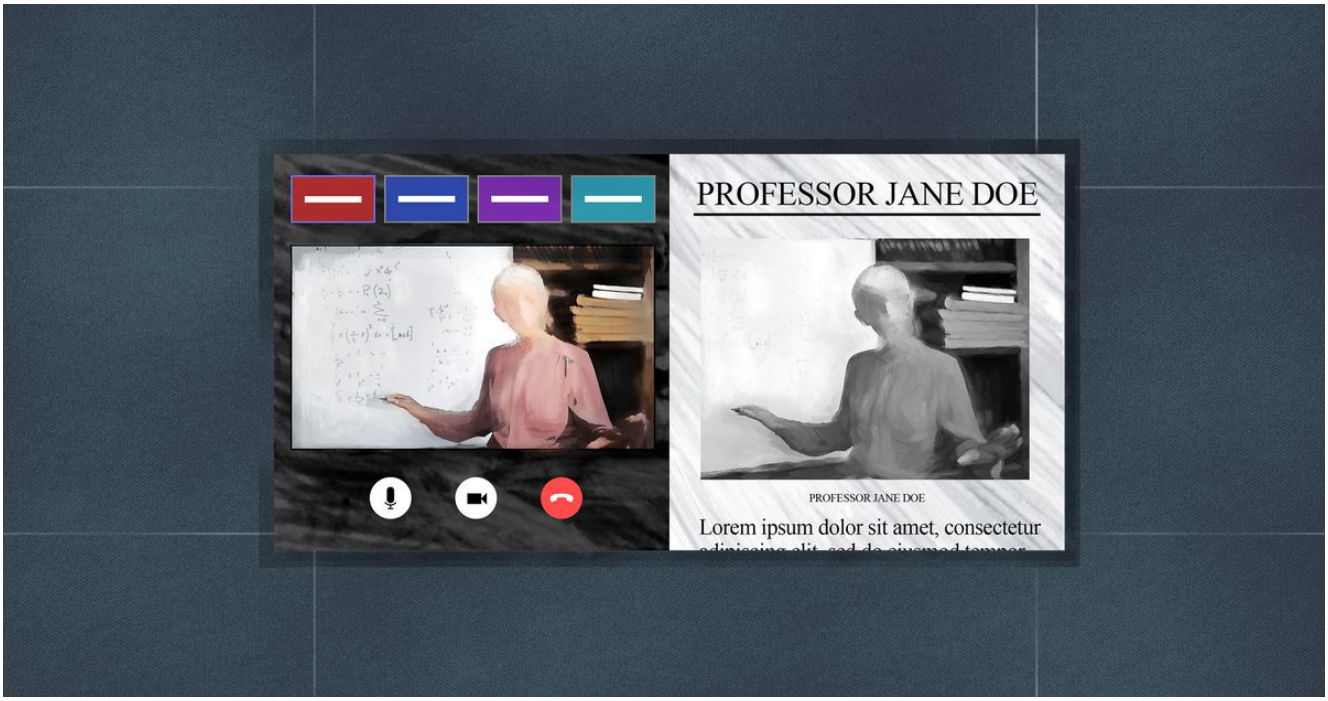
If you’re starting an online class, check to make sure your professor is alive



Three weeks into his online class on art history, Concordia University sophomore Aaron Ansuini had a question about one of the recorded lectures. He combed through Concordia’s portal, but couldn’t find his professor’s contact information. So he Googled his name — François-Marc Gagnon — and found an obituary.

At first, Ansuini thought it might be a coincidence. “I was like ‘That’s weird, he has the same name,’” he told *The Verge.* But further Googling revealed a more disturbing truth. In March 2019, over a year prior to the start of Ansuini’s course, Gagnon had passed away.

“It was weird and very scary,” Ansuini said. When registering for the class, he’d received no indication that Gagnon was teaching posthumously. The syllabus named a different professor as the official instructor, but stated that Gagnon would deliver the lectures — an arrangement not uncommon for

Concordia classes. All email communication had come, unsigned, from a “do-not-reply” address. For the first three weeks, Ansuini had assumed those emails were from Gagnon.

The revelation has completely changed Ansuini’s class experience. “I don’t really even want to watch the lectures anymore,” he says. Participating makes him sad; he tries to space the lectures out between other classes so he can take breaks. “It doesn’t feel like a class. It feels like one of those websites, like a Skillshare.”

“It doesn’t feel like a class”

The past year has been a trial-and-error process for Ansuini and millions of other college students around the world who are taking classes online amid COVID-19, as their schools navigate a new remote curriculum. While online education existed long before the novel coronavirus, the pandemic has put a massive swath of learners and families through the various motions of online learning — from remote test proctoring and automated grading to safety drills. It’s brought heightened scrutiny to strategies that schools have been employing for years, and a new urgency to the question of how much transparency institutions owe their students.

Legally, the school is likely within its rights to continue using a professor’s recorded lecture after their death. “Generally when you work with a university, you sign a contract that says … intellectual property you generate is our property,” says Joseph D’Angelo, an attorney with a focus on IP, copyright, and trademark. “There’s not much you can do about it.”

That’s not always the understanding on the ground, though. “I think the default position in higher ed is that an institution doesn’t stake claim to a professor’s course materials or lectures,” says Jeremy Bassetti, a humanities professor at Valencia College. “If I were alive and I learned that another professor was facilitating a course I developed without my

consent, I would … make some phone calls."

> *Many universities' blackboard installs will literally not allow you to delete video lectures once you've uploaded them. It's no stretch to think universities will try to use these to re-teach courses sans prof, with only a TA, copyright or not. Be mindful.* ***https://t.co/yhb8Emv1WI***
>
> *— Mar Hicks (@histoftech)* ***August 5, 2020***

Bassetti isn't alone there. As colleges announced their plans to move instruction online throughout early 2020, scores of faculty expressed fear that their universities would use their recorded lectures as they pleased. "It's no stretch to think that universities will try to use these to re-teach courses sans prof, with only a TA," one professor tweeted over the summer. "Be mindful." In mid-March, as hundreds of US universities abruptly shifted to recorded models, the American Association of University Professors and the American Federation of Teachers publicly warned schools to keep their hands off new recordings. "Institutions should not take this opportunity to appropriate intellectual property to which they would not otherwise have had access," their statement reads.

In countries where lecture recording was common pre-pandemic, the issue has been controversial for years. In 2018, when the UK's University and College Union organized a nationwide strike in response to suggested pension cuts, some universities proposed running recorded lessons in order to keep classes going. (In 2016, over 70 percent of the country's institutions were using lecture recording systems). Backlash to those proposals was so severe that it led some schools to permanently change their recording policies.

Students have also taken issue with the lack of access to their instructors. COVID-19 has drawn new attention to an age-old, persistent question: what is college tuition actually paying for? Some US colleges have kept their typical price

tags in place after moving their courses online; supporters have argued that they're still, after all, providing the same degree. But these decisions have been met with widespread blowback from students and families who claim that online classes don't provide the same benefits as in-person ones.

"It's an access issue"

College students commonly pay tuition, and register for classes, with the expectation that they'll have some degree of access to their professors — through discussion groups, office hours, in-class questions, even the ability to chat by email or phone. Intuitively, that's the argument for taking university classes online rather than watching lectures on YouTube for free. A deceased professor can't respond to emails, facilitate class discussions, or provide networking opportunities — and while that's not a dealbreaker for all students, it may be for some.

Ansuini is one such student. He has a learning disability, and following up with instructors outside of class has been an important aspect of his online education. "When there's an asynchronous lecture I'll communicate with the teacher and I'll build a back-and-forth with them so they know I'm keeping up," Ansuini says. A situation where his professor is unreachable is "an access issue."

In a statement to *The Verge*, Concordia spokesperson Vannina Maestracci said, "We, of course, regret that this student felt they had not been clearly informed and have updated Dr. Gagnon's biography in the course information provided to registered students." Maestracci noted that Gagnon "developed this online course some years ago with eConcordia," but did not address whether Gagnon had explicitly consented to the course running after his passing.

It's not unreasonable for students who believe they're paying for a living, available professor to expect a living, available professor, D'Angelo says. The extra perks that come

from those connections, he believes, are more than perks — they're understood to be fundamental aspects of a university education. He likens that understanding to an unwritten contract. "You could make a legal argument … that I signed up to all of these fringe benefits, I'm not getting it because of COVID, and I can't even interact with this person on an electronic level," he says. "I'm not sure they would win, if a student was to bring that suit, but I think there might be some damages."

"Regular scrutiny must be given by relevant program leaders"
Accountability is a factor as well. A deceased professor can't update their teaching style in response to student feedback, or modernize their material as their field moves forward. It's important for students to know if a course may be out of date, says Stacy Peazant, an academic and research administrator at the University of Florida. "Such a course should not be exempt from evaluation by students at the end of the term, and regular scrutiny must be given by relevant program leaders," Peazant told *The Verge.*

The potential benefits of posthumous classes, of course, are also obvious. Online learning provides an opportunity to preserve the work of renowned educators, and pre-recorded lectures have clear utility as teaching tools, especially as a model for new lecturers. But transparency can make a big difference.

Lia, who asked to withhold her surname for privacy reasons, says she wasn't bothered by an online modeling class she took with a deceased professor during her freshman year at Eindhoven University of Technology several years ago. The professor's recent passing, she says, was announced during the introductory lecture. That made the course feel like a mark of respect — she appreciated that her professor could continue teaching.

Still, the announcement colored the experience. "It was a

little like watching a movie and knowing one of the actors in it has passed away," Lia says. "A bit strange and unsettling, but not too distracting from the story." Eindhoven University of Technology did not respond to a request for comment.

Ansuini is going to finish out his art history class. But he hopes his university will handle future situations differently. "We don't live in a world where someone dies and you don't care," Ansuini says. "I think it lacked tact and respect for this teacher's life, and his work, and his students, to think that's not noteworthy."

https://www.theverge.com/22262230/online-college-class-covid-professor-dead