UNDERSTANDING THE BLACK COLLEGE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

D·PREP SAFETY DIVISION

Reflect on these narratives:

➤ Jasmine, a first-generation college student, works two jobs to cover tuition and rent. "Sometimes I have to choose between buying textbooks or groceries," she says. One semester, she missed an important assignment because her job hours conflicted with her class schedule. The financial pressure has left her exhausted and anxious, affecting her grades and sense of belonging.

➤ Carlos, a sophomore, frequently hears classmates say things like, "You're so articulate for a Black guy." He recalls, "It feels like they don't really see me. They only see stereotypes." This constant, subtle bias made him withdraw socially and question his place on campus, causing isolation and stress.

➤ Maya struggles to find professors who understand her cultural background. "I felt invisible in my department," she explains. Without mentors to guide her, she missed opportunities for internships, which impacted her confidence and career prospects.

➤ Trey, a light-skinned student, has a hard time fitting in. He recalls feeling, "Like I'm too light to belong, but too Black to be fully accepted anywhere." This form of colorism created a deep sense of alienation, forcing Trey to constantly defend his identity and leading to emotional exhaustion and social withdrawal.

Whistling Vivaldi & Code-Switching

The concept of **Whistling Vivaldi**, coined by social psychologist Claude Steele, refers to how individuals adjust their behavior to counteract negative stereotypes about their social group. For the African diaspora, this might mean consciously changing their speech, dress, or mannerisms to avoid confirming harmful stereotypes about Black people. While these adaptations can help reduce stereotype threat and bias in the short term, they can also create pressure, stress, and feelings of inauthenticity, making it harder for students to fully relax and express their true selves in the campus environment. This behavior is closely tied to **code-switching**, where Black students shift between different ways of speaking or behaving depending on the social context, such as using more formal language in class or at work versus informal speech with friends. While code-switching can be a helpful skill, it often requires extra mental effort and can contribute to feelings of exhaustion and a sense of not fully belonging.

Jamal, a talented Black athlete living on a residential campus, feels the pressure to constantly "whistle Vivaldi" and code-switch. On the basketball court and in casual dorm settings, he speaks and acts in ways that reflect his cultural background and close friendships. However, in academic lectures or team meetings with coaches and faculty, he adopts a more formal tone and carefully monitors his behavior. "I'm always aware of how I'm coming across—like I have to prove I'm smart and disciplined," Jordan explains. This constant switching between different versions of himself creates stress and leaves him feeling drained, as if he's never truly able just to be himself.

Black students on college campuses often navigate complex social and psychological challenges rooted in systemic racism, underrepresentation, and cultural misunderstandings. Financial hardships, stereotype threat, microaggressions, and a lack of mentorship combine to create barriers to academic success and mental health. However, resilience, culturally relevant support, mentorship, and inclusive campus climates have been shown to improve outcomes. Educational institutions must actively dismantle barriers and foster environments where Black students can thrive authentically and without the need for constant code-switching or "whistling Vivaldi."