

Taylor Kelly – NYSSMA®/NAfME Collegiate President 24-25 - SUNY Fredonia



Growth and Guidance for Soon-to-Be Teachers

As spring approaches, I hope everyone has settled into a steady routine for the semester. Many of us find ourselves at pivotal moments in our academic journeys, some preparing for recitals and coursework while others, like myself, are beginning student teaching.

As I take this next step toward becoming a teacher, I've been reflecting on the lessons I've learned over the past four years. The transition from college to the professional world can feel overwhelming but through experience and guidance I've gathered invaluable insights that I hope will help us all navigate this exciting new chapter.

Embrace constructive feedback

One of the most important lessons I have learned is to embrace constructive criticism. Student teaching is a transformative experience, but it requires adaptability and resilience. Feedback from cooperating teachers, students, and even peers is not a reflection of failure but rather an opportunity for growth.

This lesson has not always come easily to me. I often find myself admiring the methods of experienced teachers or older peers and thinking, "They make it look so effortless. They must be naturals!" But the reality is that teaching, like any other skill, takes years of practice, reflection, and patience. After all, it took us years to develop proficiency on our instruments or voices! When receiving criticism, try not to take it personally. Instead, accept it as a gift from those who want to see you succeed. In moments of doubt, pause, take a deep breath, and remind yourself that the best teachers are lifelong learners. Growth isn't always comfortable, but it is always worth it.

Another key takeaway is the importance of organization. Balancing lesson planning, rehearsals, and assessments can be overwhelming, but maintaining a structured approach—whether through detailed planning, digital tools or keeping a reflective teaching journal—can make all the difference. Organization may look different for everyone, but the most important thing is that you try a variety of methods and find what works best for you.

The confident job search

Although I am still in the early stages of my student teaching experience, I know that the job search process will soon be on the horizon. Preparation will make all the difference.

For those searching for jobs this fall, one of the most useful steps to take now is crafting a compelling résumé and cover letter tailored to each application. Highlighting relevant teaching experience, leadership roles, and music-related skills will help showcase your qualifications effectively, and don't hesitate to reach out to your university's career services office or your mentor teacher to refine your materials or to help preparing for the interview process.

Networking is another game-changer. Attending conferences, making connections with professors, and reaching out to mentors can provide guidance and job leads you may not find on your own. Earlier this semester, I had the opportunity to attend the WNY Conference Day for Music Educators where I was able to attend a variety of helpful sessions in addition to meeting many local teachers and vendors.

While larger conferences like the NYSSMA® Winter Conference offer a wealth of valuable knowledge, do not overlook the important connections you can establish by networking at local festivals, particularly if you plan to work in that area.

Flexibility is also key in this process. While many of us have a vision for our "dream" jobs, it's important to recognize that being open to different grade levels, school types, and locations will expand opportunities significantly. Your first job will most likely not be your last, and your "dream" job might not look exactly as expected. Sometimes, the best opportunities will come from places you had never considered, and being adaptable will allow for professional growth in unexpected ways.

Looking ahead to teaching

As I prepare for my future career, I recognize that success in the first year of teaching will depend on preparation and adaptability. One of the best pieces of advice I have received is to establish a

support network early. Finding mentors within the school, connecting with fellow new teachers, and maintaining relationships with college advisors will provide a strong foundation for navigating the challenges of the first year.

Setting realistic expectations is another crucial lesson. As new teachers, we often put pressure on ourselves to do everything perfectly from day one. However, teaching is a lifelong learning process. Mistakes will happen, and that's okay—what matters is the willingness to reflect, adjust, and grow.

Equally important is prioritizing well-being. The first year of teaching is demanding, and burnout is a real concern. Setting boundaries, maintaining personal interests, and practicing self-care are not just beneficial for us but also for our students. A well-balanced teacher is better equipped to provide meaningful instruction and create a positive classroom environment.

At the end of the day, expecting perfection from ourselves is unrealistic and unfair. No one is born a master of their craft, but through dedication, openness to feedback, and a commitment to continuous growth, we can set ourselves up for success. By seeking opportunities, staying organized, and embracing flexibility, we can find our place in the world of music education, even if the path looks different from what we originally expected.

Announcements

The deadline to run for state office:

March 25, 2025, is the last day to run for state office. We would love to see a group of students made up from several schools across New York! If you have any questions, please email collpres@nyssma.org or reach out to [@collegiatenyssma](https://www.instagram.com/collegiatenyssma) on Instagram.

NAfME Eastern Division Conference:

April 24-27, 2025, in Hartford, CT. For registration info, visit cmea.org.

Warm regards,
Taylor Kelly Collegiate President ||