

The First Year of Teaching Percussion at the University Level

An Interview with Dr. Tim Feeney, Dr. Luis Rivera and Dr. Brad Meyer

By Benjamin Fraley

For many graduate percussion students with aspirations of teaching at the university level, the hope of one day being the head of a percussion program seems like a dream—until that day finally arrives and you accept your first major position. Years of education, performance, and practice have led to this moment, but are you ready? Most likely you are qualified and excited to start your new job and a new stage of your adult life. However, because you have never been the head of a percussion program before or you are now teaching at a school where the program differs greatly from your previous position, there may be some surprises along the way during your first year.

To find out more, I recently interviewed Dr. Tim Feeney, Dr. Luis Rivera, and Dr. Brad Meyer. All three had completed their first year of teaching at their respected universities during the 2012–13 school year.

Benjamin Fraley: *Where do you teach and how did you happen to be there?*

Dr. Tim Feeney: The University of Alabama. I answered ads for searches in 2011 and 2012, and won the 2012 search.

Dr. Luis Rivera: I teach at the University of South Alabama, and I earned the position during the summer of 2012. I became aware of the position through an online job-search website.

Dr. Brad Meyer: I teach at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. I was recommended by several SFA music faculty to be considered as the interim percussion director while the current percussion director at SFA, Dr. Scott Harris, filled the interim director of the School of Music position during the 2012–13 school year.

Fraley: *Do you teach anything besides lessons and percussion ensemble, or have you been asked to?*

Feeney: Besides the applied activity, I also teach three percussion methods courses. Students take one in the spring semester of their sophomore year and return the fall semester of their senior year.

Rivera: I teach the drumline, front ensemble, world music ensemble, steel band, and percussion methods.

Meyer: I am the steel band director as well as the marching band's percussion coordinator on top of my lessons and percussion ensemble duties. I have also taught percussion methods.

Fraley: *What did you know about your job going into your first year?*

Feeney: I was taking over a program that had grown rapidly after being relatively small, and one that might be ready for a cultural shift. In addition to the teaching responsibilities, it was going to be especially important to help the studio recruit, especially graduate students, and that we would need to completely overhaul its instrument library.

Rivera: I knew that there had been several new hirings within the music department in the previous five years. Several professors had retired, and the expansion of the department in general was allowing new positions to be opened for faculty, both full time and adjunct. The percussion studio had been in the midst of massively updating its inventory, and in general, trying to bring the development of the studio as a whole more up to par with the trends occurring throughout the country.

Meyer: Because of the quick job appointment, there was very little time to gather a lot of information about the job. I knew how many lessons I would be teaching as well as the ensembles and courses I would be instructing. However, all of my questions were quickly answered once I

was on campus. Overall, everything worked out quite well because of the extremely welcoming and helpful faculty at SFA. The biggest help in getting settled was having Dr. Harris, the previous percussion instructor at SFA, around to help me and guide me through the year. He had already done most of the logistical work in planning the year and he was very willing to help me “learn the ropes,” especially in regards to advising students as well as giving me helpful, insightful information about potential issues he had faced and solved in past years.



Teaching is a dance between me and my student, and we serve the relationship best when I am not thinking textbook solutions to textbook problems. —Dr. Tim Feeney



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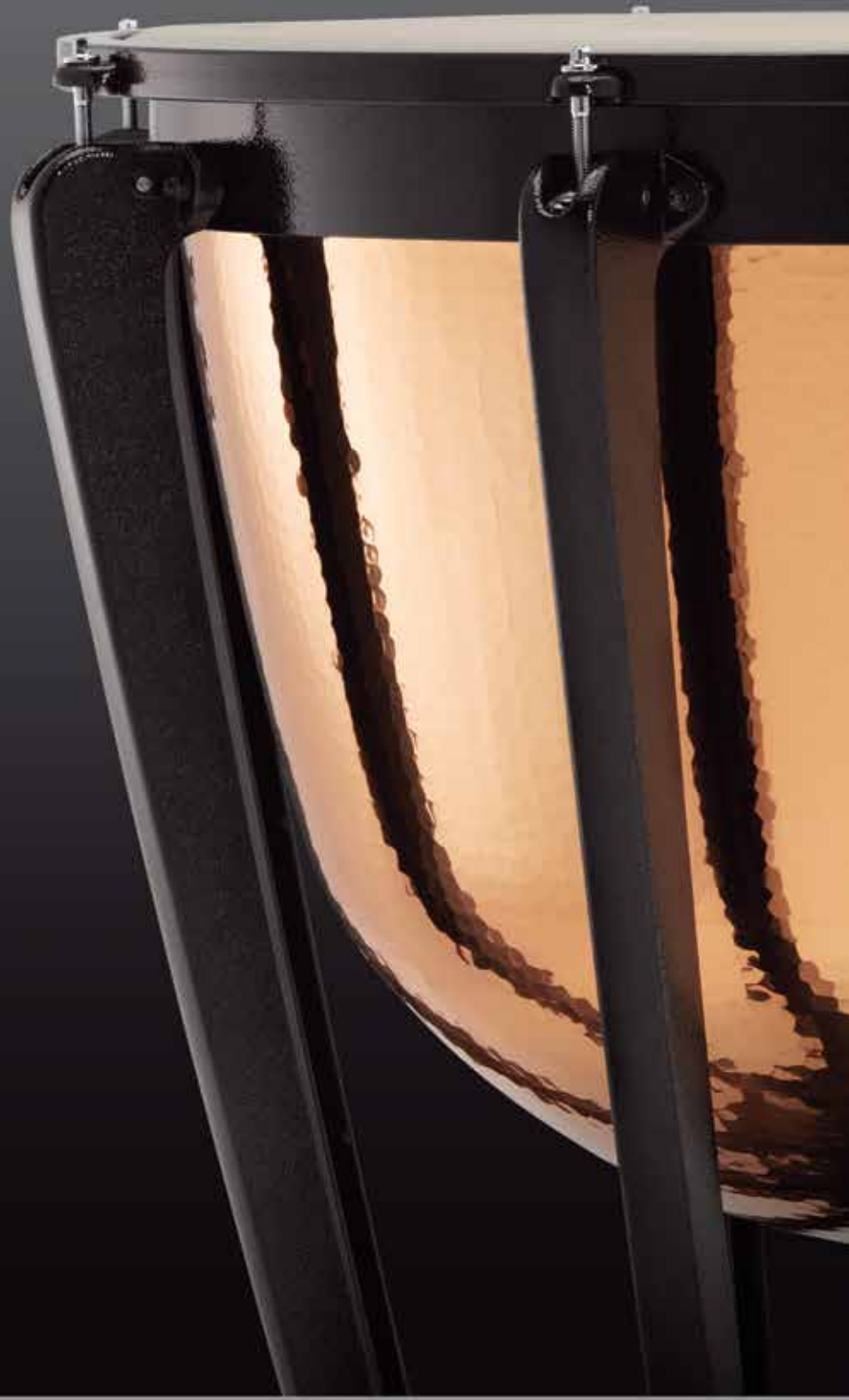
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Fraley: *How did that perception change as the year went on?*

Feeney: It didn't change so much as intensify. Tasks that I felt abstractly over the summer got pointedly real when I started working hands-on with everyone, and I needed to manage my time and effort to keep up.

Rivera: I immediately noticed that music students in general were lacking in several areas of performance, mostly through no fault of their own. Percussionists would come into college without having had experience on drumset, timpani, or holding four mallets, or sometimes reading music for different instruments—drumset notation, rudimental notation, for example. The other interesting thing was that no matter the student, they were always severely lacking in one area of percussion—for example, strong keyboard player but weak on snare, or vice versa. I spent my first year trying to make up for those deficiencies as best as I could within a finite time frame.

Meyer: My perception changed very little over the course of the year. I loved my first year at SFA. There were very few surprises. And, with the help of Dr. Harris, anything that came up was quickly resolved. Overall, I was fortunate to have great students and colleagues who were very open to my teaching and presence during my first year.

Fraley: *What best prepared you for your first position?*

Feeney: I had some experience working in my previous job as a non-tenure-track faculty member, which gave me a taste of the logistics—managing equipment, scheduling

lessons, preparing a syllabus according to a standard set by the university—that I would need to engage, as well as time to think about how I wanted to best interact with students who might be coming from completely different directions than I was.

Rivera: I honestly believe that my various backgrounds, both educationally and professionally, best prepared me for the diversity of students I am responsible for at my current position. My drum corps experience, along with my tenure at three different music institutions, exposed me to the gamut of percussionists, from the very weak to the exceptional.

Meyer: *Everything!* Learning as much as I could and taking advantage of every opportunity in years past helped me prepare for my position. However, I would say my most beneficial preparation for directing the percussion studio at SFA was gained during my doctorate at the University of Kentucky. Professor James Campbell allowed me and the other graduate students to be very hands-on in his studio. The opportunity to teach lessons, conduct ensembles, help decide music for concerts, and everything else I did at UK was crucial in my preparation to be an educator.

Also, my previous teaching experience at Centre College and Tennessee Technological University helped me prepare to teach full-time at the college level. After my doctorate, I started teaching at Centre, where I ran the percussion ensemble and gave lessons on drumset and one other area of percussion once a week to mainly non-music majors. I was fortunate enough to teach 18 private percussion lessons to mainly music education majors at TTU alongside percussion director Dr. Eric Willie, who needed some part-time help covering his load. Both of these experiences, along with the side projects I had at the time, helped me dovetail nicely into teaching full-time at a large university. Without teaching at Centre and TTU, I would have been grossly unprepared to teach at SFA my first year.

Fraley: *What were you not prepared for?*

Feeney: The scale of the position, especially on weeks when I am traveling for performances; handling the week's worth of work in three or four days is overwhelming. There are days when I have to accept the fact that I am not going to catch up with or make progress on necessary work, and I have to think carefully about blocking out time for it well in advance.

Rivera: How long it took to get acclimated to the new university and all of its idiosyncrasies. I was responsible for attending and/or completing several new faculty orientations, forms, meetings, and seminars. I had to learn a new set of course

numbers and multiple degree requirements in order to advise students. Learning 10 students' schedules and degree tracks can be quite overwhelming.

Meyer: There were not many things I felt truly unprepared to face throughout my first year. Dr. Harris was a great sounding board for me whenever there were any minor issues. Also, I feel fortunate that my position involves doing the things I have been trained to do. Some people I know have to teach classes or direct groups they would prefer not to—sometimes due to preference and sometimes due to lack of prior training—but are required to as a part of their job description. However, that is not the case for me; I really love all aspects of my position at SFA.

Fraley: *Were there skills that you had that the school found particularly interesting, or do you have certain skills that have made your job easier to do/manage?*

Feeney: I am half-improviser as a performer, and the mindset of “fixing the problem at hand, using what you have at hand” seems really applicable to many of our tasks. Teaching in particular is a dance between me and my student, and we serve the relationship best when we are fully present and I am not thinking textbook solutions to textbook problems.

Rivera: I think that my education and



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—Dr. Luis Rivera

teaching background were skills that the search committee found particularly appealing for the department. I am very much an advocate of teaching a student to become proficient on several levels of percussion performance, and I think the committee saw that in me when reading my vita. They explicitly told me they liked that I had experience in drumset and world percussion, and that I would incorporate those elements into my curriculum. I was also fortunate enough to have significant recording experience in my final performance degree, and I integrated that and other technological facets into my teaching and student performances.

Meyer: Some of the faculty at SFA have been interested in my integration of technology into lessons and music in general—for example, using websites as recruiting tools, recording private lessons in HD, and doing all my lessons sheets online. I believe my record keeping and organization skills have helped me immensely throughout the last year. All the equipment has a specific place and all my files and music are easily searchable. Also, so I could be more competitive in the job market, I completed a “Music Theory Pedagogy Certificate” during my doctorate, which prepared me to be able to teach freshmen/sophomore aural and written music theory.

Fraley: *What do you wish you had known before your first job?*

Feeney: I was not in the best habit of documenting things that I do, and it has been the biggest adjustment to my current position; our campus culture is meticulous about the way it handles the ways we record out activity. It pays at review time to document everything we do, and having done so, we can see the tremendous amount of work necessary to meet the needs of our studio.

Rivera: As silly as this may sound, I wish I had more insight into the process of ordering equipment and music, seeking out sponsors and endorsements, creating a budget plan for new inventory, contacting artists and clinicians for guest performances, and anything else associated with the operations of a percussion studio that is not teaching music. We always know about those things while we’re in school, but I never got the chance to sit down with one of my professors and actually go through any of those processes to see what it all really entails.

Meyer: I was fortunate enough to have Prof. Campbell as my teacher during my doctoral studies, and he was very open with how and why he ran his percussion studio the way he did. He also let me and the other graduate students make decisions that most

percussion directors do not let graduate students make. Also, he would describe and explain what makes different percussion programs successful and unsuccessful. By just being around Prof. Campbell, I was able to get a lot of insight about the real world aspects of running a percussion program.

Fraley: *What have you learned?*

Feeney: I try to make better attempts to handle problems—placing students in ensembles when they are dealing with course conflicts, broken heads on snare drums, figuring out lesson makeup times around a tour—as soon as I can. Obviously, I still struggle with this.

Rivera: Your own personal practice time goes out the window immediately! If you haven’t learned how to manage and maximize your time by this point in your career, you should either stay in school longer or switch to another profession.

Meyer: Be the teacher you would want to learn from, and be the faculty member you would want to work alongside with. Always offer your help, and try to find ways to help without being asked. Be involved with anything relating to your school and community whenever possible. Ask questions to both the students and faculty about what you and the program can do better. Constantly try to better your teaching and your program. Do as much as you can every day. If you are not tired and busy all the time, then you are not working hard enough!

Benjamin Fraley is a percussionist, composer, and educator currently in his doctoral studies at The Florida State University. A veteran of many musical genres and percussion disciplines, Fraley has performed and trained in Portugal, Canada, Ireland, Switzerland, Germany, Ghana, Austria, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, as well as the United States. He has also been a frequent performer at PASIC, the Midwest Band and Orchestra clinic, the College Band Directors National Association Conference, the American Bandmasters Association, the National Flute Association Conference, the Chosen Vale International Percussion Seminar, and MusicX, Grandin, Cincinnati Fringe, and Bang on a Can festivals. Fraley is also chair of the PAS University Committee. Visit his website at: <http://www.benjaminFraley.com> PN

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