Many people may think that I came from a financially decent family since I was born in Beijing, China. However, my tuition as an international student was extremely high, requiring my parents to spend more than 15 years of savings. This financial burden placed constant pressure on me, forcing me to restrict my spending to essentials like meals and rent. Yet, it also motivated me to maximize the value of my education and seek every opportunity to grow and succeed.

This constraint made me immerse myself in a wide range of coursework, including programming languages, compilers, operating systems, and computer architecture. This broad exposure gave me a strong foundation and sparked my interest in research and problem-solving. The financial pressure became a driving force, compelling me to work harder, seize every opportunity to learn, and make the most of my resources.

To ease this burden and gain valuable experience, I worked under Professor Jeff Erickson, developing an autograder for the algorithms course on the PrairieLearn platform. This role required me to collaborate closely with colleagues to design an intuitive tool that helped students practice effectively and perform better on exams. Our weekly meetings often turned into long debates, sometimes over an hour, as we worked to refine the interface to balance usability, fairness, and clarity. These experiences taught me to value diverse perspectives, appreciate the process of consensus-building, and develop polished, student-friendly outcomes.

In addition, I worked as a lab assistant in the ECE department, helping students troubleshoot both circuits and oscilloscope setups. Since each student approached problems differently, I adapted my explanations to fit their individual understanding, offering indirect hints to ensure they could solve problems independently while feeling supported. These experiences deepened my ability to collaborate, communicate effectively, and build environments where students could succeed.

These experiences, alongside my financial challenges, have shaped me into someone driven to excel academically and contribute meaningfully to my field. Whether designing an autograder or mentoring students in the lab, I have developed essential skills for collaboration, adaptability, and inclusivity. By listening to diverse viewpoints and creating supportive environments, I have learned how to make meaningful contributions that benefit others.

Turning financial hardship into a source of motivation, I have sought knowledge and embraced every opportunity that came my way. These experiences have prepared me to thrive in graduate school, where I aim to bring this same resourcefulness, persistence, and commitment to creating supportive and inclusive academic communities.