well in law school, where reading is a heavy requirement.

“I really found myself overwhelmed,” he said. “My dyslexia was still a significant hurdle, and I was still a teenager, too. It wasn’t a good match. Law school was an important failure in my life. After my experience at Yale, I began to reconsider, does going off to professional school or graduate school really make sense given my limitations?”

Bolger began working with several associations that focus on helping people with learning disabilities, including the Michigan Dyslexia Institute, where he received extra training on how to effectively manage his dyslexia. He began thinking about going to graduate school again, this time to study sociology, which he always had a strong interest in. He had applied to the University of Oxford, and the more he thought about it, the more going to Oxford made sense.

“The Oxbridge (Oxford-Cambridge) system uses a tutorial system quite extensively, so it’s more kind of one-on-one meetings with faculty as opposed to traditional lectures with 20 or 30 people in the classroom,” said Bolger. “That experience really very much reminded me of the homeschooling experience I had had years earlier, working with my mother or other instructors on a one-on-one basis.”

Bolger went to Oxford in 1996 and ended up excelling. Though he completed his first master’s degree in 1997, he said he was “left with more questions than answers, and so the next year, I kind of migrated my interest from just sociology to sociology and politics.” Bolger began another master’s degree program at the University of Cambridge, and, at the same time, started working toward a doctorate at Oxford.

Over the next decade, Bolger would earn a total of 11 graduate degrees from a variety of distinguished institutions of higher learning, including the University of Oxford (1997, M.Sc. in Sociology); the University of Cambridge (1998, M.Phil. in Sociology and Politics of Modern Society); Stanford University (2000, A.M. in Education); Teachers College, Columbia University (2001, M.A. in Politics of Education); Columbia University (2001, M.S. in Real Estate Development); Harvard University (2002, M.Des.S. in Real Estate and 2007, D.Des.); Brown University (2004, M.A. in Development Studies); Dartmouth College (2004, M.A. in Liberal Studies); Brandeis University (2007, M.A. in Coexistence and Conflict); and Skidmore College (2007, M.A. in Liberal Studies - History, Philosophy, and Psychology).

Though Guinness does not have a world record on file for the most graduate degrees held by one person, Bolger said, from his research, he has yet to find anyone in modern history who holds as many – let alone more than -- him. Surprisingly, Bolger said the apparent record-number of degrees was completely unintentional.

“You could consider it a healthy appetite for learning,” Bolger said with a laugh. “I think part of learning is learning how to ask good questions, and so I asked a lot of questions when I was in a program, and was left with answers that I wanted to explore more in depth.”

Amassing those degrees certainly didn’t come easy. The scholar, who still struggles to read, often took an overload of

credits and only gets four to five hours of sleep per night.

"I go to sleep after the monologue of Jimmy Kimmel at midnight and get up at 4 or 4:30 and start the day. Being dyslexic requires being more structured. It take a little more work with regard to writing, spelling and reading, and so you have to budget your time and be very focused," he said.

But Bolger did not spend all of his time studying as he worked toward his degrees. He was heavily involved in debating as an extracurricular activity, participating in two world tournaments and winning first place in Princeton's public speaking competition. He also speaks around the country about dyslexia and learning disabilities.

Though there are many people with dyslexia who have excelled in sports, acting and other fields, Bolger said that there are "fewer positive profiles of academics that are dyslexic, and so I'm interested in providing a positive message that in spite of learning disabilities, one can go on to achieve some degree of success."

Bolger began teaching as an adjunct professor after he came back to America from Oxford at several academic institutions. While studying at Harvard, he served as a Teaching Fellow for six years, and in that time, earned 12 teaching awards from Harvard -- roughly one every semester, he said. Bolger said that having a learning disability gives him a unique perspective on how he teaches.

"Because I am dyslexic, I realize that different people learn differently and just because you may need to learn differently doesn't mean you are any more or less talented than somebody else," he said.

When Bolger finished his doctorate work at Harvard last year, he moved to Ithaca, N.Y., where he began two more master's degrees (to be finished this summer) and began looking for full-time teaching positions, hoping to give back some of the time and energy that so many faculty members have invested in him.

He came to William and Mary because of its deep commitment to undergraduate education -- and it didn't hurt that that the College is Thomas Jefferson's alma mater.

"My whole lifetime, I've been a terrific admirer of Thomas Jefferson," he said. "He had a very well-rounded life. I certainly do not have anywhere near the brilliance as Thomas Jefferson, but I have the same kind of curiosity to do a number of different things. I've always respected his very diverse career, and so I am mindful that he was educated at William and Mary."

Bolger will be teaching three classes in the fall at William and Mary: one on the sociology of education, and two sections of the same class on American society.

"We are pleased that someone of Ben's talents and varied education will be teaching for our sociology department next year," said Carl Strikwerda, the College's dean of arts and sciences.

Bolger said he will also probably take some classes at the College's School of Education. However, the boy who wasn't supposed to finish high school said the learning he is really looking forward to is that which he will share with his students.

"Regardless of how many degrees one might have compared to how many degrees another might not, I think that there's a lot of learning to be shared between people, and I take that opportunity very seriously," he said.

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