The Humanities Institute at the University of Texas at Austin was founded in 2001 by English professor Evan Carton, with the mission of bridging intellectual divides on campus and between the campus and community. From the start the Institute has been a place where the humanities are engaged with the community and with the community’s most pressing. During the 2014-15 and 2015-16 academic years, the Institute’s activities have been organized around the theme of Imagined Futures. Our interdisciplinary Faculty Fellows Seminar, our Distinguished Visiting Lecture Series, and our Difficult Dialogues courses and public forums have all engaged the topic of how human beings—past and present, actual and fictional—imagine our future. Not all of our discussions have centered on sustainability, but many have.

In Spring 2015 and Fall 2015, two dozen faculty from Liberal Arts, Fine Arts, Communication, Education, Business, Architecture, and Engineering have gathered weekly to share work in progress about Imagined Futures. As you can tell from this list of participants, the Humanities Institute defines the humanities broadly, welcoming all whose interests center in some way on the human experience. Participation was invited in response to the following questions: What possible futures do we envision? What futures have been envisioned in the past? How are imagined futures related to the conditions, connections, and limitations of the present? Although the seminar participants bring a broad array of disciplinary perspectives to the table, the discussion has converged around a number of themes. Among these are Risk, Crisis, Rupture, Possibility, Design, and Sustainability. Thanks to support for a Graduate Research Assistant from the Office of Sustainability, the Spring semester’s discussion is documented on a blog maintained by GRA Patrick Russell (http://sites.utexas.edu/imagined-futures/). There you will find ruminations on the imagined futures of Renaissance England, modernist literature and modernist design, contemporary Spain, Italian postfeminism, transnational
Another communications scholar, Mary Bock from the School of Journalism, engaged us in a discussion of cosmic images, including the iconic images of the mushroom cloud, the floating human fetus, and the view of Earth from space. She asked us to consider whether such iconic images are possible in today’s fractured digital media environment, leading to a lively discussion of what kinds of images might galvanize action on climate change (as polar bear imagery seems not to have done).

Government scholar Benjamin Gregg led an equally lively discussion on the future of genetic engineering, focusing in particular on what kinds of decisions need to be made by political communities in order to assure just and equitable practices. Can a line be drawn between healthy and dangerous forms of genetic enhancement, and who decides?

The second design-oriented seminar was led by Gloria Lee of the Department of Art and Art History. Lee, who has taught a Difficult Dialogues signature course on Reframing Sustainability, introduced the seminar to participatory design through a discussion of her applied work in Austin. We also considered THIRST, Beili Liu’s temporary installation of a parched tree above Lady Bird Lake that memorializes the millions of trees lost due to recent droughts in Texas. How does a work of design inspire dialogue and ultimately action?

In addition to the Faculty Fellows Seminar, the Humanities Institute is the sponsor of several public lectures and workshops concerning the theme Imagined Futures. In February, 2015 we organized a Difficult Dialogues Public Forum on The Future of Water in Texas featuring Andy Samson of the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment at Texas State University and Katherine Lieberknecht of the School of Architecture here at the
University of Texas. Their presentations, moderated by Jim Walker of the Office of Sustainability, were highly informative for the audience, largely made up of undergraduates. After the presentations, the students were invited to discuss among themselves how they could personally and collectively address the waste and scarcity of water.

And coming up on November 11, 2015 is a lecture by the noted journalist and cultural critic Naomi Klein, who will speak on the topic of her bestselling book, The Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate. We anticipate a large audience for her lecture, and will work to ensure that it is only the beginning of a campus-wide focus on climate change.