

MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

MICHAEL NETTLES

By Corrinne Fahl



Michael Nettles, currently Senior Vice President of the Policy Evaluation and Research Center at Educational Testing Service (ETS), began his academic career in political science. After obtaining his B.A. from the University of Tennessee, he rapidly acquired an M.S. in Higher Education and an M.A. in Political Science from Iowa State University. While pursuing his Ph.D. in Higher Education, he was employed by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission as an Academic Affairs Analyst. In 1979, Tennessee introduced a plan to distribute state funding based on the institutional performance of a higher education institution, rather than funding based on the demographics of the student population.

The higher education landscape in Tennessee at that time was influenced by an ongoing series of cases against the state of Tennessee by a teacher at the Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University (now Tennessee State University), Rita Sanders. In 1968, Sanders initiated a class action lawsuit accusing the state of maintaining de facto segregation due to the existence of a post-secondary education system that operated separately for whites and non-whites, particularly Black Americans. The case went through a series of decisions, and in 1984, Nettles advised one class of Plaintiff Interveners in the *Geier v. Alexander* litigation. Nettles was also highly involved in advising

lawyers and writing critiques on Tennessee's desegregation goals for public institutions of higher education for the Legal Defense Fund in 1988. The Geier cases would not be settled until 2001.

Those prior experiences influenced his interest in assessment and access in higher education. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Nettles provided advising to a variety of institutions on how to develop assessment tools. From 1989 to 1992, Nettles served as the Vice President for Assessment for the University of Tennessee System, a position he left to join the faculty at the School of Education at the University of Michigan.

Nettles shared that his interest in institutional assessment also encompasses individual assessment, and how the results of the performance-based funding in Tennessee has influenced the ways states assess individuals. The differences in performance between predominantly White and predominantly Black institutions can be addressed in many ways. First, support needs to be evenly distributed. Second, the metrics need to be examined to reveal any bias in the assessment tools themselves. How can an institution be evaluated fairly if the tools used for that evaluation were inaccurate and faulty on the individual level?

Nettles has published prolifically on the topic of race and student retention, desegregation, and the achievement gap since 1982. One important result of his research was the *African American Education Data Book* (1997, with Laura Perna), a three-volume collection examining the entire educational life cycle of the African American student. The project was funded by the Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, part of the United Negro College Fund. Data in this detail and breadth, available in a single source, was a huge step for research on equitable access to education and the systemic educational outcomes. Nettles was only in his second year as the Executive Director of the Patterson Research Institute when the publication process was initiated.

<https://cmsi.gse.rutgers.edu/content/msi-oral-history-project>

Nettles had been serving on the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) for some time before he began work on the *African American Education Data Book*. The NAGB administers the National Assessment of Education Progress (also known as the nation's report card). He continued to serve on the NAGB until 2004.

The importance of his work in these and similar venues became even clearer when Nettles was appointed to the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for African Americans in 2014. He shared a story on how the commission came about and that he felt that the administration believed in the goals of the commission, but any real change would happen at the glacial pace of all political endeavors.

Over his long, multi-faceted career in higher education and assessment, Nettles has seen shifts in public opinion and popular theories. When asked what he thought could be done to best address inequities in education, he spoke first about individual standardized testing. The nature of standardized testing is to most accurately measure the "majority" population. This leads to inconsistencies when assessing other parts of the population. Even if testing can be made fair (which is impossible, although Nettles is part of a group of researchers working to make tests more equitable) there are many aspects of a person's ability to learn and succeed that don't lend themselves to quantifiable assessment. One specific area he mentioned as difficult to address in assessment was persistence, which can be addressed with carefully designed background and summary questions, but is often undetectable in tests like the SAT or the GRE. Because persistence is an important quality for remaining in school until graduation, it is worthwhile to investigate how we can measure it when discussing admission decisions.

Nettles also discussed schools moving away from standardized testing as well as admissions committees being trained on implicit bias and mitigation techniques. Holistic admissions processes are on the rise in the United States and focusing attention on admitting bodies on viewing applicants as whole people is clearly something that he considers to be a goal of his work.

Nettles has dedicated his career and his research to understanding the impact of assessment at institutional and individual levels. State level politics, national level educational review, desegregation, educational access equity, and student retention are some of the areas his work has touched over the years. The importance of assessment and data as ways of influencing policy is clear, and one path towards better policy is better assessment. The research Nettles has contributed towards this end will continue to influence policy for a very long time.

Minority Serving Institutions Oral History Project

The MSI Oral History Project shares a glimpse into the lives of prominent scholars and leaders across the MSI landscape. This initiative was born out of a class titled "Understanding Minority Serving Institutions," in which students interviewed key figures in higher education who have led Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), work to advocate for MSI inclusion in larger discussion within higher education, or conduct MSI-related research. These important individuals range from faculty in higher education to MSI presidents to those working within nonprofit organizations that support MSIs.