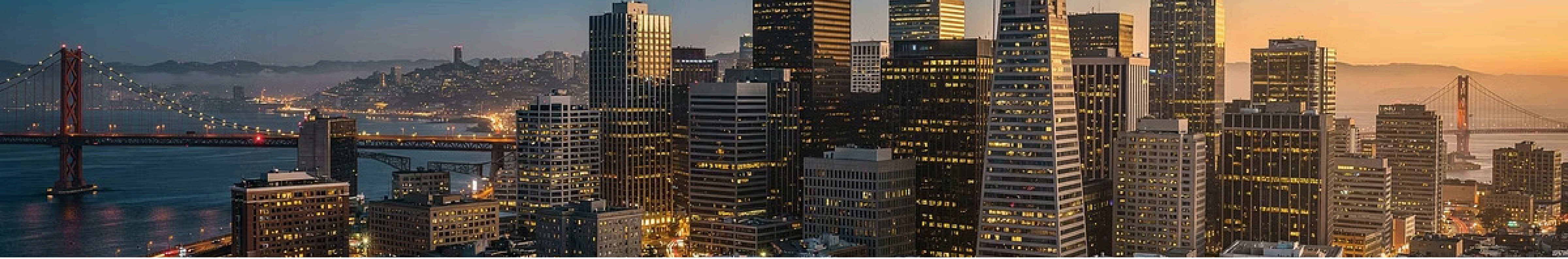

STARTUP COMPETITIONS IN THE USA

Comprehensive Guide — *Prepared by: CIBA Startups | June* 2026 Edition

80+ COMPETITIONS | 15 CATEGORIES | DETAILED APPLICATION INFORMATION

80+
Competitions & Accelerators

15
Categories

$4B+
Federal Grant Funding

About CIBA Startups

Who Are We?

CIBA Startups is a high-energy community and networking platform where founders, investors, students, and visionaries come together to exchange ideas and challenge the status quo. We provide the ecosystem needed to transform your entrepreneurial journey into a scalable future.

What We Offer

Pitch Nights

Weekly events and monthly pitch nights

Networking

Exclusive platform for founders, operators, and investors

Community

Startup groups and community forums

Education

Content, interviews, and newsletters

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Purpose and Methodology of This Report

This guide brings together more than 80 startup competitions, accelerator programs, and entrepreneurship grant funds actively operating in the United States, compiled in ready-to-publish form. Building on the previous edition, it includes additional categories discovered through in-depth research: AI and deep tech accelerators, defense industry competitions (AFWERX, SpaceWERX, DARPA), sector-specific programs (healthcare, biotechnology, fintech, food/agriculture, edtech), veteran/military entrepreneur programs, high school-level competitions, and state-by-state regional competitions.

The guide is intended for all entrepreneurs living in the United States or seeking to enter the U.S. market, aiming to cover as broad a spectrum as possible in terms of sector, stage, and demographics. For each competition, the following information is provided systematically: official website, prize size and structure, application criteria (particularly citizenship/company registration requirements), timeline, and important notes.

⚠ **Important Note:** The 2025–2026 schedule for a given competition may have already passed. Entrepreneurs reading this guide should always check the relevant website for the current timeline before applying. Many programs accept rolling applications throughout the year or are renewed annually.

3 Questions to Ask When Choosing a Competition

1

Eligibility Question

Do I genuinely meet the citizenship, registration, stage, and sector criteria?

2

Value Question

Is the primary value cash, network, or customer access — which one is the priority for me?

3

Resource Question

Is the time I'll spend on this preparation more valuable than finding customers?

One well-crafted application to a single competition is always better than five mediocre applications.

SECTION 1

This category includes the highest-profile and most widely attended competitions in the US. Most are open to international applicants and can be applied to directly. World-class companies like Dropbox, Cloudflare, Discord, and Trello have emerged from these stages.

TechCrunch Startup Battlefield

The world's most established startup pitch competition. Dropbox, Cloudflare, Discord, and Trello have all come from this stage. 1,700+ alumni have raised a combined **$32 billion+** and completed 250+ exits.

Website	techcrunch.com/startup-battlefield
Prize / Investment	**$100,000 equity-free** grand prize + Disrupt Cup. 200 finalists gain global visibility.
Who Can Apply	Early stage (bootstrap, pre-seed, seed). A working MVP is required. Select Series A companies are also eligible (capital-intensive sectors).
Timeline	Applications close in the May–June period; the Disrupt final takes place in mid-October at Moscone West in San Francisco.
Sector / Category	AI, Biotech & Health, Climate, Crypto, Fintech, Robotics, B2B SaaS
Selection Process	4 stages: Application → Review → 200 selected → 20 finalists → 5 grand finalists
Notes	Being on the Battlefield 200 list means you can say "I've been on the TechCrunch stage" in future funding rounds. Judges include the likes of Y Combinator's Gary Tan.

Startup World Cup & SXSW Pitch

Startup World Cup (Pegasus Tech Ventures)

Website	startupworldcup.io
Prize / Investment	**Grand Finale: $1,000,000 investment.** Cash prizes and in-kind support in regional rounds.
Who Can Apply	Early-stage technology startups from all sectors.
Timeline	Regional qualifying dates vary by country/city. **2026 Grand Finale:** November 6, 2026, San Francisco Hilton Union Square.
Notes	Regional finals available in 60+ countries; you can apply through your country's qualifying round. Specialized regional tracks: Silicon Valley, Dallas, Tennessee, Agriculture & Food (Illinois).

SXSW Pitch (Austin, TX)

Website	sxsw.com/pitch
Prize / Investment	**Prize + media visibility + investor access** for each category winner (exact amounts vary year to year).
Who Can Apply	Early-stage startups. Application fee required.
Timeline	**2026 event:** March 13–14, JW Marriott Austin.
Sector / Category	Augmented & Virtual Reality, Enterprise & Smart Data, Entertainment & Content, Future of Work, Health & Wellness, Innovative World, Robots & Hardware, Smart Cities & Transportation, Social & Culture.
Notes	45 finalists selected from 600 applications. Now in its 18th year. Judges include names such as Gary Tan from Y Combinator and Josephine Chen from Sequoia.

Hult Prize & 43North

Hult Prize

Website	hultprize.org
Prize / Investment	**$1,000,000 seed investment** (Global Final).
Who Can Apply	University student teams (undergraduate/graduate/PhD).
Timeline	Campus rounds February–March. HQ: Cambridge, Massachusetts. Global Final held in a different city each year — **2026 Global Final: Bangkok, Thailand (outside the US).** Global Accelerator runs in the summer.
Notes	The world's largest student startup competition, run in partnership with former US President Bill Clinton, held across 130+ countries and 2,000+ campuses. 200,000+ annual participants; 50,000+ entrepreneurs. The Global Final location changes every year and may be held outside the US. Campus rounds take place in 130+ countries including the US.

43North (Buffalo, NY) — FINAL YEAR

Website	43north.org
Prize / Investment	**5 winners, each receiving $1,000,000 in investment** (total $5 million) in exchange for 5% equity (as a warrant).
Who Can Apply	Early-stage startups from all sectors. The CEO and 50% of staff are required to be based in Buffalo for 12 months.
Timeline	Applications close in mid-June 2026. **Final:** Early October 2026, Shea's Performing Arts Center, Buffalo.
Notes	2026 has been announced as the final edition. Afterward, 43North will transition to an AI-based venture studio model (Radial Ventures). The 43North Foundation's $100 million, 10-year commitment will continue to support the Buffalo ecosystem.

SECTION 2

Accelerators, unlike competitions, offer 3–6 month structured programs. Most take equity in exchange for capital investment. Some (like MassChallenge, Plug and Play, JLABS) take no equity and use a grant-based model. This section covers the strongest programs that make capital investments.

Y Combinator

Founded in 2005, the pioneer of the modern accelerator model. Companies like Airbnb, Stripe, Dropbox, Coinbase, Reddit, and DoorDash emerged from here.

Website	https://www.ycombinator.com/
Location	San Francisco, California — Pier 70, Dogpatch. Moved from Mountain View to SF in 2023. Program is conducted in-person in SF.
Award / Investment	$500,000 ($125K post-money SAFE + $375K uncapped MFN SAFE) — in exchange for 7% equity.
Who Can Apply	Any stage, any sector. Acceptance rate is around 1.5%.
Timeline	4 batches per year: Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall.
Statistics	4,500+ alumni companies, 11,000+ founders, acceptance rate ~1.5%
International Founders	International founders can apply directly; accepted companies are expected to convert to a Delaware C-Corp structure.
Notes	Notable alumni: Airbnb, Stripe, Dropbox, Coinbase, Reddit, DoorDash

Techstars & 500 Global

Techstars (Global, 50+ Programs)

Website	https://www.techstars.com/
Location / HQ	Official HQ: New York City (relocated from Boulder, Colorado in 2024). Also has offices in Denver, CO and London. 50+ programs run in different cities worldwide.
Award / Investment	Total $220,000 ($20K equity + $200K uncapped MFN SAFE) — 5% common stock + additional SAFE value.
Who Can Apply	Post-idea, early traction. Vertically focused depending on program (Space, Sports, AI, Healthcare, etc.).
Timeline	Program-specific application windows vary throughout the year.
Sector / Category	Space, Sports, AI, Healthcare, Fintech, and 90+ other verticals
Notes	Corporate partners include Amazon, Disney, Comcast, and Microsoft. Applying to the program most aligned with your startup's sector increases success rates.

500 Global (San Francisco / Global)

Website	https://500.co/
Award / Investment	$150,000 — in exchange for 6% equity.
Who Can Apply	Early-stage startups, particularly those targeting markets outside the US.
Notes	Has invested in startups across 80+ countries. One of the strongest programs for international founders; has a network that opens doors to Latin America, Southeast Asia, MENA, and Africa.

a16z Speedrun (Andreessen Horowitz)

Launched in 2023, a San Francisco-based 12-week intensive program. **Acceptance rate is below 1%.**

Website	https://a16z.com/speedrun/
Award / Investment	Up to $1,000,000 ($500K SAFE at 10% equity + $500K next round) + $5M+ in credits (AWS, OpenAI, Nvidia, Deel).
Who Can Apply	Pre-seed/seed, focused on frontier AI and consumer products. 2 cohorts per year, each with 50–70 startups.
Timeline	2 cohorts per year. SR007 (Summer/Fall 2026, July 27 – October 11) applications closed on May 17, 2026. The schedule for the next cohort **SR008** will be announced at a16z.com/speedrun/ (typically around August/September).
Acceptance Rate	Below 1% — in the most recent cohort, ~70 accepted out of 19,000+ applications.
Demo Day	Watched by 1,000+ top-tier investors.
Portfolio	250+ portfolio companies, total $300M+ invested.
International	Global founders from 30+ countries including Turkey, Israel, and Germany are accepted.
Notes	Relocation to SF is expected. One of the most prestigious programs focused on AI and frontier tech.

Plug and Play, Alchemist & AngelPad

Plug and Play Tech Center *(Sunnyvale, CA + Global)*

Website	https://www.plugandplaytechcenter.com/
Prize / Investment	No equity taken. Instead of direct cash, access to a network of 50,000+ startups, corporate pilot deals, and capital connections.
Who Can Apply	Industry-specific verticals: Fintech, Mobility, Insurtech, Health, Retail, Energy, Sustainability, Brand & Retail. Each has a separate application.
Notes	Founded by Saeed Amidi, the world's largest corporate-innovation platform with 550+ corporate partners. Plug and Play often does not make the first investment; corporate partner pilots and customer access are the key highlights.

Alchemist Accelerator *(San Francisco + Chicago)*

Website	https://alchemistaccelerator.com/
Prize / Investment	~$36,000 seed investment + 5% equity (Class 34). Alchemist Chicago: $50,000 (quantum/deep tech).
Who Can Apply	B2B/enterprise sales model. Classes rotate throughout the year.
Notes	6-month program focused on enterprise/B2B startups. Enterprise sponsor companies include Cisco, Salesforce, and others. Class 34 saw 24 startups reach an average post-program valuation of $8 million.

AngelPad *(San Francisco)*

Website	https://angelpad.com/
Prize / Investment	$120,000 — in exchange for 7% equity.
Who Can Apply	Highly selective, 1–2 small batches per year.
Notes	Frequently ranked **"#1 accelerator in the US"** by Forbes. Smaller cohorts.

Antler, ERA, Capital Factory & Dreamit

Antler *(Global, New York + Austin)*

Website	https://www.antler.co/
Award / Investment	In the US: **$250,000** — ~9% equity.
Who Can Apply	Founders looking for a co-founder or who haven't built a team yet. Solo founders are eligible.
Notes	A global accelerator focused on founder/co-founder matching. Unlike other accelerators, you can join the program even at the team-building stage — a rare opportunity for solo founders.

ERA — Entrepreneurs Roundtable Accelerator *(New York)*

Website	https://eranyc.com/
Award / Investment	**$100,000 + optional additional $250,000** — total ~8% equity.
Who Can Apply	Early-stage startups ready to be based in the NYC area.
Notes	One of NYC's most established accelerators. 4-month program. Stands out for its proximity to Wall Street and fintech mentors.

Capital Factory *(Austin, TX)*

Website	https://www.capitalfactory.com/
Award / Investment	Various formats; main program offers a support package in exchange for **1% equity**.
Who Can Apply	Early-stage, any sector. Ready to be based in Texas.
Notes	Texas's central startup hub. Stands out for its low equity rate. Also runs specialized pitch tracks such as Fed Supernova (defense technology) — August 2026.

Dreamit Ventures *(Philadelphia)*

Website	https://www.dreamit.com/
Award / Investment	Takes **NO** equity until Series A (deferred model). Optional $50K–$100K investment, 6% equity.
Who Can Apply	Post-revenue startups with a product and early customers.
Sector / Category	Healthtech, Securetech, Urbantech
Notes	Revenue-focused accelerator founded in 2008. 370 portfolio companies. Alumni include SeatGeek, Houseparty, LevelUp, and Adaptly. Runs Customer Sprints and Investor Sprints formats.

Berkeley SkyDeck, AlphaLab, Google & StartX

Berkeley SkyDeck *(UC Berkeley)*

Website	https://skydeck.berkeley.edu/
Award / Investment	**$100,000** — for 7.5% equity.
Who Can Apply	Teams with a Berkeley/UC connection or selected through open applications.
Notes	UC Berkeley's flagship accelerator. Cal alumni are prioritized. Fall 2025 batch gave $100K to 35 alumni ventures; total post-batch valuation of $420M.

AlphaLab / Innovation Works *(Pittsburgh)*

Website	https://www.alphalab.org/
Award / Investment	Investment varies by program. AlphaLab Health: **up to $50,000** from a $10M evergreen fund.
Who Can Apply	Early-stage startups willing to be based in the Pittsburgh area.
Sector / Category	Software, hardware, life sciences, robotics
Notes	Pittsburgh's established accelerator. Partnership with UPMC health system (40+ hospitals) is a significant advantage. Operating costs in Pittsburgh are 40–60% lower than SF/NY.

Google for Startups Accelerator

Website	https://startup.google.com/
Award / Investment	No equity. Google Cloud credits (up to $350K), engineer mentorship, access to Google teams.
Who Can Apply	Seed–Series A. Program-specific criteria vary.
Tracks	AI, Latino Founders, Climate Change, Black Founders Fund, Women Founders
Notes	Multiple demographic and sector tracks available.

StartX *(Stanford-affiliated, Palo Alto)*

Website	https://startx.com/
Award / Investment	Lifetime access to the Stanford network and mentor community instead of direct cash. **Equity-free.**
Who Can Apply	Founders affiliated with Stanford (students, alumni, professors, staff).

Founder Institute *(Global, San Francisco-based)*

Website	https://fi.co/
Award / Investment	No direct investment, but small post-program funds available.
Who Can Apply	Idea-stage or pre-product entrepreneurs. Encouraged demographics are broad.
Notes	Local chapters in 60+ countries; participation is possible without coming to the US. Backed by Tim Draper of the Draper family. 14-week program.

SECTION 3

Leading U.S. universities host competitions worth millions of dollars each year. Most require at least one student/alumni connection. These competitions are extremely valuable both for prestige and networking.

Rice Business Plan Competition & MIT $100K

Rice Business Plan Competition (Houston)

Website	https://rbpc.rice.edu/
Prize / Investment	Total 1.5+ million $. Goose Capital Investment Grand Prize $200,000 (2026 winner total $611,500).
Who Can Apply	University student teams from around the world (primarily graduate).
Timeline	Applications open in November, close in January; finals in mid-April in Houston.
Sector / Category	Hard tech, life sciences, energy/cleantech, digital, consumer.
Notes	The world's largest and richest student startup competition. 42 teams, at Rice University.

MIT $100K Entrepreneurship Competition

Website	https://www.mit100k.org/
Prize / Investment	Grand prize $100,000, second place $20,000, Audience Choice $5–10K. Total $160,000+ in prizes.
Who Can Apply	MIT and Greater Boston area students.
Timeline	Three stages: Pitch (September), Accelerate (March), Launch (May).
Notes	30+ years old, entirely student-run. Alumni companies include HubSpot, Akamai, iRobot, Lightmatter.

Harvard, Penn Wharton & Stanford

Harvard President's Innovation Challenge

Website	https://innovationlabs.harvard.edu/presidents-innovation-challenge
Prize / Investment	$500,000+ prize pool. 5 grand prizes x $75,000 + 5 runner-ups x $25,000 + $2,500 Ingenuity Awards.
Who Can Apply	At least one Harvard student or selected alumni founder.
Timeline	Application in October, semi-finalist mid-February, finalist in May.
Notes	Harvard's flagship competition. Sponsored by the Bertarelli Foundation for 14 years.

Penn Wharton Startup Challenge (Venture Lab)

Website	https://venturelab.upenn.edu/startup-challenge
Prize / Investment	$200,000+ total. Perlman Grand Prize $75,000 (2026 winner: Cloak). Summer Venture Awards: $10,000 x 9 teams.
Who Can Apply	At least one Penn student team leader. Ventures that have raised less than $150,000 in funding.
Notes	Running since 1998 (formerly Wharton Business Plan Competition). Coverforce, Strella Biotechnology, and Aavrani emerged from here.

BASES $100K Challenge (Stanford)

Website	https://bases.stanford.edu/challenge
Prize / Investment	$100,000+ total prize pool.
Who Can Apply	Stanford students and selected alumni.
Notes	Stanford's oldest and largest startup competition.

UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC Irvine & MIT Climate

UC Berkeley LAUNCH Accelerator

Website	https://startup.berkeley.edu/
Prize / Investment	Up to $25,000 each for up to 3 startups at Demo Day + $50,000 in professional services.
Who Can Apply	At least one UC student, faculty member, or alumnus on the team.
Notes	Early-stage startup competition affiliated with the UC system. Based at the Lester Center, Haas.

UCLA Knapp Venture Competition (Anderson)

Website	https://www.anderson.ucla.edu/knapp-venture-competition
Prize / Investment	$100,000 total.
Who Can Apply	UCLA students and alumni (Anderson priority).
Notes	Early-stage competition at UCLA Anderson School of Management.

Stella Zhang New Venture Competition (UC Irvine)

Website	https://merage.uci.edu/research-faculty/centers/innovation-entrepreneurship/new-venture-competiton.html
Prize / Investment	$100,000+ cash + service credits (including AWS).
Who Can Apply	Team of 2–6 people, at least 2 enrolled UCI students. Idea less than 2 years old, <$10,000 in external funding.
Sector / Category	Business Products & Services, Consumer Products, Consumer Services, Life Sciences, Social Enterprise
Notes	7-month competition. Being open to community members is a rare feature. Anyone in the Orange County region who can partner with UCI students may participate.

MIT Climate & Energy Prize

Website	https://cep.mit.edu/
Prize / Investment	$100,000 non-dilutive.
Who Can Apply	University student teams. 12 finalists selected from 200+ global applications.
Timeline	Grand Final typically held in April at Greentown Labs (Somerville).
Notes	The world's longest-running university climate-tech startup competition (~20 years). A strategic opportunity for climate-tech and energy-focused doctoral teams; a gateway into the Greentown Labs ecosystem.

NYU, Columbia & Northwestern Competitions

NYU Entrepreneurs Challenge (Stern)

Website	https://entrepreneur.stern.nyu.edu/entrepreneurschallenge/
Prize / Investment	Total $225,000+ in cash and pro-bono service awards.
Who Can Apply	Teams including an NYU student / alumnus / faculty member.
Timeline	Final pitch-off in mid-May.
Notes	Flagship competition at NYU Stern. 6-month accelerator + venture competition.

NYU Stern Social Venture Competition

Website	https://www.stern.nyu.edu/experience-stern/about/departments-centers-initiatives/academic-departments/business-society-program/seminars-and-events/social-venture-competition
Prize / Investment	Total $50,000 Social Venture Prize.
Who Can Apply	Ventures creating solutions to social problems.
Notes	NYU Stern's social impact-focused competition.

Startup Columbia (Columbia University)

Website	https://entrepreneurship.columbia.edu/
Prize / Investment	Helen Gurley Brown (HGB) Foundation Prize: up to $25,000 non-dilutive. Multiple category awards.
Who Can Apply	Active Columbia students or recently graduated founders.
Notes	Columbia's flagship venture competition held every spring. Open Track, Technology Track, Social Impact Track.

VentureCat (Northwestern University)

Website	https://thegarage.northwestern.edu/programs/venturecat/
Prize / Investment	Total $325,000+ non-dilutive prize. Grand prize $150,000.
Who Can Apply	Teams including a Northwestern student.
Sector / Category	Business Products & Services, Consumer Products & Services, Energy & Sustainability, Life Sciences & Medical Innovation, Social Impact
Notes	Northwestern's annual student startup competition.

Kellogg Real Estate Venture Competition (Northwestern)

Website	https://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/academics-research/real-estate/real-estate-venture-competition/
Prize / Investment	Annually varying grand prizes + connections with major real estate firms such as Blackstone and Ventas.
Who Can Apply	MBA students (including Kellogg, Booth, Wharton, Oxford, INSEAD, Berkeley Haas).
Timeline	Generally mid-April.
Notes	Kellogg School of Management's real estate-focused MBA competition.

SECTION 4

This section covers the US federal government's **non-dilutive (non-equity)** grant programs. A total of **$4 billion+** is distributed annually.

⚠ IMPORTANT: To apply for SBIR/STTR, you must have a US-incorporated company and be a company controlled by a US citizen or green card holder. Strategic path for international founders: incorporate a Delaware C-Corp and work with a co-founder/CEO who has permanent US status.

SBIR/STTR Programs: NSF, NIH & NASA

America's Seed Fund — SBIR/STTR (General)

Website	https://www.sbir.gov/
Award / Investment	Phase I: $50,000–$323,090 (proof of concept). Phase II: $750,000–$2,153,927 (24-month technology development). Phase III: commercialization.
Who Can Apply	US-incorporated for-profit companies, <500 employees, controlled by US citizens/permanent residents. STTR requires a research institution partnership.
Notes	Non-dilutive grant program coordinated by 11 federal agencies. Since 1982. ~7,000 awards annually, 4,000+ recipient companies. 65,578 new jobs/year.

NSF SBIR/STTR (National Science Foundation)

Website	https://seedfund.nsf.gov/
Award / Investment	Phase I: up to $305,000. Phase II: $1 million + Phase IIb supplements.
Who Can Apply	Deep technology-focused small businesses.
Sector / Category	AI, semiconductor, energy, medical devices, robotics
Notes	~400 companies funded annually. AI-based projects are at the forefront.

NIH SBIR/STTR (National Institutes of Health)

Website	https://seed.nih.gov/
Award / Investment	$1.2 billion dedicated annual budget. Phase I up to $300K, Phase II up to $2M.
Who Can Apply	US-incorporated startups conducting R&D in the health sector.
Sector / Category	Medicine, biotechnology, digital health, medical devices

NASA SBIR/STTR (Space/Aviation)

Website	https://www.nasa.gov/sbir_sttr/
Award / Investment	Phase I $150K, Phase II in the range of $850K.
Who Can Apply	<500 employees, US-based.
Sector / Category	Space/aviation technologies relevant to NASA missions

Defense Programs: AFWERX, SpaceWERX & DARPA

AFWERX (US Air Force)

Website	https://afwerx.com/
Award / Investment	10,400+ SBIR/STTR contracts, total $7.24 billion+ paid out. Up to $15 million with STRATFI/TACFI.
Who Can Apply	US-based small businesses, dual-use technologies.
Sector / Category	AI, autonomy, hypersonics, advanced manufacturing, cybersecurity, space
Notes	Innovation arm of the US Air Force. STRATFI/TACFI designed to bridge the Valley of Death.

SpaceWERX (US Space Force)

Website	https://spacewerx.us/
Award / Investment	Ranging from $75K–$3 million.
Who Can Apply	US-based startups developing space technologies.
Notes	SBIR/STTR program of the US Space Force. Active since 2019.

DARPA Prize Competitions

Website	https://www.darpa.mil/work-with-us/contracting/contests-prizes
Award / Investment	$1–6.5 million. DARPA Lift Challenge 2026: $6.5 million total ($2.5M first place).
Who Can Apply	US citizens/permanent residents, university researchers, independent inventors.
Notes	The DARPA Grand Challenge (2005) ignited self-driving vehicle technology.

Catalyst Accelerator (Colorado Springs / Ogden, UT)

Website	https://catalystaccelerator.space/
Award / Investment	85+ alumni companies have raised a total of $288 million in follow-on investment.
Who Can Apply	Focused on space domain awareness, EW, AI/ML for ISR, SATCOM.
Notes	Space Force/AFRL-backed 3-month semi-residential program.

Health and biotechnology is one of the most capital-intensive startup sectors and requires specialized accelerators. The programs below offer either equity-free or non-dilutive grants.

MedTech Innovator & JLABS

MedTech Innovator

Website	https://medtechinnovator.org/
Award / Investment	65 cohort companies share a total funding pool of $800,000. The MTI Index ranking serves as a major validation signal.
Who Can Apply	Medtech, BioTools, and healthcare AI startups. Global applications accepted. 4% acceptance rate (65 out of 1,835 applicants).
Timeline	Innovator Summit held in early June in San Francisco.
Sector / Category	Heart and Brain Health (with American Heart Association), Plastic Surgery (with ASPS), and general medtech.
Notes	The world's largest medical technology accelerator. 4-month program.

JLABS (Johnson & Johnson Innovation)

Website	https://jlabs.jnjinnovation.com/
Award / Investment	No direct cash; lab access in exchange for bench fees + access to the J&J ecosystem. **TAKES NO EQUITY.**
Who Can Apply	Early-stage life sciences (medical devices, pharmaceuticals, digital health, biotech).
Notes	826+ portfolio companies across 10+ global locations. Being equity-free is a major advantage. One of the most critical gateways for biotech and medtech entrepreneurs; the bench fee model makes it possible to get started without lab costs.

BioLabs, IndieBio, HAX & Health Accelerators

BioLabs

Website	https://www.biolabs.io/
Award / Investment	Bench fee instead of equity (~$2,200/month). Capital, mentorship and ecosystem access.
Who Can Apply	Biotech, medtech requiring wet-lab.
Notes	Biotechnology incubator with co-working spaces in 15+ global locations.

SOSV / IndieBio (San Francisco + New York)

Website	https://www.sosv.com/programs/indiebio/
Award / Investment	Up to $525,000 (250K initial + 250K Genesis SAFE). Therapeutics track: up to $2 million.
Who Can Apply	Wet-lab biotech, health, food biotechnology.
Notes	World's most active life sciences and hardware investor. Portfolio includes unicorns such as NotCo ($1.5 billion valuation) and UPSIDE Foods.

HAX (SOSV / Shenzhen + Newark)

Website	https://hax.co/
Award / Investment	Up to $250,000 investment (18 companies in Shenzhen S25 batch).
Who Can Apply	Early-stage hardware/deep tech startups.
Notes	Hardware-focused deep tech accelerator. SOSV's hardware arm.

Health Wildcatters (Dallas, TX)

Website	https://healthwildcatters.com/
Award / Investment	Investment in the $30,000–$50,000 range.
Notes	Dallas-based health-focused accelerator. Access to UT Southwestern and other Texas medical ecosystem.

Cedars-Sinai Accelerator (Los Angeles)

Website	https://csaccelerator.com/
Award / Investment	$100,000 investment.
Who Can Apply	Digital health startups. Being located in the LA area is a plus.
Notes	3-month digital health program sponsored by Cedars-Sinai hospital.

Dreamit HealthTech

Website	https://www.dreamit.com/healthtech
Award / Investment	No-equity model up to Series A. Hospital pilot deals through Customer Sprints.
Who Can Apply	Digital health companies with revenue.

SECTION 6

Climate-focused capital has become the fastest-growing investment category of the past five years. Agricultural technology has also turned into a market worth **$50 billion+** annually. The programs in this section are critically important both in terms of funding and sectoral networks.

MassChallenge & ClimateLaunchpad

MassChallenge (Boston, Texas, Switzerland, UK, Israel, Mexico)

Website	https://masschallenge.org/
Award / Investment	Up to **$2 million in cash prizes per cohort.** Switzerland program: **1 million CHF non-dilutive** (~$1.26 million). **TAKES NO EQUITY.**
Who Can Apply	Early-stage (generally <$2 million raised), open to all sectors.
Timeline	Switzerland application closes in early March.
Sector / Category	Healthcare, Climate, Security, Finance (USA); AI & Autonomy, Cybersecurity (UK); food/climate (Switzerland)
Notes	Founded in 2009, a global accelerator that takes **NO** equity. Alumni have raised **$16 billion+**, with a **70% survival rate.**

ClimateLaunchpad (Climate-KIC)

Website	https://climatelaunchpad.org/
Award / Investment	At the European final: **€10,000 + Climate-KIC Accelerator access.** Alumni have raised **€500 million+**.
Who Can Apply	Cleantech ideas under 2 years old and having raised <€200,000.
Timeline	Opens at the start of the year, closes around May. **2026 global final: Singapore.**
Notes	The world's largest green business ideas competition. **Operations in 97 countries.** There are local chapters in 97 countries; applying through your country's national heat is the fastest route.

Greentown Go, Grow-NY & World Food Prize

Greentown Go (Somerville, MA)

Website	https://greentownlabs.com/programs/
Award / Investment	Corporate pilot and customer access rather than direct cash.
Who Can Apply	Startups developing process technology in the relevant sector, TRL 3–8.
Sector / Category	Go Make (manufacturing), Go Move (transportation), Go Energize (energy), Go Build (buildings), Go Grow (food/agriculture)
Notes	Greentown Labs' corporate-innovation program. Major partners include Shell and Technip Energies.

Grow-NY Food and AgTech Competition

Website	https://www.grow-ny.com/
Award / Investment	Total **$3 million. Grand prize $1 million.** Distributed among 7 teams.
Who Can Apply	Global food, beverage, and agriculture startups. Winners must operate in Central NY, Finger Lakes, or Southern Tier for at least 1 year.
Timeline	Applications close **May 15, 2026**, 5 PM ET. Summit in November in Canandaigua, NY.
Notes	International food and agriculture competition run by New York State and Cornell University. In its 7th year. One of the programs worth considering for opening a U.S. operation in the food/agtech space.

World Food Prize — Innovate for Impact Challenge

Website	https://www.worldfoodprize.org/en/nominations/innovate_for_impact_challenge/
Award / Investment	**$50,000 grand prize.** Top 3 finalists pitch live at the Borlaug Dialogue.
Who Can Apply	Early-stage agtech (concept–pre-Series A). At least 1 full-time founder. Global applications accepted.
Timeline	2026 application deadline: **April 15, 2026.**
Notes	Global agtech competition organized by the World Food Prize Foundation and America's Cultivation Corridor. 60+ countries applied in 2025. No U.S. operations requirement.

Startup World Cup: Agriculture & Food Regional (Illinois)

Website	https://researchpark.illinois.edu/
Award / Investment	Winner advances to the Startup World Cup Grand Finale (competing for a **$1 million investment**).
Timeline	Final typically held in early March at the AgTech Innovation Summit in Champaign, Illinois.
Notes	Agriculture-food dedicated regional round within the Startup World Cup ecosystem. Run by the University of Illinois Research Park.

Fintech and Sector-Specific Competitions

Visa Everywhere Initiative (VEI)

Field	Detail
Website	partner.visa.com
Prize / Investment	Global Final: **$100,000 + AWS Activate $25,000** credit. Regional winners: $20,000–$40,000.
Who Can Apply	Startups focused on payments, fintech, and e-commerce innovation.
Notes	15,000+ alumni companies, collectively raised $48 billion+ in funding.

SXSW EDU Launch Startup Competition

Field	Detail
Website	sxswedu.com/competitions
Prize / Investment	Investor access, strategic partnerships, market visibility. Presented by Walton Family Foundation.
Who Can Apply	Early-stage edtech startups.

Build with Gemini XPRIZE (Google + XPRIZE)

Field	Detail
Website	xprize.org
Prize / Investment	**$2,000,000** prize pool. 5 finalists selected.
Who Can Apply	Developers, AI startups. Requirement to build a real business within 90 days.
Timeline	Build period: **May 19 – August 17, 2026.** Finals: **September 25, 2026,** Los Angeles.
Sector	Education, Entrepreneurship, Small Business, Financial Access, Professional Services.

Sloss.Tech / IDEAS (Birmingham, AL)

Field	Detail
Website	sloss.tech
Prize / Investment	Access to investors and industry experts.
Who Can Apply	Early-stage entrepreneurs based in the Southeast US.
Timeline	Applications: **February 3 – April 10, 2026.**
Sector	Agtech/Foodtech, Healthtech/Biotech, Talent/Productivity Tech, Emerging Tech.

Summerfest Tech Pitch (Milwaukee, WI)

Field	Detail
Website	summerfest-tech.com
Prize / Investment	Variable cash prizes year to year + investor access.
Sector	Manufacturing/Food/Bev/AgTech, FinTech, Healthcare/Biotech.

SECTION 8

The following programs are open exclusively or primarily to teams with women founders/partners. These programs offer both funding and a strong community network.

Cartier Women's Initiative & Tory Burch Foundation

Cartier Women's Initiative

Website	cartierwomensinitiative.com
Award / Investment	1st place $100,000, 2nd place $60,000, 3rd place $30,000. 9 regional + 1 thematic category, 30 fellows annually.
Who Can Apply	Women-led/owned companies with sustainability impact. Business must be 1–6 years old and generating revenue for at least 1 year.
Timeline	2027 application deadline: June 16, 2026 (CEST 14:00). Fellow program runs January–December 2027.
Notes	International women entrepreneur program running since 2006. Celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2026, Bangkok. 9 regional categories + thematic categories worldwide (such as the Science & Technology Pioneer Award). 330+ fellows supported in total since 2025.

Tory Burch Foundation Fellows Program

Website	toryburchfoundation.org/fellows
Award / Investment	$5,000 business education grant + access to interest-free loans via Kiva + NY workshop + 1-year community membership.
Who Can Apply	US women-owned (51%+) businesses, $75,000+ annual revenue, at least 21 years old, still in operation. No maximum revenue cap.
Timeline	2026 fellow applications closed on November 11, 2025; applications for 2027 are expected in October/November 2026.
Notes	50–120 fellows selected annually. Commitment to $1 billion in economic impact by 2030.

Eileen Fisher, InnovateHER, Amber Grant & Others

Eileen Fisher Women-Owned Business Grant

Website	eileenfisher.com
Award / Investment	$100,000 grant + mentorship.
Who Can Apply	Women-owned + sustainability-focused.

InnovateHER Challenge (SBA)

Website	sba.gov
Award / Investment	Up to $70,000.
Who Can Apply	Innovation-focused, products/services benefiting women and families. U.S. Small Business Administration program.

Amber Grant for Women (WomensNet)

Website	ambergrantsforwomen.com
Award / Investment	Monthly $10,000 + annual additional $50,000 grand prize.
Who Can Apply	Women entrepreneurs, any stage.

Female Founders Fund

Website	femalefoundersfund.com
Award / Investment	Direct investment (seed–Series A size).
Who Can Apply	Women-led technology startups. VC firm — invests in women-led B2B, consumer, healthcare, fintech, and social companies.

Hello Alice — Fund Her Future Grant

Website	helloalice.com/grants/hrblock
Award / Investment	6 winners, total $100,000 + 1 year of expert services. H&R Block partnership.
Who Can Apply	U.S.-based women-owned businesses.

The following programs are aimed at BIPOC, first-generation immigrants, first-generation college graduates, and other groups that have traditionally been excluded from VC funding.

Black Ambition, Halcyon & DivInc

Black Ambition Prize

Website	blackambitionprize.com
Award / Investment	Total prize pool of $1 million+. Individual awards range from $15,000–$1,000,000.
Who Can Apply	At least one founder from an underrepresented group (Black, Hispanic/Latinx, families below the poverty line, first-generation immigrants, first-generation college graduates, single-parent households).
Notes	Program founded by Pharrell Williams. **IMPORTANT:** No new applications are being accepted in 2026 — they are currently focused on existing alumni under the "Deeper Bet" phase. Subscribe to the newsletter for the 2027 timeline.

Halcyon Incubator (Washington, DC)

Website	halcyonhouse.org
Award / Investment	Free residency + mentorship + seed funding connections. **Does not take equity.**
Who Can Apply	Early-stage (post-prototype) social impact ventures. US and international applications accepted.
Notes	DC-based, social impact-focused 5-month residential program.

DivInc (Austin, TX)

Website	divinc.org
Award / Investment	Track-specific varying support packages. No direct capital, but investor access provided.
Who Can Apply	Underrepresented founders (minority, women).
Sector / Category	Clean Energy, Women in Tech, Sports Tech (with Verizon), AI.
Notes	Texas's main diversity-focused accelerator. Has supported 120+ startups since 2016, raising $15 million+.

NewME, 1863 Ventures, Stanford SLEI & Hello Alice

NewME (Miami)

Website	newmeaccelerator.com
Award / Investment	No direct investment, but 50+ capital partners including Andreessen Horowitz.
Who Can Apply	Black, Latinx, and other underrepresented founders.
Notes	Founded in 2011, one of the oldest minority-focused accelerators. Tumblr, Butlr, and Soldsie emerged from here.

1863 Ventures Pipeline (Washington DC)

Website	1863ventures.net
Award / Investment	Various grant and investment programs.
Who Can Apply	Black and Brown founders. An accelerator supporting "New Majority" entrepreneurs.

Stanford Latino Entrepreneurship Initiative (SLEI)

Website	gsb.stanford.edu/slei
Award / Investment	SLEI Education Scaling Program: **8-week training + alumni network.**
Who Can Apply	Latinx founders with US$1M+ annual revenue. Stanford GSB's Latinx entrepreneur network.

Hello Alice & Allstate Main Street Grants

Website	helloalice.com/grants
Award / Investment	**Allstate Main Street:** 100 businesses x $20,000 + 12-week Boost Camp. **Pilot Growth Fund:** $10,000–$100,000 + 1 year of free accounting.
Who Can Apply	Varies by program. Some target underrepresented founders, some are open to all.
Timeline	Rolling applications throughout the year depending on the program.

Comcast RISE

Website	comcastrise.com
Award / Investment	$5,000 cash + technology upgrade + marketing services + business consulting. Total value ~$25,000.
Who Can Apply	Underrepresented-owned, U.S.-based small businesses in operation for at least 2 years.
Notes	$160M+ in support distributed, reaching 15,000+ small businesses.

NASE Growth Grant

Website	nase.org/become-a-member/grants
Award / Investment	Up to $4,000.
Who Can Apply	NASE membership required (annual fee applies). A quarterly grant open to National Association for the Self-Employed members.

Programs specifically designed for entrepreneurs who are serving or have served in the US military, as well as military spouses. They offer a broad support network and dedicated resources.

Veteran Entrepreneur Programs

IVMF Military Founders Lab (Syracuse University)

Website	https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/programs/entrepreneurship/start-up/military-founders-lab/
Award / Investment	10-week virtual program. No direct cash — network and mentorship.
Who Can Apply	Active duty, veterans, reservists, military spouses/partners. Must have been operating for 6+ months.

Bunker Labs

Website	https://bunkerlabs.org/
Award / Investment	Veterans in Residence program + **$5,000** startup grants.
Who Can Apply	Veteran/military spouse entrepreneurs. WeWork partnership.

Warrior Rising

Website	https://warriorrising.org/
Award / Investment	Up to **$20,000** cash grant + mentorship.
Who Can Apply	Veteran entrepreneurs. 6-stage business development program.

Hiring Our Heroes Small Business Grant

Website	https://www.hiringourheroes.org/small-business-grant/
Award / Investment	5 grants per year, each **$10,000.** FedEx Founders Fund / US Chamber of Commerce Foundation.
Who Can Apply	51%+ veteran ownership, 3–20 employees.
Timeline	2026 awards announced after May 2026.

StreetShares Foundation Award

Website	https://streetsharesfoundation.org/
Award / Investment	Monthly range of **$1,000–$15,000.**
Who Can Apply	Veteran/military entrepreneurs.

V-WISE (Syracuse IVMF)

Website	https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/programs/entrepreneurship/start-up/v-wise/
Award / Investment	4-week online + 3-day in-person training + national network.
Who Can Apply	Women veteran entrepreneurs. Veteran Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship.
Timeline	Atlanta April 17–19, 2026 (online portion March 16 – April 10).

Second Service Foundation Military Entrepreneur Challenge

Website	https://www.secondservicefoundation.org/
Award / Investment	Typically **$5,000–$25,000** tiered awards (varies annually).
Who Can Apply	Veteran entrepreneurs. National pitch competition.

Competitions for entrepreneurs aged 13–18. Programs to consider if you are in high school or pre-college age with a startup idea, or if a young person has such an idea.

Diamond Challenge, Conrad Challenge & Other High School Competitions

Diamond Challenge *(University of Delaware)*

Website	https://diamondchallenge.org/
Award / Investment	Up to $100,000 in total cash prizes.
Who Can Apply	High school students aged 13–18. Business Innovation or Social Innovation tracks.
Timeline	September–April period.
Notes	Real startups like Refil (3D printing waste recycling) have emerged from this competition.

Conrad Challenge

Website	https://www.conradchallenge.org/
Award / Investment	Up to $12,000 in prizes + Pete Conrad Scholar badge + provisional patent support.
Who Can Apply	Ages 13–18, teams of 2–5 + adult coach. 4,000+ students / 50+ countries.
Sector / Category	Aerospace & Aviation, Cyber-Technology & Security, Energy & Environment, Health & Nutrition.
Notes	A STEM and entrepreneurship competition supported by Space Center Houston, in memory of astronaut Pete Conrad.

Wharton Global High School Investment Competition

Website	https://gyec.wharton.upenn.edu/
Award / Investment	Live final on the Wharton campus + sponsorship scholarship opportunities.
Who Can Apply	High school students, team. Investment decision simulation competition.

SAGE USA

Website	https://sageglobal.org/
Award / Investment	The US national champion represents the USA at the international SAGE tournament.
Who Can Apply	Ages 13–19, high school students. Students for the Advancement of Global Entrepreneurship.

Blue Ocean Competition

Website	https://www.blueoceancompetition.org/
Award / Investment	Multi-tiered prizes. Free entry.
Who Can Apply	High school students. Blue Ocean Strategy-themed business ideas that solve a real problem.

Regeneron Science Talent Search

Website	https://www.societyforscience.org/regeneron-sts/
Award / Investment	Top 300: $2,000; Top 40: $25,000; Top 10: $40,000–$250,000.
Who Can Apply	High school seniors (12th grade).
Notes	The oldest and most prestigious high school science and mathematics competition in the US.

Regional competitions at the state and city level. Prizes are generally smaller (10–50K $) but competition is less intense and access to local customer/investor networks is strong. Evaluate the ones that fit your state.

Regional Competitions: Eastern & Southern USA

Venture Atlanta (Atlanta, GA)

Website	https://www.ventureatlanta.org/pitch/
Prize / Investment	Investor access, press visibility.
Who Can Apply	Pre-seed/seed tech companies (Southeast from Texas to DC).
Timeline	Applications open in May, close in August. Free to apply.
Notes	The Southeast's largest VC conference. Startup Showcase Live competition.

Big Pitch (Charlotte, NC)

Website	https://startupmountainsummit.com/
Prize / Investment	$100,000 total (VC Pick + Founders' Pick categories).
Who Can Apply	Early stage from all sectors.
Notes	Regional pitch competition held at Bank of America Stadium.

Dig South Wild Pitch (Charleston, SC)

Website	https://digsouth.com/
Prize / Investment	Instead of direct cash, the Charleston regional winner advances to the Startup World Cup Grand Finale (eligible for $1 million).
Timeline	June 11–12, 2026 (Charleston Tech Week).
Notes	Flagship pitch held at the Dig South Tech Summit.

Startup World Cup Dallas Regional

Website	https://swcdallas.com/
Prize / Investment	Regional prizes + Grand Finale entry ($ 1 million).
Notes	Dallas-based Startup World Cup regional round.

LaunchTN (Tennessee) — 36|86

Website	https://attend3686.com/
Prize / Investment	Prizes vary annually.
Timeline	Usually September.
Notes	Tennessee's entrepreneurship festival and pitch competition.

Build-Up Berkeley (Berkeley County, SC)

Website	https://www.developmentauthority.com/build-up-berkeley/
Prize / Investment	1st: $10,000, 2nd: $5,000, 3rd: $2,500, People's Pick: $1,000.
Who Can Apply	Businesses based in Berkeley County, SC.
Notes	Pitch competition following an 8-week business development program.

Regional Competitions: West US & California

California Dream Fund / GO-Biz

Website	https://calosba.ca.gov/
Award / Investment	Non-dilutive seed grant up to $10,000.
Who Can Apply	Priority for businesses based in California representing low-income/underrepresented communities.
Notes	California Office of the Small Business Advocate state-level startup support.

EvoNexus (San Diego/Orange County, CA)

Website	https://evonexus.org/
Award / Investment	No equity; office space, mentorship, and demo day opportunity only.
Who Can Apply	Early-stage companies in the San Diego/OC region.
Notes	Southern California's leading donation-funded, equity-free incubator. Being equity-free is a major advantage; a gateway to the local ecosystem for SoCal-based entrepreneurs.

Founder Institute (Global, San Francisco-based)

Website	https://fi.co/
Award / Investment	No direct investment, but small post-program funds.
Who Can Apply	Idea-stage or pre-product entrepreneurs. Encouraged demographics are broad.
Notes	Local chapters in 60+ countries; participation is possible without coming to the US. Backed by Tim Draper of the Draper family. 14-week program. One of the most accessible programs for those who want to start from the idea stage.

This category includes competitions with **over $1 million in prizes**, often long-term (3–5 years). It features the world's largest technology and social impact awards.

XPRIZE Foundation

XPRIZE Foundation — Overview

Website	https://www.xprize.org/
Prize / Investment	Prizes ranging from $2 million to $119 million per competition.
Notes	Has organized 30 major competitions since 1995, the world's largest prize foundation. Mojave Aerospace Ventures (Ansari XPRIZE) — the modern commercial space industry started from this competition.

XPRIZE Wildfire

Website	https://www.xprize.org/prizes/wildfire
Prize / Investment	$11 million total prize pool ($5 million per track). 2 tracks: Space-Based Detection and Autonomous Wildfire Response.
Who Can Apply	Global teams.
Timeline	Grand prize awarded in 2026.

XPRIZE Seawater Desalination

Website	https://www.xprize.org/
Prize / Investment	$119 million total prize pool — one of the largest prizes in XPRIZE history.
Notes	Competition to transform saltwater purification.

XPRIZE Quantum Applications

Website	https://www.xprize.org/prizes/quantum-applications
Prize / Investment	Advancement after the Wildcard phase.
Notes	Competition for real-world applications of quantum computing.

Build with Gemini XPRIZE *(Google + XPRIZE)*

Website	https://www.xprize.org/prizes/build-with-gemini
Prize / Investment	$2 million prize pool. 5 finalists selected.
Who Can Apply	Developers, AI startups. Requirement to build a real business within 90 days.
Timeline	Build period May 19 – August 17, 2026. Finals September 25, 2026, Los Angeles.
Sector / Category	Education & Human Potential, Entrepreneurship & Job Creation, Small Business Services, Money & Financial Access, Professional Services.

Echoing Green Fellowship & Skoll Foundation

Echoing Green Fellowship

Website	https://echoinggreen.org/
Award / Investment	$100,000 stipend over 18 months + comprehensive leadership program.
Who Can Apply	Original founder, primary decision-maker, will work full-time. Early stage (idea–2 years). English communication required.
Timeline	October 2026 application deadline (for the 2027 class).
Notes	Prestigious fellowship supporting social entrepreneurs for 35+ years. 500+ alumni.

Skoll Foundation Awards

Website	https://skoll.org/
Award / Investment	$2 million unrestricted funding per award. 3 organizations selected each year.
Who Can Apply	Social enterprises with proven scale and impact. Nonprofit, for-profit, or hybrid structures. Must be legally registered.
Notes	2026 winners: ChildLife Foundation (Pakistan), SmartStart (South Africa), Indus Action (India).

SECTION 14

Comparative Summary Tables

Quick comparison of the highest-profile competitions. Awards are maximum amounts.

Table 1 — Mega Awards

Competition / Program	Max Award	Category	Eligibility
XPRIZE Seawater Desalination	$119,000,000	Mega prize	Global team
XPRIZE Wildfire	$11,000,000	Mega prize	Global team
DARPA Lift Challenge	$6,500,000	Defense/drone	US citizen/PR
43North (last year)	$1,000,000 x 5	General technology	Relocation to Buffalo
Startup World Cup	$1,000,000	Global / All sectors	Regional qualifying
Hult Prize	$1,000,000	Social enterprise	University student
Black Ambition (2027)	$1,000,000	All sectors	Underrepresented founder
a16z Speedrun	$1,000,000 + 5M credit	AI/Frontier	Relocation to SF, 10% equity
Grow-NY (NY State)	$1,000,000	Food/agriculture	NY operations
Build with Gemini XPRIZE	$2,000,000 pool	AI/Gemini	Real business in 90 days

Table 2 — Accelerators

Competition / Program	Max Award	Category	Eligibility
AFWERX STRATFI/TACFI	$15,000,000	Defense dual-use	US-based
SBIR/STTR Phase II	$2,153,927	Deep tech	US C-Corp + citizen
Y Combinator	$500,000	All sectors	7% equity
Antler	$250,000	General	9% equity
Techstars	$220,000	Sector vertical	5% equity
500 Global	$150,000	Global	6% equity
AngelPad	$120,000	General	7% equity
ERA (NYC)	$100,000+	NYC-focused	~8% equity
Berkeley SkyDeck	$100,000	UC Berkeley	7.5% equity
NSF SBIR Phase I	$305,000	Deep tech	US C-Corp + citizen

Table 3 — University & Special Programs

Competition / Program	Max Award	Category	Eligibility
Rice BPC (total)	$611,500	University	Graduate student
MedTech Innovator	$800,000 (pool)	Medtech	Global, 4-month program
SOSV IndieBio	$525,000	Biotech	Wet-lab
Northwestern VentureCat	$325,000+	University	Northwestern student
NYU Entrepreneurs Ch.	$225,000+	University	NYU affiliation
TechCrunch Battlefield	$100,000 equity-free	All sectors	Working MVP
MIT $100K	$100,000	University	MIT/Boston student
Cartier Women's	$100,000 + 60K + 30K	Women entrepreneur	Female founder
Visa Everywhere	$100,000	Fintech	Payments/commerce
Echoing Green Fellowship	$100,000 (18 months)	Social enterprise	Original founder

CHAPTER 15

When seeing a list of 80+ competitions, the first instinct might be to apply to many of them at once. This is the wrong strategy. **One strong application to a single competition is always better than five mediocre applications.**

Three-Question Elimination Matrix

1

Stage Question

Am I currently pre-revenue, do I have an MVP, or do I have sales? Does the competition require this stage? Stage mismatch is the most common application mistake.

2

Eligibility Question

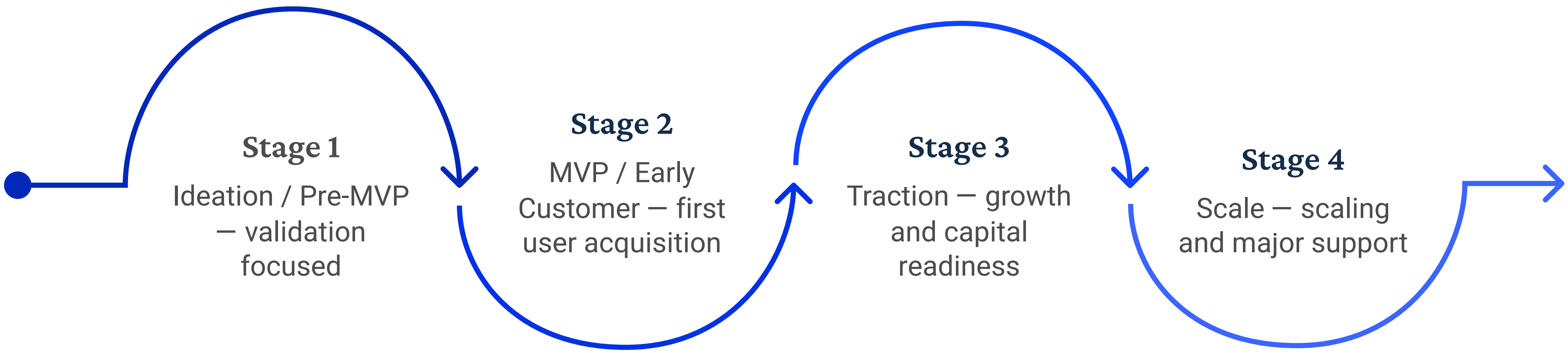
Is citizenship, company registration, university affiliation, or demographic status required? Applying to a competition you are not eligible for is a waste of time.

3

Resource Question

Do I have the capacity to invest 3–6 months into this competition? What do I lose during that time? Finding customers is sometimes more valuable.

Competition Roadmap by Stage



Stage 1: Ideation / Pre-MVP

No product yet. At this stage, validation and education should be the goal rather than prizes:

- **Founder Institute** — global, you can start at the idea stage
- **Antler** — includes co-founder matching
- **Hult Prize** — if you are a university student
- **Diamond Challenge, Conrad Challenge** — if you are high school/university age

Stage 2: MVP / Early Customer *(revenue <$100K)*

This stage is a golden period for investment and validation:

- **TechCrunch Startup Battlefield** — equity-free, $100K
- **Startup World Cup** — regional qualifier
- **MassChallenge** — 4-month equity-free program
- **Plug and Play** — by selecting industry vertical
- **Visa Everywhere Initiative** — if fintech
- **MedTech Innovator** — if health
- **ClimateLaunchpad** — if cleantech

Stage 3: Traction *(revenue $100K+ or clear growth)*

Time to attract capital:

- **Y Combinator** — $500K / 7%
- **a16z Speedrun** — if AI
- **Techstars** — choose vertical track
- **500 Global**
- **Dreamit Ventures** — if revenue exists
- **43North** — 2026 final edition

Stage 4: Scale *(revenue $1M+)*

At this stage, transitioning to traditional VC rounds is the right move, but the following non-dilutive sources are valuable:

- **SBIR/STTR Phase II** — if C-Corp in the US
- **AFWERX STRATFI/TACFI** — if dual-use
- **Echoing Green Fellowship** — social impact
- **XPRIZE** — if eligible for its category

Citizenship and Company Structure

A significant portion of US competitions ask about where the company is registered or the citizenship status of founders as an eligibility criterion. Resolving this structural issue early can open or close dozens of competition doors down the line.

- **Being a US citizen or green card holder:** Required for federal programs such as SBIR/STTR, DARPA Prize, and AFWERX/SpaceWERX.
- **Delaware C-Corp structure:** Accepted as standard by many accelerators including Y Combinator, a16z Speedrun, and Techstars; a common solution for international founders.
- **Services like Stripe Atlas, Firstbase.io, and Clerky** handle the process of incorporating a C-Corp in the US for **$500–$1,500**.
- **E-2 investor visa, O-1 extraordinary ability visa**, or **International Entrepreneur Parole** are options worth exploring for those who want to build a startup without relocating to the US.

⚠ **To apply for SBIR/STTR,** you must have a company incorporated in the US that is controlled by a US citizen or green card holder. The strategic path for international founders: incorporate a Delaware C-Corp and work with a co-founder/CEO who has permanent status in the US, or have a family member or partner take on that role.

What to Focus on During the Preparation Phase

1 Pitch Deck and Video

An English-language pitch deck and a 60–180 second video application are the two most critical outputs. This is where you should invest your energy.

2 University Connections

Connecting with university student associations and entrepreneurship clubs is the most practical way to enter university competitions through a side door.

3 Depth Before Breadth

Instead of applying to 5 competitions with the same pitch deck, doing deep preparation for the best 2 competitions is far more effective.

4 Alumni Network Value

A competition's alumni network is sometimes more valuable than the prize itself. Being on the Battlefield 200 list means you can say 'I've been on the TechCrunch stage' in a future funding round.

5 Demographic Eligibility

For demographic programs (women, BIPOC, first-generation immigrant, veteran, etc.), clearly know the categories you are eligible for — this is essential to avoid missing programs you qualify for.

CIBA Startups Is With You on the Road to Success

This guide was prepared to help entrepreneurs at every stage who want to compete in the US ecosystem reach the right program quickly. Let's shape the business world of tomorrow together — one step further with every connection.

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