

student profiles

“With my background I will be able to work with pure scientists as well as communicating the importance of their work with pure policy people. There are very few fields that have that kind of overlap.”

— Kabir Chopra



A Politically Active Voice for Science

KABIR CHOPRA REMEMBERS SITTING IN A LABORATORY as a UCLA undergraduate in 2005, asking one of the lab’s investigators why he thought more of his colleagues didn’t get involved in the political fray. The answer – that, with funding coming from the government, many were afraid to rock the boat’ – led Chopra, a molecular, cellular and developmental biology major who had been pondering becoming a scientist, to reexamine his career ambitions.

“I said, I don’t think I can stay on the sidelines,” Chopra recalls. “Science gets used to make political points, and it always seems to take a back seat to political agendas. With so much at stake, and things moving at such breakneck speed, more scientists need to become politically active.”

While taking a year off after completing his undergraduate education to contemplate his next move, Chopra worked on the Yes on 87 campaign, an unsuccessful statewide initiative that would have supported alternative energy research and development through a tax on oil profits. The experience led Chopra to decide that he was happiest working at the interface of environmental science and policy. To get the type of graduate education that would allow him to straddle the two worlds, he applied to the school’s M.P.H. program in the Department of Environmental Health Sciences.

Now in his second year, Chopra has found his niche. Through the school’s Center for Occupational and Environmental Health he is working with faculty members John Froines and Hilary Godwin, along with Timothy Malloy, a professor in the law school, to develop policy recommendations on nanomaterials. Nanotechnology is predicted to be a \$1 trillion industry within the next decade, but there are human health and environmental safety concerns; the work on which Chopra is assisting will draw on lessons learned from policies on previous technologies, and will help to inform the new University of California Center for Environmental Impacts of Nanotechnology (see page 30).

Chopra is also helping to increase his peers’ involvement in public health-related social issues as chair of the Public Health Student Association’s social action committee. Last year, the committee held a discussion about

post-traumatic stress syndrome in relation to combat veterans and discussed how public health professionals should be prepared for the repercussions of the nation’s current military conflicts. This fall, the committee’s activities have included voter registration. “We remain non-partisan, focusing on social issues that the health field will have to deal with,” Chopra says.

Raised by parents – both with science degrees – who came to the United States from India the year before he was born, Chopra was impressed from an early age about the importance of civic participation. “Voting was always a big deal in our house,” he says. “My parents stressed that it was important to have an opinion and make it known, because we live in a country where you can do that.”

He now eagerly anticipates a career in environmental policy. “With my background I will be able to work with pure scientists as well as communicating the importance of their work with pure policy people,” Chopra says. “There are very few fields that have that kind of overlap.”