Using SBIR.gov to identify funding opportunities to address community-driven challenges

The Small Business Innovation Research program, coordinated by the Small Business Administration, is a highly competitive program to encourage domestic small businesses to engage in Federal Research/Research and Development (R/R&D) with the potential for commercialization.

The SBIR program has topics offered by a number of agencies and institutes that are interested in solutions to a wide variety of community-driven challenges. If your solution requires further R&D to become commercially viable, the SBIR program might be a fit for your company’s project.

As our example for this walk-through, we will assume the role of an entrepreneur who has an innovative solution to address food security in our community. More specifically, our solution addresses food deserts.

First, we will visit the SBIR.gov website and conduct a search for funding by topic area.

1. Choose “topic areas” from the “funding” pulldown menu at the top of the page.
   a. We can use the filters on the left-hand side to target our search. Or we can do a keyword search. You can see that the page defaults to searching “open” (active) funding opportunities.

2. Type “food desert” into the keyword search box and hit “search.”
   a. As of the date of this walkthrough (11/10/21), there are no “open” topics for this phrase.

3. Select “future” from the left-hand filter menu to search upcoming topics.
   a. As of the date of this walkthrough (11/10/21), there are no “future” topics for this phrase.

4. Do not get discouraged! The “future” search only covers those topics that have been released as of the date of your search. Topics are released often, so revisit the site and do this search regularly.

Topics that have recently “closed” (and are no longer accepting proposals or applications) can be a very useful source of information about the types of projects that have been of interest to the federal government and the SBIR program. Many of these topics are recurring (on an annual or more frequent basis). To do a search of “closed” topics:

5. Select “closed” from the left-hand filter menu.
   a. You will see FIVE results, all from the USDA. They all look the same at first glance.

8.5: Food Science and Nutrition

The Food Science and Nutrition topic area aims to fund projects that support research focusing on developing new and improved processes, technologies, products, or services that address emerging food safety, food processing and nutrition issues. The program will fund projects to: 1) increase the understanding of the physical, chemical, and biological properties of food; 2) improve methods for the...

The topic we have identified through our search is 8.5 Food Science and Nutrition. Looking more closely we can see that the dates (release, open, due and close) are different. Furthermore, we can see that this topic has been in each solicitation from the USDA for the last several years (since at least 2018).
6. To learn more about the topic, let’s click on the first listing.

This takes us to a new page that gives information, including the solicitation number. We’ll come back to that. It also describes the specific topic in more detail. Notice that it specifically refers to the alleviation of food deserts (our search phrase).

Description: The Food Science and Nutrition topic area aims to fund projects that support research focusing on developing new and improved processes, technologies, products, or services that address emerging food safety, food processing and nutrition issues. The program will fund projects to: 1) increase the understanding of the physical, chemical, and biological properties of food; 2) improve methods for the processing and packaging of food products to improve the quality, safety and nutritional value of foods, and to reduce food waste; 3) develop technologies for rapid, sensitive, reliable and robust detection of pathogens and chemical hazardous materials in foods, 4) develop programs or products that encourage the consumption of healthy foods and reduce diet related chronic diseases, or alleviate urban and rural food deserts; and 5) Develop products to drive climate-smart food systems to ensure safe, accessible and nutritious food supply. The outcome of a successful project is a proof of concept for a marketable product or patented process. The long-term goals (10 years) of the program are to commercialize the production of useful new food products, processes, materials, and systems that reduce foodborne illness, carbon footprints, improve nutrition and health, enhance the nutritional quality and value of foods and/or bridge socioeconomic gaps in access to healthy foods/sustainable, resilient food practices.

7. To find out more about the program and available funding, let’s click on the “official link” for the solicitation at the agency’s website. This is in the right-hand gray box.

   a. This opens a new window at the USDA website that gives some key information, including the “win rate” for the program and the funding per award. Review this information.

8. Click on the “view RFA” button to read the details of the program.

   a. This opens a PDF that describes the program.

   - Page 2 tells us that the next deadline for this program will be October 6, 2022.
   - Page 4 provides the table of contents. Each line can be clicked to take you directly to that section of the PDF.
   - Some good places to start are:
     - IIA: Available Funding
     - IIIA: Eligibility Requirements
     - VB: Evaluation Criteria
     - Appendix I: Agency Contacts

Do not hesitate to reach out to the agency contact for the topic area of interest. In the case of our example, that would be the contact for topic 8.5. These contacts can address questions and provide valuable insight. It is advisable to reach out by email first to request a conversation, rather than calling directly.

Having identified a funding opportunity for a project involving a solution to the community-driven challenge of “food deserts,” your next steps are to review the solicitation details, identify projects that have recently won awards for the topic, investigate potential collaborators and competitors, leverage the resources and training materials at SBIR.gov and prepare your proposal for the next deadline. Good luck!