

**James Lambert 0:17**

Welcome to W&L After Class, the lifelong learning podcast. I'm your host, James Lambert, filling in for Ruth Candler in the last episode of our sixth season, and previewing my gig as host in season seven. Today is a fitting way to both end season six and begin the 2025-26 academic year as we talk to Provost Lena Hill. Lena Hill began serving as Washington and Lee Provost in July 2021 after having served as dean of the college for three years. And today's podcast is especially serendipitous for me, as I got to first know Provost Hill, or know of Professor Hill, when I was a graduate student at the University of Iowa while she was teaching graduate classes in African American literature and visual culture, if you know her, it goes without saying that she was a legend. While I was at graduate school, a model of rigorous teaching, scholarly acumen, and most importantly to us, personal and professional grace. Provost and Professor Hill is known internationally as a scholar of Ralph Ellison, and in addition to publishing numerous articles and essays, she has authored three excellent books, including *Visualizing Blackness* and *The Creation of the African American Literary Tradition*. She received her bachelor's from Howard University and her PhD from Yale University, and she completed postdoctoral work at Duke University, and in today's conversation, we will talk about Lena's role as provost, her vision for academic curriculum at W&L, and her omnivorous interests in all things bright and beautiful. Lena has prioritized the support and growth of interdisciplinary programs, the recruitment and retention of excellent faculty and faculty mentoring and development. It is great to be with you today, Provost Hill.

Lena, welcome to our podcast today. To start, many of our listeners may not fully understand what a provost does, so I thought we might start there. How do you describe your role to someone outside of academia?

**Lena Hill 2:22**

Thank you, James for having me so excited to be here, and that is a perfect first question. It's one that many people ask me, and if they don't, it's just because they're feeling shy. So in the world of academia, a provost is the chief academic officer, and that simply means that I get to work very closely with President Dudley and other members of cabinet, but I also get to support an incredible group of academic leaders and faculty who are really responsible for delivering the exceptional educational experience all of our students receive here at W&L. So who does that include? I work really closely with the academic deans, those in the Provost Office, the Director of Athletics, the director of the library, the directors of our museums, as well as many, many others, our registrar's office, the directors of all of our academic centers and programs that really enhance the experience, not just of our students, but of everyone in the W&L community. So that includes community-based learning, international education fellowships and student research, the DeLaney Center, the Mudd Center. I mean, it's really an exciting kind of work that I get to do. And James, you know this, I'm an English professor. So for people who first are introduced to the role of provost via Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure*, or a play like that, the provost is the keeper of the prison keys.

**James Lambert**

Yes, I do know that.

**Lena Hill**

I love to think about that, because I think my role is exactly the opposite. We invite students to W&L, and then we give them the keys to unlock all their potential and all the things they're gonna do for the rest of their lives.

**James Lambert 4:00**

I like that the opposite of the prison keys. It's like the keys to the kingdom or something like that. We're welcoming a new class of undergraduate students. We're welcoming a new group of athletes coming in. We're even welcoming a new group of law students who are not necessarily undergraduate students. All of those things fall under the purview of the provost. So what do you want those students, the law students, the undergraduates, the athletes, who are undergraduates, to get out of their time at Washington and Lee?

**Lena Hill 4:31**

I am always so excited that for each of those groups of students, I know they are on the cusp of an incredible experience. Our undergraduates, it's the first time for many of them being away from home. They are really exploring the full breadth of the liberal arts. Our law students are coming from all kinds of undergraduate institutions. Many of them have been working but they are now at a moment where they have decided what they really want to focus on, what they are most passionate about, and that is a different kind of excitement, a different kind of intellectual energy that they bring. And then our student athletes and all the others, our student athletes actually come first. So I always say, when we get here and we start seeing the football players and the others come to campus, they set the tone. They bring the energy. And let me tell you, they bring it.

**James Lambert 5:25**

As you mentioned, you are a fully tenured professor in two different academic departments, Africana studies as well as English, and you are provost. So I wanted to ask, is there any kind of do those different roles? Either compete complement one another. Do they work together? How do you see those roles working in tandem?

**Lena Hill 5:46**

They definitely complement each other. And I say that specifically thinking of the way that my work unfolds at W&L, because I still get to teach, and I think that's really important, because for those of us who end up moving into academic administration, we have to remain connected to why we do what we do, and for me, it is definitely the love of the classroom and of getting to engage with our students. So you mentioned I'm a professor of English and Africana Studies. I really focus on African American literature and visual culture over a very long time span from the late 18th century to the middle of the 20th so I still teach that area, both in a course on campus as well as in our study abroad program, and it really keeps me fired up and passionate about getting to oversee the whole breadth of our academic program, if I can stay inspired about my own work.

**James Lambert 6:41**

A fired up and passionate provost is the perfect kind of provost. Professors are often fired up about their field. You mentioned visual culture. What is that? I mean, and what makes that different from like something that an art historian might teach and tell me how you got into that.

**Lena Hill 6:59**

That's great, and I actually became interested in Visual Culture via art history study. So my junior year of undergraduate, I spent, I did my undergraduate work at Howard University, but I spent my junior year, the first part at Williams College and the second part in Italy, in Florence, Italy, studying high and late Renaissance art, really as a heart, as an art historian would. It was my first experience studying art history, and I just loved it, and immediately began thinking about the ways it informed my experience with African American literature. So as I really kind of progress. Through my own academic journey, I began to realize that many texts by black authors, whether they be novels or plays or even poems, were focused on a protagonist or a poet speaker who, while not illustrating their texts was very cognizant of the fact that their readers were focused on their racial identity, so these writers then invited their readers to see them or their protagonists, engaging visual art, engaging paintings, engaging sculptures, maybe in a museum setting, Maybe they're just in a house, but in those moments in the texts, we slow down and it becomes what I would describe as an ekphrastic moment. What does that mean? It means we recreate a piece of art and a piece of literature, and by doing that, readers necessarily focus on the sophistication of this protagonist, mental mind of their emotional state, and that allows these African American writers, without coming out and saying, I want to display the beauty, the sophistication of these individuals and their texts, they invite the reader to actually see it happening.

**James Lambert 8:58**

You're an Ellison scholar, and as you're talking, I immediately think of the frame of Invisible Man. Invisible Man, just the title itself, is visual culture. What are you seeing? Do you see the protagonist and the opening and closing? I believe in visible man is in a white room. He's wondering if he's visible. So is that what we're talking about when you talk about ekphrastic and visual culture?

**Lena Hill 9:21**

Partially, but it goes beyond that. And I love that you bring up Invisible Man and that you-

**James Lambert**

I knew you would!

**Lena Hill**

-are so sophisticated in thinking about the framing of the text. But it's more than just Ellison playing on that metaphor of visibility. There are so many moments in the text. For instance, early on in that protagonist college career, he actually pauses and thinks about this monument of Booker T Washington that actually exists on the campus of Tuskegee University, and he expects that we are familiar with that sculpture and that we understand as he's recreating that

moment in his text, what the protagonist is really asking us to think about in terms of Booker T Washington's role as a college university president, but even more broadly, as a leader of African Americans. And so that's a really great example of an ekphrastic moment. And in my own archival research on Ellison, what I realized was a couple of things. One, Ellison was very interested in visual art. Actually, spent a summer studying with Richmond Barthe, who was a sculpture doing a sculptor during the Harlem Renaissance, that he was incredibly interested in photography. So, when I say visual culture, I'm really thinking of visual artifacts that populate the text and that Ellison very intentionally asked us to engage with.

**James Lambert 10:43**

As I'm hearing you talk about your interests, I want to go back to that moment where you go to Florence, Italy. Is that the moment where you decide this is what I want to do for a living? Do I want to study this? You know, get my PhD, become a professor. Is there another moment is there a mentor that guided you towards that? Tell me about your own trajectory, career trajectory.

**Lena Hill 11:01**

So, I don't think that was the moment that I realized I wanted to pursue my PhD, but it was the moment that I realized there was so much more to learn and that I wanted more time to do it. Then I discover there's a lovely way to do that and have someone else pay for that experience in graduate school, which really is a gift in and of itself, to get to have that time, to just bury yourself in an area and a field that you love. So I don't know when I recognize I think it was my senior year when I returned to Howard and I was talking to a faculty member and expressing my passion for all that I was learning what I wanted to continue to study, and he began really outlining what it would mean to pursue doctoral study. And side note that was actually the professor who directed me to talk to my now husband, Michael Hill, about graduate studies. So it was a win-win.

**James Lambert 11:56**

Oh, mentor and matchmaker. I like that and actually thinking about undergraduates, this is the beginning of a new semester, and when students have to choose a college, they choose what they want to learn, what type of college. Once they get there, they have to choose a major, and then eventually they choose a career. But that very rarely happens as a simple build. It always has twists and turns, mostly unexpected from your own experience and from your observations as provost, do you have advice for students on how to expect the unexpected when they start as undergraduates and then as they go throughout their career?

**Lena Hill 12:34**

Well, one James, I love the way you just put that to really invite right those unexpected moments, not to think of them as disruptions, as things that are somehow throwing you off your stride, but embracing what they mean to that educational journey. And I love inviting and welcoming our newest students to W&L's campus, because they're at this wonderful moment when they don't have to be to have already decided exactly what they're going to study. There's so many things that they're going to discover while they're here. And the thing that I

hope most for all of our students is that they embrace the serendipitous nature of the liberal arts curriculum. And what do I mean by that? I mean that we intentionally invite them to explore all areas of the humanities, of the natural and social sciences, of the arts, of I mean, all of these areas that they may not even know how to describe. And we say you don't have to know exactly what you want to do. What we want to do is give you the time to explore and to figure out, what does light that fire, and then we're going to support you to pursue that in all kinds of ways that maybe you can't even imagine. So what I always hope is that they don't actually pressure themselves to be able to articulate in some finely wrought sentence exactly what they want to major and minor in, or even go on and pursue as a career, but that we just say, open yourselves to the unexpected and follow those paths as your own heart would guide you.

**James Lambert 14:05**

What I found myself telling people is that Washington and Lee is a sure thing. Your major may not be, there's a bunch of other things. So if you have Washington and Lee on your diploma, you're pretty good regardless of the other options you have. But I wanted to ask you about you discussed a liberal arts education and what that is. And you've also worked, and this is where we first met. You've also worked at a big research institution, and I should say for the listeners, I was a graduate student when you were in your first tenure track job, if I'm not mistaken, and we, I, we have almost have the same timeline there, only there was a hush when Dr Hill walked by. *Have you taken a class from her? She's really good*, and then we find ourselves together again. But that was a big research institution. What's the difference between what we have now in Washington? Lee and a big research institution.

**Lena Hill 15:02**

Well, thank you. That was very kind, and I treasure those early moments in the classroom. We all learned so much from our students, and I really enjoyed my time at the University of Iowa. I think what we learn having experiences at different kinds of institutions is how fortunate we are to live in a space where different institutions cater to different family needs, different student needs. So I had wonderful colleagues, wonderful students at the University of Iowa, and I think that the education they received was excellent in so many ways at W&L, I feel privileged to stand on a stage and talk to parents and talk to incoming students, and to be able to tell them, we're going to be able to make just about everything you want to come true in terms of your academic interests. We're going to be able to make that happen that we're small enough to help you create the kinds of relationships with your faculty members, with each other with fantastic staff members, that you're going to be able to do things that maybe you don't even know you want to do. We're going to be able to give you research experiences in labs that aren't reserved for post docs or for those on fellowships as an undergraduate. You're going to be able to publish. We're going to be able to send you abroad, and it doesn't matter your financial situation, we're going to be able to say, if you want to go on a spring term to anywhere in the world, just about we'll make that happen. Those are some of the immediate differences. Being at a small school that is well resourced, where we have some of the best faculty in the world waiting to welcome students into these different areas of the entire curriculum. It, it's kind of breathtaking for me, but more so it's, it's really exciting. It's, it's

humbling. So I can't say, I mean, we're small, we can't educate everyone in this country and this world, so we need places like the University of Iowa and other big R1s, but for students who do choose and are able to come to W&L, who are accepted and come to join us, it's really an incredible opportunity that they have.

**James Lambert 17:14**

Those spring abroad courses are incredible. You've done one. I don't know how many you've done you've done. You've probably done several, but you've recently done one in France, if I'm not mistaken, tell us about did you were you able to combine visual culture and literature? Tell us about the France experience with students.

**Lena Hill 17:31**

Yes. So I have taught a course in France a couple of times, African American literature and the allure of Paris. And during that course, we really focus on African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance in the post world war two era. It I love, I love the course I teach, but I also would love to take the courses that my colleagues teach, because they're really incredible, because this represents place based learning, which I think brings a subject alive for students. So in answer to your question, yes, definitely am able to combine my love for literature with my love for the visual arts, because we begin with Harlem Renaissance writers who are so invested in both. We read Langston Hughes. We think about Gwendolyn Bennett, who herself was literally a poet and a visual artist. We go to Marseille, and they get to read Claude McKay's romance in Marseille, and then go to the places he features in that book. And then when we turn to the post world war two era, we read the best Richard Wright, I mean, James Baldwin. We go to the cafe where he was working on one of his novels. So students have all of those opportunities. But we also go to jazz clubs. We go to the louver so they see all of the visual art from all over the world that really impacted these writers during the time of their study and living in France.

**James Lambert 18:54**

That experience is available to all Washington and Lee students. Maybe not that specific experience, but you try to make a study abroad experience spring term, you mentioned it was available to all students. I don't quite understand. How is it available to all students? Is this something that the university has done as part of its Gen Ed curriculum, or anything like that? Or no?

**Lena Hill 19:15**

So, when I say that the full W&L experience means that no matter your abilities, in terms of your finances, if you would like to pursue these experiences, you can. And when I say these, it's both study abroad, it's domestic, study away, it's also research experiences, all the things that sometimes increase the cost of an education. We really guarantee that all of our students can have access to that you mentioned general education. Yes, we want to make sure that these and other experiences that we describe as high impact experiences, those things that we really know, help students reach their full potential, that every student can pursue, that no matter no matter their financial situation.

**James Lambert 19:58**

All right. Buzz around is that the university is revising its Gen Ed curriculum, and the Gen Ed curriculum is sacred to many people. What you just described as a signature or a piece of the Gen Ed curriculum sounds incredible. I'm just curious, how would you describe this Gen Ed curriculum change, and is now the right time.

**Lena Hill 20:24**

Thank you for asking about that. I you know, I'm really proud of our current general education curriculum and also proud of the work our faculty have done in revising it, and I should just say that we have a terrific program, so we're building on strength, and we understand that, but we are also never unmindful of the future, never complacent, always wanting to make sure that we're offering our current students, our future students, exactly what they need. So let's, let's think about that, because I, I love hearing you say that people are passionate about the general education curriculum as they should be. It is the way that every student at W&L is introduced to the breadth of the liberal arts curriculum, and we will continue to do that. We simply ask ourselves, How can we do it more effectively? So when the faculty began thinking about revising general education, they began surveying students and faculty and asking, you know, what's your experience now, we weren't surprised to hear that students had really good things to say about the courses they took as part of general education, about the faculty. Many of them ended up taking several courses with a faculty member after having discovered them in a course they were taking to fulfill a Gen Ed. What did give us pause, though is that many students weren't as reflective on their Gen Ed experience as we wanted them to be. They didn't make connections between the courses, between how those courses actually influenced their major course of study, their minors, the things they wanted to do when they graduated. So in many ways, the new general education curriculum is more intentionally building on the strengths of the current one. It continues to be distributive. We don't invite you to study the breadth of the liberal arts. We kind of insist, and we will continue to do that. But we also have learned a lot about what our students need. So I just mentioned study away and study abroad and research experiences. We refer to those as signature experiences in the new general education curriculum. And now, whether you're a savvy student who comes in knowing that it would be great to have an individualized research experience with a faculty member, that you really do need to have a summer internship, that going away to a different country to study is something that really will enhance your undergraduate education, whether you come in knowing that or not. We think the general education curriculum should push you toward discovering that, and so those are the kinds of additional requirements that we've added to enhance what is already an incredibly strong general education curriculum.

**James Lambert 22:59**

Well, from your mouth to my heart, I love the idea of insisting on students studying as widely as they can. I don't know why a professor likes the insisting on a student studying wide. You just talked about the undergraduate experience and getting breadth and having a signature experience. So I'm going to ask you this, if you were to speak to your undergraduate self, the freshman or sophomore at Howard. What kind of advice would you give that Lena?

**Lena Hill 23:31**

That Lena, oh, that excited, future oriented, Lena, you know, there are many things I'm happy I didn't know as a young person, and looking back, I would say, retain that openness and that willingness to acknowledge that every path you begin down, you're not quite sure where it will take you, and that's okay. So I would say to younger Lena, retain that I do wish that Lena journaled more. I'm so curious well now that you know when I when I travel and have new experiences, I often write about them, one because my memory is not as good as it once was, and so I recognize that if I don't write, I may not remember exactly what I saw in that incredible exhibit, but I would love to know what sophomore in college Lena thought when she met Desmond Tutu shortly after the fall of apartheid in South Africa and sat chatting with him.

**James Lambert 24:30**

And I want to know what young Lena thought. You know, I'd love Desmond Tutu thing, because that's the real question.

**Lena Hill 24:37**

That's the question. But those are the kinds of things, right? What I think when I first saw the David, what I think after my first rugby game, all of those things. So I would say, you know, slow down and realize that each of these experiences is really special. I think, I think that's what I would what I would say.

**James Lambert 24:57**

That's beautiful. You're a reader. In your downtime, from what I understand, just curious, is there a particular book you remember, you remember reading during your undergrad, and maybe it was for a class, or maybe it was on your own, and it made a huge impact on you and changed some things for you?

**Lena Hill 25:18**

Okay? I'm gonna say two. Okay. The first book is Their Eyes are Watching God, favorite novel. But in graduate school, the novel I read that surprised me, and I loved it so much I dreamt about it at night was Charles Dickens, David Copperfield, so yes, when Demon Copperhead came out, I could not wait to read it. And if anyone has not read it. It is as good as the height.

**James Lambert 25:42**

This is Barbara Kingsolver, Demon Copperhead, yeah, so those are the two books I what I would say is Great Gatsby, which happens to be our first year reading this time, and that's probably why I snuck that question in there. But yes, Their Eyes Were Watching God and David Copperfield, well done. Excellent choices. All right, I have a couple of other questions, lightning round of questions for you, and they come from some of your responses earlier. They're not it's not a quiz. You just can answer very quickly. So the first one, I needed to know if something akin to what we call the Harlem Renaissance happened today. What city or place would get the name instead of Harlem? I recognize the Harlem Renaissance happened all over, but Harlem got got the moniker, it got the name. Who What would get the name?

**Lena Hill 26:31**

Now I'm gonna say Atlanta, and that's a bit of hometown pride, okay, but I also think of the burgeoning film industry there of the incredible writers that are associated with Atlanta and the culture of food. So I'm going to say Atlanta, because when I think of the Harlem Renaissance, I do think of all of the different arts and different contributors that made that such a rich moment. And did I say music? Okay? I was going to say because I graduated with members of outcast and so and Goody mob, so, so, yes, Atlanta.

**James Lambert 27:08**

Atlanta, the Atlanta Renaissance. All right, Lena, what's a film or television show that you can re watch at any time?

**Lena Hill 27:16**

The Sound of Music.

**James Lambert**

Why?

**Lena Hill**

Why I love so much about it. It's so beautifully gets at the depth of relationships and how relationships actually create the connections that lead you back to artistic loves. So in many ways, what seems like a light hearted musical about a young nun in the mountains of Austria is really a way for us to both explore a really difficult moment on the world stage and how a love of singing, which, for me, in that moment, takes becomes a vehicle for the arts, keeps us grounded, reminds us of our deepest values and commitments.

**James Lambert 28:01**

And it's about fashion, because those Von Trapp play clothes are amazing, made out of the curtains. I second that they're amazing. I've always wanted the Von Trapp play clothes. Finally, what excites you most about the future for Washington and Lee?

**Lena Hill 28:18**

I think we are so fortunate to be building on strength. We are always striving toward excellence, but unlike so many other institutions that are struggling in different ways, we have the privilege to look at what we do really well and then make it better. We have incredible alumni and others who support our mission so generously. I'm always blown away by the way we can think up something and then we're supported to do it. So yes, we're opening new buildings like the Williams school. Yes, I look forward to a new Science Center. I'm so excited about all that's in the future, but I also love that we do not shy away from interrogating our past. I'm very excited about the institutional history museum and the way that we will wrestle with questions that our nation has been wrestling with since our inception. W&L does so many things well, but it's because we are able to welcome the strongest students, the best faculty,

the most dedicated and talented staff. We are able to do what we do because of the people, and that makes me excited about W&L today and W&L in the future.

**James Lambert 29:33**

That's beautiful. Lena, many thanks for taking some time to talk with us today and for what it's worth. Thank you for your leadership and your vision. And thank you to all the listeners for joining us, if this is your first time or if you are Lifelong Listener learners. This marks the end of season six of W&L After Class podcast. Yes, we have had six seasons, which makes us a longer running show than Breaking Bad or even Downton Abbey. I'd like to personally thank Ruth Candler for running the show, interviewing our guests and designing the podcast format for the last six seasons, and I'd like to personally wish her well in her retirement. We will start season seven in January with me, James Lambert, as your host, and with a few small changes to the format. If you are like me, The anticipation is absolutely unbearable, but if you just subscribe, you'll be the first to know when the new season drops. I'd like to remind you to visit our website, <https://www.wlu.edu/alumni/lifelong-learning/>, for other Lifelong Learning opportunities on campus, on the internet and well all over the world. Make sure to explore our Show Notes for today's episode with Provost Lena Hill. Thank you to the team behind this podcast and until next season, Ruth and everyone else, let's stay in touch, not unmindful of the future.