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## Personal Reflection

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## **CAITLIN HOBBS: SENIOR PROJECT PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

As a sophomore, I began to wonder what I would study during my Senior Research Project for the Southern Scholars program at Southern Adventist University. The variety of possible topics was overwhelming and the amount of work it would take was daunting. But although I was a little anxious, I just had a feeling it would all fall into place. Little did I know, the journey would be one of the hardest I experienced during my college years. Thankfully, what began with anxiety, uncertainty and ambiguity would develop into a project designed with God's help every step of the way—a ministry and a journey I never would have dreamed possible. My hope is that my experience will encourage all students, especially Southern Scholars, to finish strong and to rely on God, even with the journey is difficult and intimidating.

By the end of my junior year, I had developed a plan for my project on my own. However, during the fall semester of my senior year, this plan for my project was falling apart and I needed a back-up idea. I had set my heart on accomplishing my initial plan and had invested hours of time and effort to make it happen. Unfortunately, as this plan began to take longer than expected and began to lose momentum, I had absolutely nothing to fall back on. Time was of the essence—my goal was a May graduation! I actually began to doubt I would graduate as a Southern Scholar at all.

After three years in the Southern Scholars program, I considered giving it up due to my daunting predicament. But I was so close to finishing and my heart ached to finish strong. I had been trying so hard to do so. My first project plan had not been an unworthy investment of time and energy either. Working in the Human Performance Lab with a research team, we set out to coordinate a research study on the metabolic efficiency of obese women in the Collegedale area. The study involved testing their resting metabolism, body composition, and aerobic fitness levels after a whole foods diet intervention and a 6-week walking program. I was planning to focus mainly on the dietary intervention, while my colleagues and professors looked at the differences between different intensities of exercise. We were seeking to narrow down the plethora of possible causes of metabolic shifts between levels of fat and carbohydrate burn, a fascinating area of research. When it began to look like I may not have my data in time to graduate in May, I began to realize I needed to brainstorm other ideas. But with lack of ideas, I felt helpless and thus considered giving up all together.

Even though I considered giving up, I held on and kept trying because of a perspective deeply rooted in my heart. Before I would be ready to truly finish with a healthy mindset I would need to confront and process this mentality. You see, I had begun to place a lot of my worth in the Scholars program. I was feeling that without having Southern Scholars on my diploma, my degree would have no value at graduation. I felt worthless as an “ordinary” student and my thoughts sounded something like this...*I'm just a Health Science major...and I don't really know exactly what I'm going to*

*do with my life. I chose this route and so it is my fault I'm where I am. Therefore, I HAVE to graduate as a Scholar to make my parents proud and feel like these four years were worth anything at all...I literally could not comprehend not being a Scholar. I was so very broken inside at the thought of letting it go.*

Throughout this struggle, I was coming closer and closer to an experience with God that would change my life and alter this perspective. Up until this point, my status as a member of the Scholars program had been based my desperate need for affirmation. As I was faced with the idea of giving up the program, I realized that this achievement had become a very real idol in my life. My greatest fears were rooted in my membership, and with a project standing in my way of finding my worth, I was desperate to hold on and find *something* for my project. When a friend reminded me that my worth was based in much more than my Scholar status, I suddenly realized that if God asked me to let the program go, I would protest very strongly and would not be able to obey. Thankfully, God mercifully began to open my eyes to this distorted way of thinking and started to show me the ways He could shape me through this challenging time.

My first lesson came from 2 Chronicles 20. King Jehoshaphat's people came to him out of desperation when a great army was coming against them. They were terrified, kind of like I was in the face of hopelessness and desperation. Instead of being strong and calming them down, the king, too, was afraid. And so they all went before the Lord their God and Jehoshaphat said, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes *are on you.*" (2 Chronicles 20:12, NIV). Then God told them not to be discouraged because the battle was not theirs but *His*. They would not have to fight the battle because *He would fight for* them and He would be with them, if only they would stand firm and trust Him.

My heart finally gave up fighting as I accepted that I was broken as could be. Like King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles, I had no idea what to do. And so I decidedly told God that my eyes were on Him and this was now His battle to fight. I began to come to terms with the fact that living without Southern Scholar title was possible because my true value came from God, not any accomplishment of my own. I firmly decided that if I finished the program it would be because it was God's will, not mine. I knew that the *only* way I would have victory in this battle would be through His strength and providence alone.

Before the Lord even delivered Jehoshaphat, he and his people began to praise the Lord for what he could and would do. Like them, I praised God for the guidance he would give in the midst of my situation and strived to continue walking with my eyes on Him instead of on my circumstances. I chose to continue trusting that if it was His will, He would guide me to a project. I would no longer strive so that I could one day say, "I did this..." Instead, I chose to surrender so that I would be able to proclaim, "He has done this through me. I could never have done it without Him by my side."

My first thought for another project came to mind as I was reflecting on my course of study. *If only I could do something that combines religion and health*, I thought

multiple times. I faintly remembered some students doing the “Daniel Diet” for religion classes, but I had not a clue how that would be possible to coordinate for a research study. Despite my uncertainty, I knew testing students who changed their diet in this way would bring interesting results. Those that know me would not have been surprised by my intrigue—I *love* nutrition!

When I mentioned this “Daniel Diet” to my Exercise Physiology professor, he said that Katie Schuen, the Wellness Director for Campus Ministries, had been working on starting "The Daniel Challenge" on campus. He suggested I ask her about it and I followed his advice. When I spoke with her, she said she had been hoping and praying for someone who would coordinate the research behind the scenes of the Daniel Challenge. I did not realize it at the time, but this first meeting with Katie would quickly grow into something greater than we could have imagined ourselves—something so much bigger than us—something that would surely fail without God.

Throughout this time of indecision, I had been talking with my best friend, Jason, as I was trying so desperately to decide between my initial project and this new possibility with Katie and Campus Ministries. For my Christmas gift, he felt impressed to send me a book by Susan Gregory (2010) entitled *The Daniel Fast*. I read it within the first week of Christmas break and decided that I would do this so-called Daniel Fast myself at the beginning of 2013 to start off my new year with dedication and purpose. I was so excited for my own journey! But I was even more excited that the format of this book would be an excellent way to implement the fast on our campus. Little did I know that God was gently leading me with this idea and that I would soon be coordinating 40 subjects and scheduling their metabolic testing!

I proposed that the Daniel Challenge team have a small portion of the Southern students do only the Daniel Fast for research purposes. To have a solid research foundation, we needed a group to do the Fast only to eliminate some of the variables in the Daniel Challenge plan. Katie met with Lilly Tryon, our faculty sponsor, and, instead of just agreeing to the fast along with the Challenge, they were both convicted not to do the Daniel Challenge at all. In fact, during their meeting, the man who was initiating the idea of the Challenge texted Katie telling her that he felt convicted not to do the Challenge this year. Katie and Mrs. Tryon then reviewed the Daniel Fast proposal and accepted it as the best option for our campus.

God was leading us all to be on the same page without even communicating, and we began to truly feel God leading us towards the Daniel Fast. First, I believe He led Jason to give me the book for Christmas. And then He led Katie, Mrs. Tryon, and I to the same convictions. I began to pray for all details to continue to fall into place if it was truly God’s will for me to adopt the Daniel Fast as my senior project. There were three proposals that needed to be approved in order for us to proceed with the plan. I decided that if all of these went through without trouble, I would know that this was the path I should take.

Katie and I proceeded to draw up a solid proposal for Campus Ministries that outlined a specific plan. This plan was approved quickly. I still had to have the Scholars Faculty Committee approve it as well as write an Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal and wait for feedback. The possibilities got more exciting every day. The Scholars Faculty Committee approved my change in plans. The IRB proposal took only a few hours to write and was approved within a few days. I then knew without a doubt that God had been working in us and using us.

Sometimes, Katie and I were nervous and anxious about the endeavor. After all, this project was so much bigger than just two full-time students could coordinate! A lot of stressful planning was involved. However, although we knew that *we* could not do it, we knew that God *could*. Trusting God to be by our side every step of the way, Katie and I proceeded to coordinate the 28-day Daniel Fast on campus, complete with food service labels for appropriate foods and an Agape Feast for all participants at the end. We watched as students learned about themselves, the goodness of natural foods, and the importance of growing in a relationship with God.

I realized the significance of God's work on the last day of the fast. Many powerful stories were shared during the Agape Feast. As I looked around the room, I could tell that hearts had been moved and lives had been changed. Without a doubt, the destination we had reached that night at the end of the fast made all of the planning, stress, and uncertainty worth the tiring journey. I could not believe that my senior project—once a source of such confusion and anxiety—had become a powerful testament to God's grace and power. My senior project had become more than just a project—it had become a ministry and a real journey with God for myself and many others. My project had become more than another requirement to graduate as a Scholar—it had become a symbol of a very important process taking place in my own life with God.

Throughout the planning, preparing, fasting and testing, Katie and I encouraged each other in faith saying, "This is *God's* project. We can't do this but He can." I *must* say that implementing the Daniel Fast was not my idea, but His, and He provided everything necessary to make it happen. The Daniel Fast t-shirts say, "I completed the Daniel Fast with God by my side" and the story of this project is no different. I completed the Daniel Fast senior project with God by my side and I owe every accomplishment to Him.

What began with me wondering *if* I could combine religion with health science in some way ended with God doing abundantly more than all I had asked or imagined (Ephesians 3:20, NIV). My project was a testament to the truth of the promise, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13, NIV) and the same is true for every Southern Scholar. We can do anything through Christ who gives us strength. Everything we do should be *for* God, whatever the discipline in which we study. My hope and prayer for every Scholar is this: that the words "Southern Scholar" would be more than a title, that we find our value not in our accomplishments but in Christ, and

that whatever the focus of our ambitions may be, we strive to be excellent not for our own glory, but for the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord and our King.

I hope that you enjoy reading about how our Daniel Fast affects the mind, body, and spirit. As Scholars pursuing faith-based academic excellence, we can especially appreciate the potential impact on the mind. However, nutrition's impact on the body and spirit cannot be ignored. My hope is that all three dimensions will be seen as invaluable and equal in importance for living the abundant life God intends for us to live. The three dimensions go hand in hand, and the interdependencies are truly fascinating. Blessings as you read about this God-designed project, and how it relates to His amazing creation—us.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first express my gratefulness for this project to you, God. I am truly amazed at the work you have done for me and for others. Thank you so much that I have been able to finish strong and that my project has been such a wonderful character-building, faith-deepening experience. I would not trade it for anything in the world and I owe it all to you.

Jason, you have been used by God to support me throughout this entire journey. I could *not* have done this without your wisdom, support, and encouragement. I probably would have given up, but God used you to keep me strong. I am so glad you've been on this journey with me! Thank you for always being there every day, every moment I needed you.

Katie and Mrs. Tryon, thank you for being on the team during the Daniel Fast. Katie, you know I could not have done this study without your support through Campus Ministries! And Mrs. Tryon, your time and wisdom were incredibly valuable to me throughout the planning and implementation. I am so thankful we were *all* able to be on this journey together and I will cherish the memories of how God used us for years to come.

Professor McGrath, thank you for your support in the later stages of this journey! Your encouragement and enthusiasm about this project have done wonders for my spirit as I tried to finish strong. You always have inspired me to do my best and I am so thankful for every bit of help and encouragement. I could not have finished this without you.

Dr. Mayer, thank you for supporting this project through allowing me to use the Human Performance Lab. Also, thank you for your passion for research. I strongly believe that God used you, your experience, and even the research meetings I attended with you to prepare me for *this* ministry!