Alumni Greeting: Dr. Jenny Aker F97
Assistant Professor of Development Economics

Class Day Ceremony, May 19, 2012
The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University

Dean Bosworth, Dr. Haas, Dr. Tomin, Mr. Wharton
Fellow alumae
Future alumae, students and parents
(Friends, romans, countrymen...)

Good morning!

Now, some of you might have been expecting Paulo Bilyk, a Fletcher alum from the class of 1992, to be speaking today. Unfortunately, Mr. Bilyk couldn’t join us, so Dean Bosworth asked me to say a few words, wearing my “alum” hat. Now, I’m not sure if the Dean asked me to do this because of his high esteem for me as an alum (and speaker), or because I am the only Fletcher alum on the faculty whose last name starts with “A” AND was I foolish enough to answer the phone on a Friday afternoon... But whatever the motivation for his invitation, I am very honored to be talking to you today, especially to this class of students, whom I know so well, and during this year, which is my 15th-year Fletcher reunion.

As the CIO of an investment firm, as well as the president of several community service organizations, Mr. Bilyk probably would have provided some extremely insightful and useful advice about banking, the private sector, corporate social responsibility, and the multitude of changes that those sectors – and his country, Brazil – have experienced over the course of the past 20 years.

Unfortunately, I cannot give you any insights on these issues, since I have never been to Brazil (which is shocking) and have never worked for the private sector (perhaps not so shocking). My path has been a little bit different. After graduating from Fletcher, I worked for a NGO in West Africa for many years before returning to the US to get my PhD in economics. And now I have come full circle back to Fletcher – not as a student or alum, but as a faculty member.
On the surface, then, it seems as if Mr. Bilyk and I followed very different paths, despite the fact that we graduated from Fletcher only five years’ apart. But beneath the surface, I would bet you that he and I share something in common: our passion for our work, our motivation and our sense of community, which came out of our experience at Fletcher, especially via people we met here.

Now, what do I mean by that? Well, I would like you to take a minute a look at those sitting around you. (Look to your left, your right, in front and behind you – say hi. Go ahead, do it).

What do you see? Other than those in your family, you should see your classmates, your colleagues and your friends, all of whom came from different countries and backgrounds, and with very diverse perspectives. You probably see someone who is a military officer, an engineer, a former Peace Corps Volunteer and a government official. And over the course of the past two years, you have really gotten to know each other – you have laughed together, danced together, drank together, suffered through interesting and tedious lectures together (not mine, of course) and worked through countless group assignments (where I am sure at times you wanted to pull at your hair, or at least you were cursing the professor who assigned them).

But because of those experiences with students from very diverse backgrounds, you have probably learned more – and better – even if it wasn't necessarily easier along the way. And I would bet that during your time here you have probably learned more than what was actually taught in the classroom; many of you probably learned about yourself – what you believe, what you want to do, and what you want your place in the world to be.

In some ways, my time at Fletcher just 15 years’ ago wasn’t so different. Sure, I was younger then (and had fewer wrinkles and grey hair), but the Hall of Flags was a still place where people hung out, we went down to Ryan’s Irish pub in Davis Square on Thursday nights, and Jerry Sheehan still made the same bad jokes during the Fletcher Follies (although it seems as if there was less nudity during the Fletcher follies at that time, an unfortunate change). Also like you, I had classmates from around the world, who challenged me, encouraged me, supported me, infuriated me and inspired me, both during and after my time at Fletcher. Two people in particular really changed my life.
One person, Dave O’Brien, opened my eyes the problem of poverty in the developing world, the injustice of it, and got me angry enough to do something about it. The second, Kristin Kent, and her husband Lawrence, made sure that I had the chance to turn that passion into action – by helping me to get (and succeed at) my first job at Catholic Relief Services.

So when I first went to work with CRS in West Africa, there were numerous challenges at the time – the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone were at their height, there was only one airline in the region, which meant at times it took days to get from Ghana to Sierra Leone and communications with friends, family and colleagues was difficult if not impossible. Today, many of those challenges have been resolved – the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone have thankfully ended, and mobile phone technology is connecting people in ways we never imagined. But now, new challenges and opportunities still remain – from the financial crisis to climate change, to the war in Congo to technological innovation.

Tomorrow, you will all leave here with the same diploma, but face those challenges and opportunities – and make your own contribution -- in different ways. Your paths will be as diverse and interesting as the ones that brought you here – the military, the government, the UN, NGOs, banks, consulting firms, and start-ups. Some of you will stay here, some of you will return home, and yet others will go to different corners of the earth.

To deal with the challenges you will face in your new jobs and new lives, you will need to call upon what you learned here. You have the skills. But at the same time, a Ghanaian proverb says, “Wisdom is like a baobab tree; no one individual can embrace it.” This means that you cannot or should not do it alone; you’ll need to count upon your family, your friends, your classmates, and, the broader Fletcher community to help you to learn how to deal with these new obstacles and to succeed.

But with access to that network also comes a responsibility – a responsibility to pay it forward. Some of you already have a job, some of you are looking, and some of you just want to graduate tomorrow and think about work later. But regardless of where you are in the process, almost all of you have or will rely upon the broader Fletcher community, in some way, to get there. You can, and you should. 3, 5, 10 years from now, don’t forget where that first job came from, and don’t forget who helped you. Because when the next
generation of Fletcher students sends you an e-mail and asks for your advice or wants to meet with you, your time and knowledge will be your most valuable gift you can give them.

So, congratulations to the class of 2012!! And welcome the Fletcher community!