

As uproar fades, Seton Hall students meet to study gay marriage

by [Kelly Heyboer](#)

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SOUTH ORANGE, N.J. (RNS) It is the class that wasn't supposed to happen.

In a basement classroom at Seton Hall University, 24 undergraduates meet twice a week for a course known as "Special Topics in Political Theory: Gay Marriage."

Most of the tension that surrounded the first few weeks of class has disappeared. The security guard who stood outside the door the first week is gone. The death threats against the professor have died down.

But a few students still haven't told their families they are taking the school's most talked-about and controversial course.

"A couple of students said they are not going to tell their parents they are taking a class like this because they don't want the controversy," said W. King Mott, the associate professor teaching the course. "But it's a very lively class."

The three-credit course made headlines last spring when Newark Archbishop John J. Myers questioned whether a Catholic university should be teaching students about a topic the church opposes.

"The course is not in sync with Catholic teaching," Myers said at the time.

Seton Hall's board of trustees, which includes Myers, convened a committee over the summer to look into the proposed course. For a time, many on campus assumed the class would be canceled.

But when the semester started, Mott was permitted by Seton Hall administrators to teach the class over the objections of the church.

Mott, who is one of Seton Hall's few openly gay professors, spent weeks fielding "hate-filled e-mails and phone calls" from anti-gay and pro-Catholic protesters around the country. Several threats were specific enough to notify local police, and a security guard was briefly assigned to his classroom door, he said.

Though the class has gone on without incident, Seton Hall officials have repeatedly declined to publicly discuss the controversy surrounding the course. Seton Hall also declined to allow The Star-Ledger to observe or photograph the gay marriage class or interview students, though the university has regularly allowed media coverage of undergraduate classes in the past.

"To allow press presence in a small class on a sensitive topic about which there is significant public debate could stifle the atmosphere of freedom of discussion," said a statement released by Seton Hall Provost Larry Robinson's office.

Church officials also declined to discuss the gay marriage class, except to say Myers still believes Seton Hall should not offer the course. "His position has not changed," said James Goodness, Myers'

spokesman.

Mott said he designed the gay marriage course to explore a public policy issue, not to advocate for one side. Mott is in a civil union with his partner, who works in real estate. The couple has four daughters.

The gay marriage class includes a mix of gay and straight students and a few undergraduates who oppose some aspects of same-sex marriage, the professor said. But class discussions have always been respectful.

"No one is demonizing gay people," Mott said.

Despite all of the controversy, Mott plans to teach the class again next fall. Under Seton Hall's rules, if a special topics class is taught three times, the professor can propose it become a permanent class. Mott said he would like to have the gay marriage class offered every year as long as the issue is part of the national debate.

"People can demonize me all they want to," Mott said. "The important thing is to examine the idea."