



Eduardo Padrón

UPFRONT

DID YOU KNOW THAT THE GREAT EQUATORIAL rainforests are known as the “lungs of the planet?” In fact, the Amazon forests alone produce 40 percent of the world’s oxygen. When it comes to pharmaceuticals, one in four originates from plants in the rainforest, and some 1400 rainforest plants are believed to offer cures for cancer. These dense, opulent jungles

cover just 2 percent of the Earth’s surface, yet are home to more than half of the world’s animal, insect and plant life.

And of course, amidst the fascination, the bad news proliferates: We humans have now destroyed half of the world’s tropical rainforests. Fifty football fields worth of rainforest are lost to human activity each minute.

Duly provoked, an entire classroom of Miami Dade College students joined their professor for a summer in the Costa Rican rainforest. They met

can education, often referred to the troubling distinctions between doing and knowing, emotions and intellect, experience and knowledge. He called them forced dichotomies. Is the learning more effective in the classroom or the forest? Clearly, both offer unique advantage. No matter the technology, the classroom will never approach the feeling of setting foot on the forest floor. Likewise, the capacity to reflect and assess is hardly foremost when every step brings an assault on the senses.

civic engagement. It proposes to integrate community work with course objectives and provides structured reflection and assessment, not only regarding learning outcomes but also community work. Students are discovering that life in the city can be as fascinating as the species found in the rainforest.

“Service learning opens eyes, topples walls, nourishes critical thinking, stirs up excitement, creates bonds, turns on light bulbs, turns off prejudice,” offered one professor. “In short, it gives teachers and students a powerful text that lives and breathes. It encourages us to read, critique and appreciate the world, perhaps more closely than many of us are used to. It answers the question, constantly, how does this class relate to me?”

Community colleges are prime exponents of the service learning ethos. MDC’s program is the nation’s largest, with close to 40,000 students having participated in the past 10 years. More than 200 faculty members have integrated service learning into their courses, collaborating with 200 community agencies.

Student contributions run the gamut. Business stu-

dents assist a non-profit with strategic planning while others prepare tax returns for the elderly. English instruction, environmental cleanup, counseling at-risk youth, teaching computer literacy . . . the list goes on. MDC’s America Reads program alone provides one-on-one tutoring to more than 2,000 at-risk elementary-aged children every week at 65 schools.

More than 1,000 colleges and universities now offer service learning courses, with 30 percent of college students having engaged in service learning to date. They have provided \$5.6 billion in service to their communities.

It has been muttered in recent years that we are a democracy in decline, that we take our freedoms for granted. Perhaps. But from the rainforest of Costa Rica to the broken neighborhoods of Miami and back into the classroom, a wave of young citizen participation offers reason for hope. **H**

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peasant farmers, wealthy cattle ranchers who have cleared miles of forest to produce cheap beef, and of course, they communed with the forest’s unimaginable variety of life.

So, why the science lesson, why the travelogue? John Dewey, regarded as the father of Ameri-

with their communities. In the information age, relevant learning, learning that isn’t trapped in books and doesn’t stop at the campus boundary, is required.

“Service learning” seeks to bridge Dewey’s dichotomy of doing and knowing as it provides students an avenue into