In 1934, when Martin Luther King, Jr. was just five years of age, a lone artist and graduate of the University of Kentucky, Ann Rice O'Hanlon, painted a fresco into wet plaster on the walls of the foyer of Memorial Hall, built to honor the memories of 2,756 Kentuckians who made the ultimate sacrifice in the First World War. As we know, the perspective and biases of the time led us to mistakenly view it as the War to End All Wars.

In a similar fashion, to some the mural beautifully captures their perception of another time and place. But to others, the perspective and biases of that time which Ms. O'Hanlon painted led to the mistaken view that it fully and fairly captured a painful chapter of the American story.

As art and artists should, Ms. O'Hanlon’s work arouses thoughts and senses, and to this day educates and pushes us to connect to one another.

By many accounts Ms. O'Hanlon fulfilled the dreams we have for graduates today. Soon after finishing her fresco she went on to California to teach her craft to others of all races and walks of life.

Had she remained in Kentucky at our University she would not have had the opportunity to teach a person of color until 1949, after Lyman T. Johnson courageously fought and won through the courts the rights of African Americans to attend UK.

When Ms. O’Hanlon painted her fresco in the 1930's she hoped to wordlessly capture her view of the toils of craftsmen in blazing Kentucky's frontier as it built toward the Industrial Age. Her audience was void of the Lyman T.'s or any faculty of color.

Decades after she painted the mural Ann Rice O'Hanlon reflected on her life and the meaning of life, and this is what she said:

"For nearly 40 years I have been learning anew about the creative spark in people and myself, first through the job of teaching.... through the privilege of teaching, and then the suspicion dawned on me that I should not be teaching at all, but should be listening, and acting, and asking, and exposing, and perhaps nudging, and above all, perceiving objectively the works of people and the world of nature."

It dawned on her that the major obstruction to comprehension was the fact that we don't know how to see, how to look, how to perceive.

She said further, "Gradually it became very obvious to me that the ability to perceive -- totally -- required more than just reading or looking or talking or meditation. It required doing."
Two months ago two dozen African American and Black students brought their full humanity through the doors of my home on campus to learn about, critique, and provide advice and perspective on what we are doing to make our campus more diverse and inclusive; and what more we must do.

It was an essential moment for me and other members of the leadership team, black and white, male and female, to hear from our students, in their own words, what they experience on our campus. They shared their hopes for themselves, their friends, and their futures; and they laid bare the uncertainty, anxiety, and in some cases - fear - that can come day-after-day as a member of an underrepresented part of the University of Kentucky family. I cannot fully comprehend what life is like for our students, but our ongoing dialogue gives me greater appreciations for what many on our campus confront daily.

Like the artist of the Memorial Hall mural said in her later years, overcoming the obstruction to understanding and comprehension is about doing.

While our work is unfolding and unfinished, let me share a little about what the University of Kentucky is doing:

- In the past 5 years we more than doubled the scholarships for underrepresented students from $8.0 million to $15.4 million.
- Our entering classes for the past five years are increasingly diverse in color, nationality, class and place of origin. Our African American or Black students make up 11 percent of our freshman class, far above the eight percent represented in the most recent graduates from Kentucky's high schools. Nearly three out of every 10 Kentuckians enrolled are Pell grant recipients, an indicator of high financial need; nearly one out of five are the first in their family to go to college.
- And while we remain vigilant in pursuit of speech or acts that pose a true threat and harass, we know that the subconscious bias within us --that we often do not recognize or admit-- can be a pernicious threat to diversity and justice within our ranks. It must be overcome through policies, practices and an ambitious campus-wide program of education and experiences.

What did the students we met with say we should be doing? They picked five top priorities:

- Continue to be attentive to access and affordability;
- Further strengthen the programming and infrastructure;
- Be vigilant in holding ourselves accountable for the goals we establish;
- Aggressively recruit and retain a more diverse faculty; and
• Ensure the cultural competence of every student who earns a degree from the University of Kentucky, so that we have the capacity to understand one another.

What our students say about what we should be doing is threaded throughout our strategic plan in a loud and clear ambition for a fully diverse and inclusive community.

My friends, we are a work in progress.

But I will know we are closer to achieving these ambitious goals when the students on our campus know the belonging they seek. If we cannot foster belonging at our University, there is little hope it will be fostered elsewhere across our state, country and world.

And our efforts must go beyond race.

In the moments of often blind and hateful rhetoric generated by fear and misunderstanding, we must ensure that our Muslim students know they belong, as members of all religious communities are welcome on our campus.

In this moment when we must continue to evolve in our views of identity, our LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students must know they belong, as we welcome all forms of personal identity to be expressed in a safe and caring environment fostered on our campus.

In this moment when we rush to ban the refugees fleeing their homes for safety because of conflict or persecution, our international students must know they belong, because when you choose to make a home in this campus and become a Wildcat, we welcome you no matter what distance you have to travel to your Old Kentucky home.

And in this moment where we have not struck every necessary blow in the cause of gender equality, our female students must know they belong and are equal to their male counterparts with the same opportunities, recognition and visibility.

Just looking around can sometimes tell you whether you belong; whether you are welcomed and safe.

Symbols, like flags, statues, monuments and murals atop, on and within buildings meant to welcome should celebrate our past and reflect our values. They should make you feel you belong. They should inspire you to belong.

This is why the first building named in our $1.8 billion revitalization of our campus bears the name Lyman T. Johnson.

This is why, beginning this fall, visitors to and players at Commonwealth Stadium will be met by life-sized statues of Nate Northington, Greg Page, Wilbur Hacket and Houston Hogg – the first
black students to play football at UK. Nate Northington is the first of his race to play any sport in the SEC.

This is why we have asked a group of faculty, students, staff and community representatives to make recommendations about how to preserve O'Hanlon's mural but re-contextualize the space and our campus to better present our values, recount our complete history and fully welcome all peoples.

I sometimes wonder how Ms. O'Hanlon would have responded to the students who challenge us today. I think she would have welcomed in them the virtues she more fully appreciated in her later years -- to listen, to ask, to act, to expose, to nudge, to do. I think she would see strength in their minds and spirit and understand how they are most offended, not by her work, but because for too long we insensitively let her work stand alone, frozen in history and absent recognition of the struggle for equality and justice led by Dr. King and others.

I also think about how Ms. O'Hanlon would paint our history on the vacant walls of Memorial Hall in 2016, or in 2034, on the hundredth anniversary of her mural. This fresco will be about us and what we did in our time.

I hope she would capture us on days like today in places like this, sitting at the table of friendship to talk, listen, challenge and think anew. A table where we are comfortable with questioning long-held beliefs in the presence of those who seem different at first experience but become familiar and comfortable with each passing moment, word and deed.

A table where you feel no need to constrict who you are to measure up to who others are.

A table where perspectives are put to the test.

And whether our values and beliefs align or diverge, we clasp our hands in fellowship held fast by the virtues in our common humanity.

A table where we all know we belong.