

# WOMEN'S

ISSUE

As women in this world, we've got issues — and so EW's first Women's Issue is born. We don't want to leave topics like reproductive rights, workplace equality and representation in the media to be covered in this March section alone; they deserve timely attention year-round. (Call us!) Instead we have profiles of local women on our radar. We applaud women who stand out, love them or hate them, so here are some conspicuous local women. — Shannon Finnell

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD COOPER



## Yvette Alex-Assensoh

### LOOKING TO EMPOWER PEOPLE

After 18 years teaching, doing research and serving as the dean of Indiana University's Office for Women's Affairs, Dr. Yvette Alex-Assensoh was drawn to the University of Oregon by a desire "to open doors to people with a variety of backgrounds." Alex-Assensoh serves as vice president of the University of Oregon's Equity and Inclusion Department.

"I think the bottom line of the work that I do is about empowering people," she says. "And by empowering people in the state of Oregon, we empower and enhance the standing of this state. In turn, as we do that, we empower America as a global entity."

A political scientist, licensed attorney and registered family mediator, Alex-Assensoh has had a hand in the creation of five books, through authoring, co-authoring or editing. Her latest book, *Immigrants and American Racial Politics in the Early 19th Century*, is "about the impact of immigration in changing the way that we engage politically in America, especially around issues of voting and public policy."

Intrigued by how a person's racial background, language, gender and class — all aspects of inclusion — led to power, her initial studies at Indiana University were related to the urban underclass, specifically trying to uncover how being a social outcast and social marginalization relate to the political world.

"If we have people living in these underclass neighborhoods, how does that affect how they see themselves as political actors?" she asks. To help answer that question, she received funding from the National Science Foundation, the Social Science Research Council and the Ford Foundation. She then surveyed white and black underclass neighborhoods to learn how the people inhabiting these areas behaved.

"The similarities were just amazing," she says, "that whites and blacks who previous researchers discussed as really separate political animals when it came to voting, and when it came to political attitudes, expressed themselves and behaved similarly in the context in which they lived."

Her work has been inspiring but that doesn't mean it has been all smooth sailing for her office, with a cloud of controversy hovering over Johnson Hall. On Jan. 7, protesters, many of whom were Native American, stood outside voicing their displeasure regarding two related matters: the recent dismissal of former vice presidents Emilio Hernandez, Carla Gary and Tom Ball and not being included in the restructuring process. The *R-G* reported that the office didn't consult with Oregon's nine tribes prior to making the changes, which upset much of the Native American population. The protesters desired to meet with Alex-Assensoh, but she was unavailable at the time. Alex-Assensoh declined to comment on the topic.

Still, Alex-Assensoh says her ultimate goal as vice president is to help put conflicts to rest and make all feel welcome. "People who were warring for whatever reason can be compelled to create a new reality where both parties live amicably and where everyone has an opportunity to benefit and thrive," she says. — Nick Poust