IRVINE - Students at the UCI School of Law are taking courses called "Common Law Analysis," "Statutory Analysis," and "Procedural Analysis." But the students, the faculty and even the dean still sometimes call them by their old names: contracts, criminal law and civil procedure.

The mantra among those creating the UCI School of Law is "traditional enough to be credible, innovative enough to justify our existence." Nowhere is the tension between old and new more obvious than the school's curriculum.

Therefore, those basic areas of law that all first-year law students must learn are being presented not so much as areas of law but as approaches to law generally. "It's not so much a difference in substance as it is a difference in framing," said Professor Stephen Lee, a young former Stanford teaching fellow taking on his first substantive class this year, procedural analysis.

Lee's plan is to show students that the ideas and principles in civil procedure - such as notice, fairness and opportunity to be heard - sound in all sorts of legal activity such as arbitration, mediation and even transactional work.

"It's a useful frame through which to look at all these other areas," he said.

Along those lines, in his first class Monday, Lee presented one of the students with a phony letter from the dean claiming the student had violated the honor code and was expelled immediately. Lee then led the students to discuss issues such as fairness, notice and even special damages.

According to student Jeffrey Wachs, Professor Jennifer Chacon, an immigration law expert brought down from UC Davis, took a very statutory-analysis approach to her first class Monday. Rather than explore the meaning of scire and mens rea, like most criminal law classes, Chacon started the students off with the rules for statutory construction, Wachs said.

But Professor Christopher Leslie's common-law analysis class seemed like a traditional contracts class, according to Wachs.

Professor Rachel F. Moran said she plans on teaching the same torts class next semester that she's been teaching for 25 years; she won't particularly focus on regulatory or common law analysis. On the other hand, Moran's standard tort class is not simply a rundown of Palsgraf and its progeny. Instead, she gets into law and economics, law and morality, legal inertia and accident-prevention strategies.

Next semester, UCI's inaugural class will carry the analysis method forward to study "Constitutional Analysis" and "International Analysis," otherwise known as constitutional law and international law, itself an uncommon offering in the first year.

All year long, the students are also taking two other courses that are innovative reworkings of traditional subjects. "Lawyering Skills" starts as the usual legal research and writing class, but with
the addition of legal interviewing, negotiation, fact investigation and, in the second semester, a clinical experience with real clients.

Course designer Professor Grace Toner, brought in from the University of Michigan, also plans to get the students to look at methods of problem-solving beyond litigation. This semester, the students will work on aspects of a piece of litigation.

Next semester, Toner said, they will look at the same dispute earlier in time, before the lawsuit was filed. Armed with special secret facts on each side, they will try to negotiate a settlement, she said. "We're going to introduce the idea of how could [the parties] have done something differently so it wouldn't have fallen apart," she said.

Even more unusual, UCI law students this afternoon begin studying the "Legal Profession." A much souped-up version of the legal ethics or professional responsibility class that most law students take in the second or third year, this class will examine the economics of law practice, different settings and types of practice, the sociology and anthropology of lawyers and many other topics. Panels of practicing lawyers will discuss how and why they practice and answer students' questions on ethics and other issues.

The course is "a study of the profession," said Professor Catherine Fisk, that will both train them in professionalism and show them "what an interesting career law is."

"We spent a very long time last year designing the curriculum," Dean Erwin Chemerinsky said. "What do we want [the students] to know? What skills do we want them to have?"

These days, many law schools are looking at ways to modernize their curricula and to boost training in "skills," several outside observers noted. Many law schools have been inspired by a study called "Educating Lawyers" put out by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching based at Stanford University, according to former UCLA law dean Susan Westerberg Prager, who now is the executive director of the Association of American Law Schools in Washington, D.C.

"It remains to be seen whether [the UCI curriculum] is an improvement or just different," said John Eastman, the dean of Chapman University School of Law in Orange.

Brian Leiter, University of Chicago law professor and law-school blogger, called the curriculum "intriguing."

"The proof will be in the pudding: i.e., how the students fare when they graduate and what the legal employment marketplace makes of them," Leiter wrote in an e-mail. "It may well be a huge success."

Students seem to share those feelings. Whether the new approach ends up actually working "is the unspoken question that's been hanging over me," Wach said. On the other hand, "the faculty seems very excited." That excitement may make all the difference at UCI School of Law. "You could sense the enthusiasm of the students," former paralegal Xenia Tashlitsky said. "Everyone says hello to you."

As a UCI undergrad, Tashlitsky felt a bit like a cog in a machine. At the law school, however, "You get the feeling that we're all in this together."