

Ruth Candler (intro)

Welcome to W&L After Class, the Lifelong Learning podcast. I'm your host, Ruth Candler, and today we're excited to sit down with someone who brings deep thought and wide-ranging perspective to our campus community. Philosopher, Professor, and University President, Will Dudley. If you've listened to previous episodes of W&L After Class, you'll know that our conversations are with faculty who share their experiences, insights, and expertise. Today's conversation is no different. While higher education has recently been a frequent topic in the news, President Dudley's focus on W&L's students is unwavering, so we're keeping our conversation true to our W&L After Class format and focusing on his role as an educator. In this episode, President Dudley shares what first drew him to philosophy and the big questions that continue to inspire his work. We'll explore why he's chosen to remain in the classroom, even as president, and how his course centered on W&L's mission statement encourages students to wrestle with real world concepts like honor, integrity, and civil discourse. From philosophy to flyfishing and symphonies to student life, it's a conversation that goes well beyond the office walls. I hope you enjoy our conversation as much as I did.

Ruth Candler

So, President Dudley, welcome to W&L After Class.

Will Dudley

Thanks, Ruth, glad to be here.

Ruth Candler

So, I'd like to go back in time a bit. When you were a kid, what did you dream of becoming?

Will Dudley

Well, I think I wanted to be a professional football player. Growing up in Washington, I was a big fan and turned out I was small and slow and skinny, so that didn't work out. And then I wanted to be a world class mathematician. I was really inspired by the idea that we could prove things that hadn't been proven and discover universal truths about the nature of math. You know, like Pythagoras. I wanted to be Pythagoras.

Ruth Candler

I think that's the first time anyone has said that in this podcast.

Will Dudley

It's true. I wound up a math major.

Ruth Candler

So, math major, and when did you decide that you wanted to become an educator?

Will Dudley

I think it was a little bit of a gradual process. The first time I remember that occurring as a possibility was sophomore year of college, and I was in my first philosophy class, Philosophy 101 Intro to Moral and

Political Philosophy, and I loved it. And I realized that my teacher, this amazing professor, was actually getting paid to spend his life, you know, thinking and talking and writing about the most interesting ideas in the world. And I thought, well, that seems like a pretty good gig. So that was first time it occurred to me.

Ruth Candler

So it was that it was that professor that ignited that spark.

Will Dudley

You know, I went to a small Liberal Arts college and had a lot of great teachers and loved the whole experience. But I do remember that particular... in that class, a little light bulb went off that maybe that's a job I would like.

Ruth Candler

Was it a specific philosopher as well?

Will Dudley

It really wasn't. I think it was more just the process and activity of philosophy, which is really, you know, intellectual combat, just sort of the greatest minds arguing with each other about the most important questions. And I just found that so exciting that, you know, I wanted to be part of it.

Ruth Candler

It seems like you're more intrigued by the questions than the answers, which I suppose is a philosopher's trait.

Will Dudley

You know, we generate very few answers and lots of questions and arguments. So, I guess that is true. If you're... it's... I do think that philosophy is about asking the most important questions, exploring them to the best of your ability, but you have to be comfortable with the fact that pretty rarely do you get the answers that everybody agrees about.

Ruth Candler

How is that curiosity shaped your approach to both scholarship and research?

Will Dudley

I mean, I think, I think I've always been a fairly curious person, but I think it's one of the things that a great Liberal Arts education does for people, is, you know, broaden, and deepen their curiosity, introduce you to all kinds of questions and disciplines that you probably growing up weren't aware of. That happened for me. Philosophy was one. I went to public school, never, never heard of philosophy, hadn't encountered it. And, you know, in college, I took, you know, economics and other things that weren't available in my high school. And you know, it just broadens your view of what there is to learn. I love that. I mean, that's just sort of who I am. But I think a great Liberal Arts education brings that out in people.

Ruth Candler

Most university presidents step away from the classroom. What drives you to keep teaching, and why is it important for you to stay connected with students in that way?

Will Dudley

Well, I guess selfishly, I love it. It's, you know, it's why I got into this business in the first place. Like I said, I was inspired by a great teacher. And so, what I imagined that I might try to become was a college teacher myself, and that's what I was aiming at. I didn't go to grad school so I could one day become an administrator. I just... that was not what I was setting out to do. I wanted to be a Philosophy... a Philosopher and a Philosophy teacher, and so that's why we're here. It's why the whole institution is here. It's why I do what I do as the president, is so that we can be really great at teaching. That's the whole point. And so, I want to be part of that. And I also love our students. And so, I only get to teach one class a year. That's all I have time for. But you know, I get to know 15 W&L students in a much deeper way than I otherwise would, which is, again, selfishly, just enjoyable. But I think it, it makes me better president, because I know who they are a little bit better. I went fishing with one of the kids who took my class this semester yesterday. You know it's has lots of...

Ruth Candler

You know I was gonna ask, what it- what else it brings to your life, other than that fulfillment as an educator, but I guess that's it, doing things with your students.

Will Dudley

Yeah, there is that I often say, truthfully, the best part of my job is anything that involves students, and sometimes that's a lot of the time, it's just watching them do what they do really well. It's watching them, you know, play lacrosse, or give journalism presentations, or, you know, sing, or all the amazing things our students do. But sometimes I get to do things with them. I'm never going to sing with them, but I will, but I will go fishing with them if they invite me.

Ruth Candler

I've not heard you sing.

Will Dudley

Yeah, it's not going to happen.

Ruth Candler

Well, let's talk about your work in the classroom. You teach a course centered on the W&L Mission Statement, what inspired you to build a class around it, and what do you hope that students take away from it?

Will Dudley

Well, so the broader it's basically a class on the Philosophy of Education and Liberal Arts education in particular. And you know what? What is a great Liberal Arts education? And how do we make one happen? And I did a version of that class at my previous institution when I was a Philosophy Professor,

and I co-taught it with the president there, who was an economist. So, we taught it, we taught a class on the Philosophy and Economics of Higher Education. Basically, what are we trying to accomplish, and how do we allocate our resources to make it great? And I learned a ton teaching that class with the President, and it was part of my journey to getting interested in becoming a President. And I also saw how much the students got out of it, from learning in a much deeper way about the school they attended and how it worked, and what it was trying to do for them, and they got to reflect on whether they were actually doing the things that we were hoping that they would do. And so, when I came here, it I wanted to keep doing that.

Ruth Candler

So, our mission statement is a short but powerful statement. Would you recite that for us?

Will Dudley

Sure, I love it. It is, indeed, it's, it's two sentences. So, it says, "Washington and Lee University provides a Liberal Arts education that develops students capacities to think freely, critically and humanely and conduct themselves with honor, integrity and civility". That's the first sentence, and it talks about what we do with students in the four years we're here. And then the second sentence is about after graduation, when they're alumni. So it says "Graduates will be prepared for lifelong learning, personal achievement, responsible leadership, service to others, and engaged citizenship in a global and diverse society". So in my class, we examine every word of that statement.

Ruth Candler

So, dissecting a mission statement, to me, it's a unique idea for a class. What kind of challenges do students tend to grapple with in this course?

Will Dudley

Well, I think- So, it's a philosophy course. It's open to anybody that aren't any prerequisites. So, I have a mix of everything from eager first year students to Seniors who want to check out the President before they graduate. So, they're coming to it with different degrees of experience being college students. And some of them are Philosophy majors, and some of them it's their first and maybe going to be their only philosophy class. I think the things they- the challenges that they grapple with, are really what I hope they find in any philosophy class, or almost any, any class at W&L, you know, how do they- How do they express their own views in, you know, clear and concise ways? How do they respond, you know, respectfully but forcefully to either me or their classmates or the authors we're reading when they either don't understand or disagree with something that they hear or read? How do they- One thing they in their papers I expect them not only to tell me what they think, but to imagine the smartest person they can think of who disagrees with them and present that view too, and then respond to it, right? You can't let yourself off the hook by just assuming that everybody agrees with what you have to say. And that part's hard. It's hard. That's hard for all of us. It's hard for them.

Ruth Candler

I'm curious if there's been any conversations in those classes that have surprised you or maybe even seen a student's perspective change over time.

Will Dudley

Well, I hope you know, I'm sure that happens frequently. I mean, there's no particular perspective that I am trying to, you know, to get them to arrive at, but I do- a big part of philosophy is getting you to examine your own perspective, right? Socrates sort of kick this off with unexamined life is not worth living. And so, philosophers are all about examining what are my own assumptions, and trying to be honest and do I actually have good evidence for the things that I believe. And so, any philosophy class worth its salt. You will have students who come to see things differently than- when they started.

Ruth Candler

Talk about opportunity for personal growth across the board.

Will Dudley

I love it when they surprise me because it makes class a lot more interesting. You know, it's, yeah, my job is to facilitate a great discussion, and I make it really clear. You know, we're sitting at one table. It's me and 15 students around a single table, and you know, I want them to disagree with each other. I want them to disagree with me. And you know, I want there to be a lot of back and forth. And you know, we get that. They take to that like ducks to water. They love it.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, well, it sounds like you're also teaching them how to agree to disagree.

Will Dudley

Yeah, absolutely.

Ruth Candler

So, as we all know, you wear another hat here on campus. I'm curious if you hold office hours for that philosophy class, and also if it takes a student a while to start interacting with you as a professor and not as the President of the university.

Will Dudley

Well, it's true. And I tell them that they can, and they do, you know, reach out to me at any time, so that, you know they have my- they can email me, and I will- I will meet with them anytime that they you know, they need me to meet. But my schedule is such that I don't, I don't have fixed office hours at a given point in time every week, because I'm often traveling or doing other things. But they know that I am very available to them. I always like talking to them, so we do lots of that. What was the other part of the question, yes, about office hours?

Ruth Candler

If they- if it takes them a while to begin interacting with you as a- as a professor, and necessarily the President of our institution.

Will Dudley

It really doesn't. And I love that, you know, it really doesn't. And I think, you know, I don't- I walk into the room the way I have my whole career as a Philosophy Professor, so I don't walk in wearing a President hat. Obviously, they know who I am, and so, but I don't, you know, I don't need to, like, emphasize that. They know I'm the President, but I, you know, I sit down and I'm a philosophy teacher, and really, day one, they're, they're good to go, which I like.

Ruth Candler

Over the years, I'm sure you've discovered some approaches that really work when engaging students. What have you found to be especially effective in sparking participation or deep thought in the classroom?

Will Dudley

Yeah, that's, that's the job, right? That's what we're supposed to do. I think it takes a number of things. You need to assign things that are worth reading, right? And that are, you know, complicated and important enough to be worth talking about. And then you kind of need to strike the right balance. You need to figure out, as a professor of you know, of this kind of class, how to ask a good question, you know, a question that's open ended enough if you already know the answer to the question and its sort of obvious what the answer to the question is, it's not going to generate good discussion. On the other hand, if it's- if it's too open ended, you won't get enough focused conversation. So, there's really an art to figuring out, how do I ask a question that will get their attention and give them enough, enough structure that they know what to talk about, but enough, you know, leeway, that they can take it where they want to. And I mean, I would say that as a teacher, that's something that I've, you know, work at all the time, and I've tried to get better at my whole career.

Ruth Candler

So, you just shared approaches that work with engaging students from your perspective as a philosopher and educator, why do you see freedom of expression and the engagement with diverse perspectives as a critical component of a meaningful education?

Will Dudley

Yeah, I mean, I think that's kind of the core of the whole thing, to be honest. I mean, if you're gonna search for the truth, you can't do it unless you are exposed to all the plausible hypotheses that are worth considering. So, you need to have freedom of, you know, the ability to have your, you know, your mind why range widely over you know the various options that that folks can generate that are worth exploring, and the freedom to explore those you know deeply and construct and evaluate arguments based on evidence and reasoning. So, it's you know, if we're in the truth seeking enterprise, you just can't do it without free and critical thinking.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, so that's the difference between a set mindset and a growth mindset. And so, if you have- if you approach somebody with a set mindset, how would you how would you go about changing that?

Will Dudley

I really do think it's about asking questions. I mean, sometimes people's minds are set for good reasons. You know, they actually know something, and they have good evidence for it. And you know, not everybody's mind needs to be changed about everything. You know, if somebody is of the view that the Pythagorean theorem is true, well they're right. Now, if I were a math teacher, I'd want them to be able to demonstrate to me why it's true, but I wouldn't try to change their mind about the truth of the Pythagorean Theorem. You know, in philosophy, what you do is ask people why they think what they think, right? You know, so what do you think? And they might be able to tell you that, and then, and then you ask why, and if there are any parts of it that you think are not well enough supported, then you kind of press on that and you know, encourage people to either come up with better evidence or stronger reasons, or else maybe they have to reconsider the conclusions they hold.

Ruth Candler

So, from your vantage point, what would you say is the most valuable aspect of a liberal arts education? Having said everything that we just, we just said-

Will Dudley

Yeah, I think, you know, we've hit on a lot of it. I don't, I don't think I can boil it down to one thing. I think, well, I had a wise colleague once who said that that he saw the purpose of a liberal arts education as making your mind a sufficiently interesting place that you could enjoy living in it for the rest of your life. And I thought, that's not bad.

Ruth Candler

That's pretty cool!

Will Dudley

That's not bad. And so maybe I should just leave it at that. I generate that, but I like it, and I but I think expanding our curiosity, expanding our ability to explore subjects on our own. I mean, the great thing about college is you have all these amazingly talented teachers to guide you right and then, but then you graduate, and you know, hopefully you're going to live a long time between age 22 and the rest of your life. And of course, you will find other teachers along the way, but there's going to be a lot that you need to teach yourself. And so hopefully students at a place like this absorb how to go about learning something when it seems important or interesting, and how to, you know, how to ask a good question, how to synthesize complicated information, both in the form of, you know, written language or quantitative data. Hopefully, we provide all those tools in it, and it does, in fact, make people's lives more interesting along the way, and also, you know, I think all the evidence suggests it serves people really well professionally, too.

Ruth Candler

So, before we wrap up our podcast today, I want to shift gears a little bit and talk about your life outside of W&L.

Will Dudley

Okay, sounds scary.

Ruth Candler

I promise it won't be. So, I-

Will Dudley

At the moment there is no life outside. That's it. This is going to be a short section.

Ruth Candler

There we go. There we go. I have too many questions for that. I'm curious to hear what undergraduate class you took that pushed you furthest outside your comfort zone, and what you took away from that experience.

Will Dudley

Gosh, it's a really good question. I can think of a few different candidates. One might be the History of the Symphony. So I, you know, I was, I was a Philosophy and Math major, and I was pretty good at those things, and I took classes in math and philosophy that definitely, you know, pushed me hard and challenged me, but one of the things I loved about a small liberal arts college was you were encouraged and even required to take things you know, well outside your chosen fields. So, I took both an Introduction to Listening to Music and then the History of the Symphony, and I had no experience playing music and no musical education, and that became evident to both me and the professor. So, you know, pushed me pretty hard-

Ruth Candler

But a brave choice!

Will Dudley

What I learned a whole lot, and it, you know, it has expanded the range of, you know, music that I can enjoy and know something about.

Ruth Candler

Do you still listen to symphonies?

Will Dudley

Sometimes it's, you know, I won't, I won't say it's always the top of my playlist, but, but I do, I enjoy classical music and jazz and the blues. And-

Ruth Candler

Is that- Is that the genre that you gravitate toward?

Will Dudley

Rock and Roll...

Ruth Candler

Or is there-

Will Dudley

Which one?

Ruth Candler

Well, you said Blues or Jazz.

Will Dudley

I listen- I am very eclectic. And my wife would tell you that I listened to the whole kind of history of American popular music, which is, you know, a great mash up of Jazz and Blues and Rock and Roll and all kinds of other experiments.

Ruth Candler

You had mentioned earlier that you go to a lot of sporting events and student activities, and I know that you and Carola do attend as many as you can. What would you want alumni and parents to know about these extracurricular activities?

Will Dudley

I mean, I guess maybe three words that come to mind for me in watching them are our passion and talent and joy. And that's, I mean, that's what I really think they're all about, you know, are, and some of that, of course, is talents that students have when they arrive. We already know that, you know, particular kids, part of why they come here, and part of why we want them to come here is because they are brilliant musicians or athletes or other things. And some of their extracurricular passions are things that they discover here maybe they've never gone rock climbing, and it becomes a thing that they love most. So, I just, I think it's evident that whatever they're doing, our students are giving it their all, and they are astonishingly good at a wide range of things, and they have a lot of fun doing it, and that's infectious.

Ruth Candler

So, you mentioned earlier that you don't have a lot of time away from campus, and we know that, especially in the spring, so we are grateful that you took the time to join us today. But what do you enjoy doing when you're not on campus?

Will Dudley

Yeah, well, I mentioned that yesterday I got to fish with two students, and I would, I would actually, these days I'd put that at the top of my list, and that, speaking of lifelong learning, that's something so flyfishing has become a real passion. And I had never done it before I came to W&L, but a lot of our students do it. The having clubs a huge thing here, and so they introduced me to it actually back in the pandemic, when there weren't a lot of things you could go stand in a river.

Ruth Candler

10 feet away.

Will Dudley

Yeah, and I love it. I mean, there's a- there's a ton to learn about the natural world.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, it's an art.

Will Dudley

There's, there's, there's a lot to learn. It's both, you know, it's a science and an art. And for me, just being out in the area we live in, which is unbelievably beautiful, and exploring it and trying to think like a fish. That's I like spending my free time that way.

Ruth Candler

That could be a title of our podcast today. Think Like a fish. So, did you? Did you grow up fishing like in a pond?

Will Dudley

Just a little bit. No, my, my parents were not outdoorsy people, and I grew up in, you know, suburban DC, in Arlington, Virginia. And so, the short answer is, only- we would go to the beach for vacation and, you know, throw a line in the water, standing on the shore. My wife noticed how much I like to do that, actually, on vacation maybe five years ago. And she said, you know, there's a lot of water around Lexington, maybe you should try fishing at home. And I said, you're a genius. That's a great idea!

Ruth Candler

Good job. Well, I'd be remiss not to ask you about your experience as our faculty host on last summer's Lifelong Learning tour to Scotland and Norway. What were some of the highlights or memorable moments for you?

Will Dudley

Gosh, that was a fantastic trip.

Ruth Candler

I wasn't looking for that well but thank you!

Will Dudley

You don't have to look for it. It's true.

Ruth Candler

Glad that you enjoyed it!

Will Dudley

And I had, it was a long time coming, you know, I had, I had wanted to do one for many years, and for various reasons, the scheduling didn't work out, and the pandemic canceled one. And so, Carol and I were finally able to go, and we went to Norway and the islands on the northern end of Scotland. That

was my first cruise. Everything about it was first rate. The company is amazing, right? We had the ship had a couple 100 guests on it, about half of whom were from W&L and so, you know, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I sat with, you know, four or six amazing W&L alumni or former parents. And, you know, you just had great conversation with people. We all had W&L in common, and we all had in common that we were excited to be exploring Norway and Scotland, you know, and then we got to know each other too. So it was, was really wonderful.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, so a mix of learning and camaraderie.

Will Dudley

Yeah, absolutely.

Ruth Candler

So, before we go, I have to ask, is it true that if a student catches you using your phone on campus, you donate \$100 to their favorite charity?

Will Dudley

It is true. I pledge that to our students every year, so they know that about me that's all about the Speaking Tradition, which I love. It's hard to say "Hello" to people if you're staring at your phone. So, I tell them that my phone will be in my pocket when I'm outside, and it always is. And so, I have made that pledge for eight years, and I have never been caught. So, because I'm not, I'm not looking at my phone, I'm saying hello to people. And you know, I hope other people will join me in that.

Ruth Candler

So, it's a great tradition and a perfect way to wrap up today's conversation. President Dudley, it's been a pleasure having you today. Thanks for joining us.

Will Dudley

Thank you, Ruth!

Ruth Candler (outro)

Thanks to you our listeners for tuning in before we sign off don't forget to visit our website, Wlu.edu/lifelong for many other lifelong learning opportunities. Make sure to explore our show notes for today's episode with President Will Dudley. And while you're there, take a moment to meet the incredible team behind this podcast. Until next time, let's remain together, not unmindful of the future.