



# Rebecca Bergman & Paul Cerkvenik

Minnesota's private colleges see changes due to COVID-19;  
some might become permanent

A Minnesota in-the-post-pandemic-world interview

*November 6, 2020*

In a November 6, 2020, interview with the Civic Caucus, Gustavus Adolphus College President Rebecca Bergman and Minnesota Private College Council President Paul Cerkvenik speak about the role of private colleges in Minnesota's higher education system and their contributions to the state. They also discuss changes to the colleges due to

COVID-19 and adaptations Gustavus and the other private colleges have made in response to the pandemic. They provide information about their enrollment and its demographics, financial aid and student debt, racial and income achievement gaps, and the major challenge of student mental health.

## Background

**00:00 - Introduction.** (Paul Gilje).

**02:57 - Rebecca Bergman Opening Remarks.**

**Bergman:** I'm a nontraditional college president, since I didn't come from a background as a professor or an academic leader. Instead, I came from a background in research and development at Medtronic, where we were dedicated to creating medical technology for the future. It gave me an opportunity to be in touch with many colleges and universities across the country. I'm wired for challenge and the pandemic is the biggest challenge to higher education that I've seen for a while.

Both Medtronic and Gustavus are very mission-oriented. Gustavus is dedicated to the liberal arts. It's a residential college of 2,200 students. Currently, there are about 2,000 students on campus, with classes currently being offered in a variety of formats: one-third in person, one-third online and one-third hybrid.

I'm a champion of the liberal arts, which prepares students well for whatever their careers will be. We believe in offering breadth and depth for students. I'm also a champion for diversity, equity and inclusion.

**12:37 - Paul Cerkvenik Opening Remarks.**

**Cerkvenik:** The Minnesota Private College Council comprises 17 private, nonprofit institutions in the state: Augsburg University; Bethany Lutheran College; Bethel University; Carlton College; College of Saint Benedict; Concordia College (Moorhead); Concordia University, St. Paul; Gustavus Adolphus College; Hamline University; Macalester College; Minneapolis College of Art and Design; Saint John's University; Saint Mary's University of Minnesota; St. Catherine University; St. Olaf College; The College of St. Scholastica; and the University of St. Thomas.

All have missions committed to high-quality liberal arts education.

Jointly, the 17 colleges have 54,700 students; 13,900 employees, making them the ninth largest nongovernmental employer in the state; and 300,000 alumni living in Minnesota. Seventy-two percent of the schools' recent graduates stay in Minnesota.

Among the students at the 17 colleges: (1) 26 percent are students of color, not including international students; (2) 27 percent are Pell Grant recipients for low-income students, compared with 17 percent at the University of Minnesota; (3) 1,700 are international students; and (4) 10,500 are students from other states, compared with 9,800 at the University of Minnesota.

On average, there is one professor for every 12 students and 61 percent of classes have fewer than 20 students. Sixty-eight percent of first-time, full-time students graduate in four years, compared to 57 percent at the University of Minnesota system. The colleges' share of Pell Grant recipients graduating in four years (55 percent) ranks first nationally when compared to statewide averages for both public and private institutions. Thirty percent of the bachelor's degrees earned in Minnesota are awarded by the private colleges.

Click [here](#) to see Cerkvenik's slides with more information on the private colleges in Minnesota.

## Discussion

The notes of the discussion below are edited for brevity.

**21:07 - What did you expect fall 2020 enrollment at Gustavus to look like, how did it actually turn out, and how will this trend affect your future? (Paul Gilje)**

**Bergman:** We saw the impact of COVID-19 by having more admission deferrals than ever before. Some students deferred for one semester and others for a year. Some of the deferrals were due to athletics. And it's been difficult for international students to get to the U.S. Some of them have gone online while waiting to get here. As a result, our first-year class was about six percent down from our June forecast. Our total enrollment this fall was 2.6 percent less than our June forecast and approximately the same as our total enrollment in fall 2019.

We're not sure of the ripple effects of COVID on enrollment going forward. Any blip in enrollment turns into a four-year challenge. We've made adjustments to have a balanced budget.

**Cervenik:** Enrollment is down about two-and-a-half percent in Minnesota's private colleges this year, compared with a four percent decline in the state's public universities. We're not seeing 10 or 15 percent declines, as some had predicted. The large majority of students wanted to be in school and all 17 private-college campuses are open.

Some students are taking classes online, but many of them wanted to come to their campuses to do that. The response of students to COVID-19 has been a strong showing of their commitment to continuing their education.

**28:45 We have seen the growth of online instruction during COVID-19. How effective is this at Minnesota's private colleges? Should tuition rates be differentiated for online and in-person instruction? Are campuses overbuilt, particularly on the residential side, and will we look for alternative uses for these buildings in the future? (John Cairns)**

**Bergman:** We're contemplating those questions, although we're pretty dedicated to the residential model at Gustavus. We've worked with faculty about how to teach effectively online. We'll see colleges experiment more with online learning, maybe even collaborating among colleges.

We may have blended ways of learning, but Gustavus won't have a large shift to 100 percent online learning. We won't see a wholesale shift, but for some students, online learning is better and easier and has better outcomes for them. We're learning as we go. We have invested approximately \$1 million in technology since April.

But these years of young-adult learning and maturing—the experiential aspects of being on campus—can't be duplicated when students are online. There's an isolation factor that's noticeable here on campus, since there are fewer social activities bringing students together. We don't anticipate mothballing any buildings. We're well sized for up to 2,700 students.

**35:32 - Some private colleges are moving toward skill and job training in addition to liberal arts programs aimed at producing broadly educated, civically engaged citizens prepared for a rapidly changing workforce. What effect is COVID-19 having on the ratio of liberal arts to vocational programs in private colleges and which programs might be more likely to end up on the chopping block? (Helen Baer)**

**Bergman:** We are constantly evolving to the disruption caused by COVID-19 and its economic impact. We tend to be responsive and try to project ahead. We have preprofessional programs in a number of areas, including nursing, education and accounting. We're looking at expanding public health from a minor to a major and adding an engineering-oriented major in our physics department.

**39:58 - There is increasing public perception that liberal arts are politically "liberal" and that colleges are "liberal" institutions in this way. It seems as though there is a real threat to the open exchange of ideas in our educational institutions, that you can't state a number of positions at certain colleges without severe ramifications and that students and faculty alike feel very constrained. What is the role of our private colleges in creating the kind of atmosphere where we can have an open exchange of ideas? (Paul Ostrow)**

**Bergman:** Liberal arts offer a breadth of opportunities for students to learn to think critically. It is true that many of our colleges tend to lean liberal politically, but our professors have a tremendous ability to be open to all points of view in the classroom. All voices can be heard. This becomes more and more important as our student body diversifies. Points of view are more varied. Through a commitment to seeking understanding across differences, we can more easily solve society's problems. It takes extraordinary dedication to be sure we are not closing off opinions or inadvertently intimidating our students.

**44:34** - The political arena has captured the terms "liberal" and "conservative" and made them pejorative, depending upon who is speaking. The liberal arts colleges were not originally viewed as liberal political institutions, but rather places where you could receive a broad education. It will be extremely difficult for us to break away from these politicized usages and we may continue to find these ideas in the education system until we can find ways to communicate liberal and conservative views in a less-politicized environment. (T Williams)

**Bergman:** Society is not perfect right now; there's work to do. Our young people have been raised where they're susceptible to being in an echo chamber on their phones. At a residential college with small classes, students must get off their phones, actually talk to each other and learn to talk across differences. It's so important for young people today to have those opportunities.

**51:10** - On the issue of student debt, does the private college council track the amount of debt being incurred by students at Minnesota's private colleges, and what trends might be there? At Gustavus, do you advise students on how much debt might be manageable for them to incur? (Lee Munnich)

**Cerkvenik:** The median student debt at our 17 private colleges is about \$28,000. That's only a few thousand dollars higher than the state's public universities. About 30 percent of our students have no debt. We underinvest in need-based financial aid at the state and federal levels, so low-income students have more debt. Because families have become more concerned about student debt, student borrowing has leveled off and is not rising as rapidly in recent years as it was in prior decades.

**Bergman:** With or without debt, it's important to help students graduate. At Gustavus, we emphasize access and affordability for all families and are on a path to meet all need, but we are not there yet. For about a third of our students, there is a small gap between what a family receives through both academic scholarships and financial aid and the college's fees for tuition, room, and board. For those students, that gap is about \$3,000 to \$5,000 per year.

**57:06** - In the upcoming legislative session, the state is facing deficits and probable budget reductions. What are the private colleges most concerned about in the legislative arena: protection of some benefit they currently get or adjustment in terms of revenues they could have gotten? (Clarence Shallbetter)

**Cerkvenik:** During the last recession (2009-2011), the Legislature made protection and expansion of financial aid for low-income students a priority. We'll be saying to the Legislature that now is *not* the time to cut financial aid. Now is the time to invest in it, because the pandemic has increased the financial-aid needs of lower-income families. About 64 percent of state grant aid goes to students in public institutions, while about 29 percent goes to our private college students.

By investing in financial aid, the Legislature can do better on racial equity issues and help address gaps in outcomes for students of color.

**1:00:47** - Faculty in higher education often carry their prior training into their courses even as their fields change around them. How are faculty dealing with changing paradigms within their own disciplines and allowing this to appear in the classroom? (Tom Abeles)

**Bergman:** This is a great topic for our faculty to continue to debate. But give credit to the faculty for leaning in to some of the challenges and switching pedagogy so quickly. Change is not as hard as they might have thought. It's important that we have faculty of all ages, because new faculty come in with new ideas. Both our faculty and our students are committed to lifelong learning.

**1:05:05** - How many students in Minnesota's private colleges in general, and at Gustavus, are studying elementary and secondary teacher education? (Randy Johnson)

**Bergman:** Gustavus has a strong education department, which is true across the private colleges in Minnesota. Gustavus was founded by Swedish immigrants as a place to prepare teachers and pastors. The Gustavus education department is always fully enrolled. That and our nursing program are two of our strongest preprofessional departments.

**Cerkvenik:** Minnesota State universities and our private colleges provide the majority of teachers in the state, with 39 percent of new teachers coming from the private colleges. But there are not enough teachers of color. We need to increase diversity in the education field.

**1:08:24** - From the private college system, what recommendations could you offer to the other units of postsecondary education in Minnesota-the public universities, state colleges, community colleges and technical schools? What do you think they

**should be doing to create a better product? In terms of structure, do you think the technical colleges should be made independent from the community college system?**  
(Paul Gilje)

**Bergman:** There's an increasing demand for people with four-year college degrees. We're blessed in this state to have options for students to help them achieve their dreams.

**1:10:50 -You've said that Gustavus doesn't have gaps in terms of academic achievement and graduation rates between students receiving Pell grants compared with other students or between students of color and white students. What have you done to achieve this? (Dana Schroeder)**

**Bergman:** We pay attention to delivering excellence in advising students. First-year students take a seminar taught by their academic advisor. Faculty are watching out for students who might have academic difficulties, so we can help get them back on track. We've invested heavily in counseling for our students, who are experiencing more mental-health challenges today than we've seen in the past. In summary, we use an individualized approach to helping our students stay on track for a four-year graduation.

**1:13:25 - There has been much discussion about students arriving unprepared to do work at the higher education level. Do you think this trend will worsen as we see the disruptive effects of COVID-19 and distance learning? (Janis Clay)**

**Bergman:** We have adjusted some of our classes to help equip students who are not as well prepared in writing, math and science skills. We must be ready to respond to any additional gaps due to distance learning in high schools, as these students transition to our colleges and universities.

**Cerkvenik:** Everyone will benefit if outcomes in K-12 education improve. We shouldn't ask if the students are ready for us, but we should ask if we're ready for the students who are coming to us. We view every student who comes to us as someone we want to see graduate in four years. Our colleges are asking what more they can do.

**1:16:59 - Is broadband access in the state of Minnesota adequate for the purposes of your programming at the private colleges in Minnesota? Why are we seeing a dramatic increase in students who struggle with mental health? (Clarence Shallbetter)**

**Bergman:** We had a number of students in the spring who would have struggled at home for lack of good internet. About 100 of those students stayed on campus. As we invested in technology over the summer, we have helped students and faculty enhance their internet,

especially for streaming. It's critically important. We've invested household by household. This fall, about 200 students are currently learning online for a variety of reasons and we've accommodated that.

**Cerkvenik:** I can't tell you why we're seeing more mental illness, but it's widespread and it's one of the foremost challenges for all colleges right now.

**1:20:39 - Could you elaborate on changes you have made as a result of COVID-19 that you will continue doing permanently and take with you, even after the immediate pressures of the pandemic subside? (Paul Ostrow)**

**Bergman:** We have taken advantage of new technology in ways the college hasn't done before-in the classroom, in attending conferences virtually, in students engaging in virtual social opportunities, and in providing virtual opportunities for alumni to connect with their *alma mater*. Some of these changes will go away, but some will stay.

**Cerkvenik:** In the last few months I've been thinking about what the legislative process is going to be like if the public can't go to the Capitol. We usually bring hundreds of students to the Capitol to talk about their experiences and the Capitol is usually an open place where everyone can go to talk to legislators. I'm wondering how I will work at the Capitol and how the Legislature will work with virtual communication, even among legislators.

## Biographies

**Rebecca M. Bergman** is the 17<sup>th</sup> president of [Gustavus Adolphus College](#), a position she has held since July 2014. Bergman is the first woman in the 152-year history of the College to be named president.

Bergman, who served on the College's Board of Trustees from 2007 to 2014, spent the previous 26 years at Medtronic, Inc., including the last 14 years as a senior executive. Prior to leaving Medtronic, she served as vice president of Research, Technology, and Therapy Delivery Systems for the company's Cardiac Rhythm Disease Management (CRDM) business, where she led a research and development team of scientists and engineers. She previously served as vice president, CRDM New Therapies & Diagnostics, as well as vice president, Corporate Science and Technology, where she directed biomaterials and biosciences R&D, new therapy development and information management initiatives.

Bergman received a number of Medtronic's highest technical and leadership awards during her tenure with the company. She was elected as a Fellow of the American Institute for Medical and Biological Engineering in 2001 and elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 2010. She served as a member of the board of directors of Sigma-Aldrich

and on a number of academic advisory boards. She currently serves on the board of directors for the Bakken Museum, the Minnesota Campus Compact, the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities, and the Minnesota Private College Council.

Bergman earned her B.S. degree in chemical engineering from Princeton University and undertook graduate study in a Ph.D. program in chemical engineering and material science at the University of Minnesota.

**Paul Cerkvenik** is the president of the [Minnesota Private College Council](#) and the [Minnesota Private College Fund](#), a position he has held since 2009. The Council and Fund serve the shared needs of its 17 member nonprofit institutions. Before becoming president, he had served on the Council and Fund's board of directors, including as chair of the Council's Public Policy Committee.

On behalf of the Council, Cerkvenik is particularly active at the Minnesota Capitol, where he works with leaders from the member institutions to advocate for state policy that meets the needs of students, enhances private higher education and strengthens the economic and civic fabric of the state. With the Fund, he seeks to sustain corporate and foundation support for private colleges and their students, including through scholarships and unique student programs that serve students across all 17 member institutions.

Cerkvenik is a member of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities State Executives and served as its chair in 2016. He previously worked as an attorney in private practice in Virginia, Minn., where he also served for four years on the school board of the local public school district. He also worked for eight years at the State Capitol, where he served as legislative director for the Speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives.

A native of the Iron Range, Cerkvenik earned his B.S. degree from Saint John's University in Collegeville and his J.D. from the University of Minnesota.

## Present on Zoom interview

Tom Abeles, John Adams, Helen Baer, Rebecca Bergman, John Cairns (vice chair), Paul Cerkvenik, Janis Clay (chair), Pat Davies, Paul Gilje, Gary Johnson, Randy Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz, Lee Munnich, Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T Williams.