



## Gay Students Graduate Openly at Military Academies

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For first time, gay students at US military academies participate openly in graduation, events

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Gay students at America's military service academies are wrapping up the first year when they no longer had to hide their sexual orientation, benefiting from the end of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that used to bar them from seemingly ordinary activities like taking their partners openly to graduation events.

For the first time, gay students at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis were able to take a same-sex date to the academy's Ring Dance for third-year midshipmen. The U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., officially recognized a club for gay students this month. And gay cadets at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y., are relieved they no longer have to worry about revealing their sexuality.

Several gay students from the nation's major military academies said the September repeal of "don't ask, don't tell," an 18-year-old legal provision under which gays could serve as long as they didn't openly acknowledge their sexual orientation, meant significant change.

"For the most part, it allows us to be a complete person, as opposed to compartmentalizing our lives into different types of boxes," said newly commissioned Air Force 2nd Lt. Dan Dwyer, who graduated from the Air Force Academy on Wednesday. West Point held its graduation Saturday, and the Naval Academy's was set for Tuesday.

Official recognition by the Air Force school in May of the social club Spectrum means gay students there won't have to meet underground anymore.

Students and gay alumni also say the repeal is creating professional benefits by opening doors to mentorship possibilities. Being open about their orientation gives students and experienced military personal one more common experience that can foster a mentoring relationship, they said.

"That's what makes this type of networking a little bit more meaningful in our lives, because they've gone through the same thing and, yeah, it's great to have that family. It's great to have that support," Dwyer said.

Dwyer did not know that a gay alumni group of academy graduates even existed before repeal of "don't ask, don't tell." On Thursday, Trish Heller, executive director of the academy's gay alumni group called The Blue Alliance, swore him in as an Air Force officer.

"That was all based on the networking and mentorship relationship from Blue Alliance and Spectrum that would not have happened before, because we just didn't have that much of a presence and that much of a connection with the cadets," Heller said.

At West Point, the alumni gay advocacy group Knights Out was able to hold the first installment in March of what is intended to be an annual dinner in recognition of gay and lesbian graduates and cadets. Cadet Kaitlyn Kelly was among the dozens of cadets who attended the privately sponsored dinner. The 22-year-old Chicago resident was finally able to openly introduce her civilian girlfriend at an event marking 100 days before graduation.

"It was a remarkable thing for me, because I had taken her to previous things ... but I had to do the ambiguous, 'Oh, she's my best friend,'"

Kelly emphasizes that she had always been respected by her fellow cadets and officers at West Point and that changes in her day-to-day life have not been dramatic. But both she and fellow graduating cadet Idi Mallari said the repeal lessened their stress.

"My friends and I, we were so relieved that we didn't have to worry about that. Where we might not have necessarily worried about it 100 percent, it was still something in the back of your mind that you kind of always have to watch your step," Kelly said.

Mallari, who was awarded a Purple Heart during his prior service in Iraq as a combat medic, said everyone at the academy has been accepting, with just a couple of exceptions.

"I think it has to do with the fact that we're here at West Point and everybody here is just a little more educated," said Mallari, a 26-year-old Chicago resident.

In Annapolis, a gay couple attending the U.S. Naval Academy and their classmates posed for a photo in front of the academy's Bancroft Hall with a dozen heterosexual couples for the Ring Dance, when students in their third year receive their class rings.

Midshipmen Andrew Atwill, of Fulton, Ky., and Nick Bonsall, of Middletown, Del., said they received many compliments for bravely standing out in a way students had not before, and they did not receive any negative feedback from attending together.

"Because they made us feel so comfortable for going to the dance with each other, we didn't have to worry about any negative consequences," Atwill said.

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Associated Press Writer Michael Hill in Albany, N.Y., contributed to this report.