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MAA Leaders Get a Lesson on the SEC

SEC history buff Mark Windham speaks at MAA Leaders Weekend.

Story by Kelsey Allen

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Mark Windham got around town this week. Windham, a professor of entomology and plant pathology at the University of Tennessee since 1985, is an SEC fan through and through. But more than that, he is an SEC historian. He teaches a freshman seminar on SEC history and occasionally brings his expertise to other parts of the country.



SEC historian and University of Tennessee Professor Mark Windham addresses more than 175 Mizzou Alumni Association volunteers as part of the Alumni Leaders Weekend on Sept. 14, 2012. Photo by Nicholas Benner.

From speaking to students and the Columbia community at the Missouri Theatre to addressing the MU PR Council at Memorial Union to talking with attendees at an event sponsored by the Mizzou Botanic Garden, by now he probably knows his way around campus and can add a few more colorful tidbits to his newly minted slide on the Missouri Tigers.

On one of his last stops on his tour of Columbia, he swung by the Reynolds Alumni Center to present to Mizzou Alumni Association volunteers as part of the Alumni Leaders Weekend festivities. Among discussing engagement strategies for chapters back home, developing leadership skills and exchanging ideas for fueling Tiger spirit, the more than 175 leaders in attendance on Sept. 14, 2012, also had the chance to listen to Windham give his rousing presentation.

Over the past year, Windham has talked at about 14 alumni functions. This was his first time not wearing orange. Dressed in a black button-down, Windham drew out the laughs with lines such as, “Just be grateful your mascot isn’t a barn animal,” in reference to the South Carolina Gamecocks and the Arkansas Razorbacks.

Ten minutes into his presentation, an MAA volunteer raised his hand and asked, incredulously, “So if you go to the University of Tennessee, you can take a class in the history of college football?” Without skipping a beat, Windham said, “Welcome to the SEC. Y’all have some catching up to do.”

But he also addressed the importance of education in the SEC. In fact, his class only came about after Tennessee discovered a problem with retention: They were losing 28 percent of their freshman class due, in part, to a feeling of disconnect between the students and the senior faculty. To combat the problem, administrators asked professors to teach a class on a topic of their choice to a maximum of 20 freshmen and open up that line of communication. For the past seven years, Windham has been teaching about SEC football. Tennessee now has a retention rate of 89 percent. He also pointed out that the SEC was the first conference to buy radio ads touting not only their sports victories but also their academic successes.

Windham ended his presentation with a bit of friendly advice for the leaders in the room: “Every game is important. Every week for you now is the week of Kansas.”

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