Samuel Totten earned a master's degree and a doctoral degree at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he studied under Dr. Maxine Greene, Dr. Ann Lieberman, Dr. Dwayne Huebner, Dr. Lawrence Cremin, and Dr. Karen Zumwalt. Totten also earned a BA and a MA in English from state universities in California.

Totten has taught at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, since 1987. In addition to teaching in the Middle Level Master of Arts Program, he is also the Director of the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project, an affiliate of the National Writing Project (University of California, Berkeley). Totten is also a member of the Council of the Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide (Jersusalem), and the Centre for Genocide Studies (Sydney, New South Wales, Australia). For four years (2000-2005), he served as the book review editor of the Journal of Genocide Research. Currently (2005-present), he is the co-editor of Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal.

During the summer of 2004, Totten served as one of the 24 investigators with the U.S. State Department's Atrocities Documentation Project interviewing black African refugees along the Chad/Sudan border in order to collect data for the express purpose of ascertaining whether genocide had been perpetrated in Darfur.

Totten has been the recipient of the College of Education and Health Profession's Teaching Award (1991-1992); Service Award (1992-1993), Service Award (2000), Research Award (2003), and All-Around Award (2004). He was also the recipient of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction's Teaching Award (1993), Service Award (1995 and 1997) and Research Award (2003, 2005 and 2006).

He was also the recipient of the National Council for Teachers of English's Richard Meade Research Award (for his co-publication of the book Teaching Social Issues in the English Classroom) and a 1995 EdPress Award for "best single theme issue of 1995" that acknowledged his co-editing of a special issue ("Teaching About the Holocaust") of Social Education, the official journal of the National Council for the Social Studies.