

**CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE:**

Because of multiple editing errors, an article Friday about MIT professors serving in the Obama administration gave the wrong department for several professors. Professor Eric S. Lander is Course VII, Biology, not Course VI, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science. Professor J. Chappell H. Lawson is Course XVII, Political Science, not course XVIII, Mathematics. The same article also gave the wrong expansion for an executive branch office. The OMB is the Office of Management and Budget, not the Office of Budget and Management.

The article also provided incorrect information about Professor Deborah J. Lucas and her work, and omitted a word from a quotation. Lucas is a full tenured professor of finance at MIT in Sloan School of Management, she is not a visiting professor. Lucas's work at the Congressional Budget Office does not involve providing budget estimates, but rather refining the methodologies used to produce those estimates. Lucas said she had noted in 2001 insufficient attention to "federal financial obligations," not to "federal obligations."

## Professors Called to Washington to Serve, Advise the President

By Ana Lyons and Omar Abudayyeh

STAFF REPORTERS

September 4, 2009

Since Obama stepped into the White House, he has called on several MIT professors to work in or with his administration. Four have taken temporary leave from the Institute to work full-time in Washington, and others serve as advisers. These professors have taken on diverse tasks: managing budgets, crafting policy, overseeing legislation, and working with other countries.

The four working in Washington are: Xavier de Souza Briggs, a professor in Course XI, now associate director of the White House Office of Budget and Management; Professor Michael Greenstone, professor in Course XIV, now chief economist of Council of Economic Advisers; Chappell Lawson, professor in Course XVIII, now director of policy and planning for the Department of Homeland Security; and Deborah Lucas, visiting professor in Course XV, who doesn't work for the Obama administration, but is in a leadership role at the Congressional Budget Office.

Some professors also advise the President. Course VI professor Eric Lander chairs the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, whose ranks also include Course VIII professor Ernest J. Moniz, and former Course XII professor Mario Molina. The panel guides the President on current scientific issues.

### Xavier de Souza Briggs, Course XI: Associate Director of White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB)

In an e-mail, Xavier de Souza Briggs said that "as associate director of OMB for 'general government programs,' I oversee about half the cabinet agencies — shaping their budgets, ensuring consistency of their policy proposals and planned Congressional testimony with the President's agenda." Briggs said he works with "a number of independent entities, from the financial regulators and FCC to the US Postal Service."

Briggs said that his new position is "one of the most varied and demanding jobs I've ever had and one of the more storied political appointee positions in the executive branch, combining elements of policy analyst, negotiator and broker, advocate, manager, and other roles, sometimes all in one day."

Briggs is busy, but never starved for variety. "One minute, I might be working on salmon recovery in

#### Article Tools

- [E-Mail](#)
- [Print](#)
- [Write the Editor](#)

Only Vol. 129

[View Archives](#)

[Previous Issue](#)

[Next Issue](#)

#### The Tech Job Board

**UI Developer (Javascript/AJAX)**  
 Experian CheetahMail  
**Sr. Software Engineer**  
 ConnectAndSell, Inc.  
**Software Engineer - PHP & JavaScript**  
 Dconnect  
**Software Engineer**  
 Fwix  
**R&D Engineer**  
 Creare

[See all jobs](#) [Post a job](#)  
 Powered by [Personforce](#)

the Pacific Northwest, the next on inner-city housing, the next on cyber-security, immigration, financial regulatory reform, or highway spending," he said.

Before leaving for Washington, Briggs was involved in a number of research projects focused on inequality, racial and ethnic diversity in the department of Urban Studies and Planning, but has had to pause that work. He writes, "My current research is on hold, yes. As luck would have it, the opportunity to serve the President came just after I'd completed a series of major projects and just before I was deep into new ones. Getting tenure three months into the new job was an extra treat and a real validation of that completed work."

Briggs will return to MIT in spring 2011. "There's an old saying that academia is where one person spends six hundred days on a really hard problem, and Washington is a place where six hundred people spend one day on a really hard problem!" he said. "It's exciting — and a great privilege — to be a part of the action, but I look forward to having more time to think deeply about issues, too, free of the political and administrative pressures of federal service."

#### **Michael Greenstone, Course XIV: Chief Economist of the Council of Economic Advisers**

In a phone interview, Michael Greenstone said his primary goal is to "help develop policies that help to get the country on a stable path." He is working to "help refine the administration on energy legislations and climate" in his new position as the Chief Economist of Council of Economic Advisers.

As part of this work, Greenstone recently helped lead a process that developed estimates of how beneficial it would be to reduce greenhouse gas admissions, generating figures which will likely be used in many future works.

While at MIT, Greenstone was heavily involved on several research projects, including studies of the surge in Iraq and the U.S. Superfund program.

While on leave, Greenstone has reluctantly put his research projects on hold. He misses his research "desperately," he said.

In contrast to MIT, Greenstone said that "there are a lot of crazy ideas in Washington, and it's hard to know where they come from or where they take root. Ideas can really grow without a lot of evidence." As a scientist with economics research experience, Greenstone says he can help with "highlighting what's true and not true. That's where my research is useful."

His greatest frustration, Greenstone said, is that "Washington is so damn political. Scientific knowledge does not always rule the day."

Greenstone does appreciate the work ethic in Washington. "People work really hard and there's not a lot of complaining about it," he said, about D.C. "Both places are really inspiring to work, in that sense. People are really devoted to what they're doing."

Greenstone left in the beginning of February 2009, and plans to come back to MIT in January. He will likely teach an undergraduate environmental economics course as well as a graduate public economics course this spring.

#### **Chappell Lawson, Course XVII: Director of Policy and Planning for the Department of Homeland Security**

Chappell Lawson is the director of policy and planning at US Customs and Border Planning, which has the responsibility of securing all land borders and 317 ports of entry and is also the largest section of Homeland Security with 52,000 employees.

Lawson reports to the commissioner of border protection. His goals during his tenure include developing methods to better secure ports of entry, cooperating with Mexico to decrease violence and dismantle drug trafficking organizations, improving how deportation is handled, and expediting

travel and commerce.

“A personal goal is to make sure to use the knowledge I collected as an academic to better inform my policy,” Lawson said. He also hopes the opposite is true so that when he returns to academia he can draw on his experiences to be a better scholar.

Lawson will have to put his research, which involves Mexican politics and psychology, on hiatus. “Jobs in Washington are 24/7,” said Lawson. “Any work here will have to be put on hold.”

Since MIT only allows professors to maintain tenure status for up to two years of leave, Lawson is bound to eventually be back to his research agenda. “My home is academia, so there are no circumstances under which I won’t return,” said Lawson.

#### **Deborah Lucas, Course XV: leadership role in the Congressional Budget office**

Though Deborah Lucas won’t officially begin her new position until October, she is leaving MIT soon after arriving in only July 2009 from Northwestern University. As part of the Congressional Budget Office, Deborah Lucas’s responsibilities involve providing budget estimates for all legislation Congress is considering and thus has a direct influence on how federal resources should be used and what lines of action are appropriate.

Lucas, aside from her research, has experience in this area from her time as chief economist in 2001. “I realized back in 2001 that insufficient attention was given to federal obligations and there could be an improved capacity for making estimates,” said Lucas.

Lucas, using her previous experiences and research, hopes to improve how the CBO keeps track of finances and expand on current models and methodologies for evaluating federal financial obligations. While she maintains that realistically she will not be able to continue her research during her time in Washington, she aims to leave with new ideas on how to further her research.

#### **Ernest Moniz, Course VIII: Member of President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST)**

Prof Ernest Moniz is one of three current or former MIT faculty members working part time with the Obama administration as a member of the PCAST panel.

Moniz worked full-time on leave for the Clinton administration (serving as the US Undersecretary of Energy), but as a member of PCAST, he describes his personal role as being quite different. As part of the President’s advisory panel, Moniz describes in a phone interview that “our job is to work with the President’s science advisor on issues which he would like to be advised. Eric Lander, for example, at the Broad Institute is a pioneer in genomics and the life sciences, and I’m of course in physics.”

Moniz says that the “nature of the group is that we will meet for a few days roughly every 2 months. Basically our agenda is what the president wants us to weigh in on. Also, we do some work in national security, many technology issues, and many issues on how we protect ourselves. We have a very, very broad agenda. We also engage a lot of engineers and [people in] social sciences.”