

Dear Dr. Sembach and Dr. Bullock,

We, members of the astrophysics community, wish to convey to STScI leadership and the JWST Users Committee our concern with the selection of November 24, 2020 as the revised JWST Cycle 1 deadline. While we understand the time constraints put in place given the anticipated October 2021 launch, and that there is likely no good choice, the choice of this particular date is optimally bad given the COVID-19 situation, the calendar for the fall semester at many universities in the US, and the ongoing childcare and homeschooling struggles the pandemic has created.

Many universities in the US are opting to end their fall classes early, just before the Thanksgiving break, so that students will not return after visiting their families for the holiday. This places the last day of the fall semester on the same date as the new JWST Cycle 1 deadline. Due to COVID-19, this fall semester will be unprecedented, with many faculty having to prepare both in-person and online versions of their courses, increased teaching loads due to hiring freezes, and anticipated mid-semester shutdowns to online only (as was done in Spring 2020). Having this major deadline one week after the NSF AAG deadline and in the middle of the job season further compounds the burden of work for proposers at a variety of career stages. Additionally, many people may be travelling over this time period due to the Thanksgiving holiday break in the US.

Parents will also be dealing with inadequate or nonexistent childcare and dependent services (including, but not limited to, extra demands from homeschooling, daycare closures and/or limited hours, and COVID-19 related illnesses of family members), on top of the concerns raised above.

The combination of these factors is likely to disproportionately affect junior faculty and parents (especially mothers) of young children, propagating existing inequities in the field. STScI has shown that it highly values participation from a broad and diverse segment of the population by enacting dual-anonymous review of proposals. We fear that the current proposal deadline would undermine the progress that has been made with this new policy. A slightly later date (for example, mid-December or January, or even a survey of the community to select a date) would help mitigate many of these issues and better enable everyone to participate. We strongly feel that proposals for JWST Cycle 1 are too important for our community to rush during these unprecedented times.

Sincerely (in alphabetical order),

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Cara Battersby, University of Connecticut
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