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JMC414
26 Feb, 2023
Extra Credit – Case Brief

HEALY v. JAMES, 408 U.S. 169 (1972)

Facts:

A group of Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) students wanted to organize a campus organization called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). They affirmed they would have no affiliation with the national group bearing the same name and would exist independently. The CCSU Student Affairs Committee approved their application, recommending official recognition to the college president. It would allow them to announce events in the student paper and so on. College President, Dr. James, rejected the said application because he felt the groups' partition and disengagement from the national group was unlikely and because their philosophy contradicted school policies. The students filed suit against Dr. James (and some other administrators) in the U.S. District Court for injunctive and declaratory relief on the grounds of First Amendment rights denial. The court ordered CCSU to hear another session in order to clarify the details of Dr. James' decision. During the second hearing between the students and school administrators, the students reaffirmed their separation from the national SDS but could not answer in the affirmative or negative regarding if they intended to use violent means for resolution. Once again, Dr. James denied the application, stating the group would advocate for interruptive classroom behaviors. The case was then ordered dismissed by the District Court. They brought it next to the U.S. Court of Appeals (second circuit), who affirmed the students were denied due process and the court did not comply with the standards of college campus organization.

Issue:

Was CCSU's denial of the student's petition for organization infringing upon their First Amendment rights?

Rule:

- 1) The burden of proof was placed upon the students for entitlement of their petition—however, the burden lay with the college to justify its rejection.
- 2) There was no record of support for a denial based on the petitioner's agenda with the national SDS, their philosophy, or a fear of disruption—nor did the college seem to have any specific rule regarding such incidents.

Analysis:

The lower court incorrectly put the burden of proof on the students. The burden was undue because the students had already complied with every bit of evidence and information that the school requested for a petition of organization and, therefore, could only resort to litigation.

This places the burden on the administrator's rejection—specifically in justifying their denial of the student's freedom of expression in the name of safety—without good cause, prior history, or intent. It is a form of prior restraint.

Conclusion:

The burden of proof was initially placed in error, and prior restraint is unconstitutional; the court reversed and remanded the original decision. Thus, the plaintiffs won their appeal and won the day.