IRVINE - One of the most unusual features of UCI's new law school is a program that connects each student with a practicing lawyer as a mentor. This first year, the students actually get two.

The idea is to pair students with practitioners who can show them what being a practitioner is all about.

"I want to pass on my excitement" about practicing law, said mentor Brett J. Williamson, a litigator and managing partner of O'Melveny & Myers' Newport Beach office.

Many law schools provide voluntary mentoring programs through their career services offices in which some students can ask to be paired with lawyers in specific fields, according to Victoria Ortiz, UCI's assistant dean of student services. At UC Berkeley School of Law, for example, where Ortiz used to work, students sometimes can be paired with public interest lawyers.

The unusual UCI program, though, is student-body wide and unrelated to career goals. Instead, the hope is to supply students "a more nuanced feel for the profession overall," Ortiz said.

Williamson said he hopes to "demystify the actual practice of law" for his student, Selwyn Chu, and show Chu "what I'm doing day-to-day and what it means to serve a client."

According to Brian Leiter, the University of Chicago professor whose blog on law schools is closely followed throughout legal academia, "The idea of lawyer mentors is potentially a brilliant one."

Ortiz said UCI believes the mentoring program will prove valuable enough to be continued even once the law school hits its goal of 200 students in a class. Southern California lawyers are excited about the new school, she noted. "There are so many volunteers out there," she said.

This year, there were enough to give each student two mentors: an established practitioner, such as Williamson, as a "senior mentor," and a newer lawyer as a "junior mentor."

The juniors are important to UCI's plan because the brand-new school has no upper-class students. In an established law school, the second- and third-years help the first-years deal with the stress of casebooks, impenetrable legal language and the high-pressure Socratic method.

At UCI, "Who was going to teach them the ropes and hold their hands?" Ortiz asked. Well, that's the juniors' job this year.
"We're surrounded by young professionals," Ortiz noted.

One student-junior mentor pairing puts the inaugural class's only British student, Paddy Browne, together with a fellow Englishman, Luke Howitt, a 2004 UC Berkeley law graduate now working as a staff attorney at the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles.

Ortiz put the two together even before Browne had decided to come to UCI so that Howitt could offer some advice. Howitt discussed "the points that would be valuable as an Englishman here, the different points of law school."

"Law school here is very much more serious, and you're aware of the identity of the law school" compared to the U.K., Howitt said. "There's a very intense law school method."

Acrivi Coromelas, a former high school English teacher from Buena Park, is paired with junior mentor Belinda Escobosa Helzer, who graduated from Southwestern University School of Law in 2000 and is the No. 2 lawyer in the Orange County office of the ACLU of Southern California.

Escobosa Helzer said both she and Coromelas are the first members of their families to go to college or law school. When she was applying to law school, Escobosa Helzer said, "I felt a little lost at times, and I connected with her at that level."

Less than a week into the start of classes, it's far too early for the mentors and their "mentees" to have had much interaction. But Escobosa Helzer said she hopes that Coromelas, who is interested in social justice issues and law practice, will be able to shadow her in her day-to-day legal practice from time to time later on.

The students and mentors did all meet at a special luncheon on Aug. 19. "We had a really great conversation," Escobosa Helzer said.

Ortiz said all the mentors and students seemed to really click at the luncheon and to find many things in common. Williamson commented that, as an Orange County native, he is a perfect counterpoint to his student, Chu, who is a lifelong New Yorker.

Ortiz said she put a lot of thought in assigning students with their mentors, but that a lot of the good matches were serendipitous. "I'm happy to take credit for them," she said.

"I'm just really excited that the law school took the time to match up the students and the mentors," Escobosa Helzer said.

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