Workplaces privilege “professionalism” scripts based on white, male performance and see white, male bodies as the somatic norm of public sector, salary work. These rigid behavior and bodily expectations construct an uneven playing field for success at work based on embodiment. The Urban Scholars Program challenges how workplaces currently function by creating pathways for graduate and college students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to enter the public sector in the Twin Cities. During the summers of 2015 and 2016, I participated in this program as an Urban Scholar in the Minneapolis Public Schools and the City of Minneapolis, respectively. I chose to engage in this program to gain a stronger sense of how racial equity can be applied to my work and use what I learned to navigate in a more respectful and productive way in regards to anti-racist work. As one of the only white people in this program, I was pushed to question how workplace norms are constructed and why programs like Urban Scholars are necessary. Entering into my internship placements, it was not hard for me to fit into the predominantly white workplaces because I already had particular cultural similarities and internalized routines in the world due to my whiteness. I had previous professional workplace experience in past internships and knew how to network. I built these skills, at least in some part, because I was granted access to spaces due to my whiteness and privilege. Hearing from my fellow Urban Scholars of color, they often did not have the same seamless transitions. They often felt uncomfortable navigating their predominantly white workplaces and alone in their work. After hearing about these experiences, I questioned: why is it that my white body can be more comfortable navigating the workplace, while the bodies of my co-workers of color felt ostracized in this same space? How do the intersections of race and gender play out in this context? What would it mean to imagine a workplace that allowed all bodies to exist and succeed in it fully?

From this experience and curiosity, I decided to focus my senior thesis research on the Urban Scholars Program to figure out how these efforts could be learned from, extended, and evolved going forward. This analysis comes from a place of deep respect and admiration for the Urban Scholars Program and recognition of the energy and persistence poured into this program thus far. From this program, we can learn from both the benefits and limits to advancing equity within the current construction of workplaces.

In this talk, I will unpack how workplaces are currently constructed and analyze why this creates an unjust work environment. Through a case study on the Urban Scholars Program, I will illuminate that while programs that aim to close racial gaps in hiring can change the workforce somewhat, workplaces must shift to an adaptive workplace model in order to fully include all bodies and performances at work.