



Newt U

By: Robert Costa

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Tampa, Fla. — On Monday morning, in a sparse conference room, Newt Gingrich revived a role he has frequently played in his four-decade career: Republican teacher. As a tropical storm swayed the palm trees outside, Gingrich calmly opened “Newt University,” his latest post-presidential campaign project.

Newt U, while grandiose in name, is simply a week-long series of public-policy workshops about the former speaker’s ideas, broadcast online for the consumption of conservative activists and Gingrich aficionados. In the back of the room, and on Twitter, many reporters rolled their eyes.

For the 69-year-old Gingrich, though — who could nearly taste the Republican presidential nomination last year — this mesh of politics and pedagogy is an avoidance of political winter, and a fitting contribution to a convention celebrating [Mitt Romney](#), the man who snuffed his White House dreams.

Back in November, when he was starting to surge in the primary polls, Gingrich promised to teach online courses from the Oval Office. “I think I will finally try to do something that outlines for the whole country what we will try to accomplish,” he told a New Hampshire crowd. He pledged to offer the courses through the education company Kaplan in order to make President Newt accessible to all, free of charge.

Months later, Gingrich is doing something similar, and a subsidiary of Kaplan is cosponsoring the series. Monday’s lineup and the curriculum seem ready-made for the hardcore Republican types on their laptops in Texas and Nebraska, not for the entire country. Gingrich, who once taught environmental studies at West Georgia College, focused the two-hour discussion on the GOP’s Medicare-[reform proposals](#), free-market principles, and the legacy of conservative heroes such as Margaret Thatcher. Later in the week at the downtown Hyatt, energy, fiscal policy, religious freedom, and economic growth will be on the syllabus.

Gingrich, who is scheduled to address the convention on Thursday night a few minutes before a video tribute to Ronald Reagan, was very much in his element during the initial run-through. The chosen professors, among them Wisconsin [governor Scott Walker](#), spoke of “innovation,” “fundamental change,” and the futuristic-sounding promise of entrepreneurship. The outfit’s

white-haired dean opened the Monday seminar by advocating for a “fact-based campaign” against President Obama, powered by “new-generation solutions.” The lofty vocabulary, the throng of cameras — it was, in every sense, a classic Gingrichian scene.

Governor Gary Herbert of Utah was another speaker, as was [John C. Goodman](#), a health-care expert at the [National Center for Policy Analysis](#). A couple of Gingrich’s old friends, such as CNBC’s Larry Kudlow, a former Reagan adviser and supply-side conservative, took the stage to discuss the sagging economy.

One of Gingrich’s aides tells me that it was always the speaker’s plan to do something more than stroll up to the podium and read scripted remarks before cheering delegates. He wants to be the professor, tackling the “big issues” of the campaign, the aide says. To ensure this all went smoothly, Gingrich and his team have been coordinating with convention staffers for months, and the Romney high command in Boston has blessed the collegiate-themed spectacle. On the convention’s website, Newt University is a featured program.

Gingrich has been running for public office since 1974, and he has been teaching since Nixon’s first term, when he was completing his doctorate in modern European history at Tulane University. As we chat in his hotel room high above the Tampa skyline, Gingrich tells me that he never intended to retire and fade away.

“My first workshop at a Republican convention was in 1984 in Dallas,” Gingrich says, as he crosses his arms and sinks into a red couch. “Then, a few years later, we did GOPAC’s college course. What I’m trying to get across to people is that ideas really matter.” He acknowledges that many critics scoffed at his idea for an Oval Office class, but he says that was a genuine reflection of what he thinks needs to happen in the executive branch. “I tried to carry it to the next level by personifying the change as a presidential candidate,” he says. “Well, that didn’t work.”

“So, for me, the question became ‘What is the next step? What is my responsibility as a citizen to do something?’” Gingrich says. “I came up with the idea of ‘Let’s do workshops,’ then a week later, I heard from Matt Rhoades, Romney’s [campaign manager](#), who suggested that we do Newt University.” At that, Gingrich directs one of his advisers to pull a “Newt U” T-shirt from a bag, and he beams as I glance at its red, white, and blue insignia designed in the format of a college logo. “Rhoades said this will bring together a lot of dynamic, ideal-oriented Republicans, and I’m happy to do that.”

Gingrich argues that the pick of Wisconsin [congressman Paul Ryan](#) for the vice-presidential spot makes his courses, and the entire convention, more of an “ideas campaign” than the “elite media” is reporting. “Romney reached the conclusion that he wanted to fight over the most fundamental propositions, and he wanted somebody who would virtually compel the fight,” Gingrich says. “So what we’re doing is remarkably compatible and a component of what Romney is doing for the long run.”

“That’s important to me,” Gingrich says. And Romney’s support of this latest enterprise has warmed Newt’s relations with the former [Massachusetts governor](#). “This is a mature man, a man who has a successful family,” he says. “What I’m trying to do here is help him, to empower people who are supporting him.” It is a supporting role, but he enjoys it.

“People like Mike Allen at *Politico* say to me in passing that they are surprised by the fact that I’m still engaged in the ideas,” Gingrich chuckles. But if they look back at his career, he says, Newt U and related activities shouldn’t raise an eyebrow.

“In that sense, I’m just living out my life,” he says. “I was prepared to live it out as president, but the country decided that wasn’t the right route. So I’m living it out as a citizen educator. We’ll see what happens.”