Cal Poly’s architecture program is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, and it seems the design world is honoring the occasion with a special gift. This fall, for the first time, the industry trade publication DesignIntelligence named Cal Poly the best undergraduate architecture program in the nation.

Long a fixture among the publication’s Top 10 programs, Cal Poly leapfrogged prestigious programs including those at Cornell, Rice and Syracuse universities.

“This year we received 1,108 valid responses to our survey of professionals who have authority to hire within firms and organizations,” says Bob Fisher, associate publisher of DesignIntelligence. “When asked which undergraduate architecture programs best prepare students for success in the profession, their No. 1 choice was Cal Poly.”

The publication further endorsed specific skill areas at Cal Poly. “It is interesting to see that rankings of skill areas — like construction, cross-disciplinary teamwork and sustainability — combine findings for graduates of bachelor’s and master’s programs,” says Christine Theodoropoulos, dean of Cal Poly’s College of Architecture & Environmental Design. “Graduates with Cal Poly bachelor degrees have skills that compete with graduates of prestigious master’s programs like Harvard, Columbia and MIT in many of the skills.”

In her previous positions as head of architecture at the University of Oregon and a contributor to the architecture students thrive in the creative chaos of professor Thomas Fowler’s third-year design studio.

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National Architecture Accrediting Board, Theodoropoulos recalls wondering how this CSU architecture program in an obscure rural town kept showing up near the top of national rankings year after year.

When she joined Cal Poly in 2012, she found a whole host of reasons why. Most prominent, she says, is the program’s unique facilitation of what she calls a “making culture.”

“Students begin designing the very first day they're on campus as freshmen,” she says. “Over five years, they actually influence the design dialogue here, and a lot of the projects they've developed for us have been really great.”

Students find the experience of integrating into a professional firm invaluable. “You're dealing with business people, not classmates anymore,” says Aguas-Tio, a third-year architecture student who participated in a placement last quarter at the Los Angeles design firm AE3M. “The people who have experience are willing to help you with the work. I had to learn all the practical aspects of really getting the job done — to learn the reality.”

Fowler, who has also taught at other top programs, including Cornell and UC Berkeley, credits the Cal Poly program’s legacy with another key differentiator — a holistic curriculum and a making culture has created something Theodoropoulos calls the “Cal Poly Signature”: highly functional projects that are intricately detailed and bold in their conception.

By some estimates, Cal Poly graduates make up a significant number nationwide. To put that in perspective, there are 10 schools with accredited architecture programs in the state and more than 120 across the country.

“In terms of numbers, our impact on the architecture profession is significant. Our graduates are getting into practice — they’re everywhere,” says Margaret McDonald, head of the architecture program. “I hope that our strong presence in the industry raises the quality of the built environment — and not just aesthetically but also in terms of innovation and sustainability.”

“We have so much potential to shape the future of the built environment by training the architects who go into the field and do the full spectrum of design work,” she says. With such a large presence in the profession, McDonald hopes that the “Cal Poly Signature” will increasingly characterize the future of the industry.

The combination of unique hands-on opportunities, a holistic curricular focus, and a distinctive making culture has created something Theodoropoulos calls the “Cal Poly Signature” of design: highly functional projects that are both intricately detailed and bold in their conception.