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CATALOG CRITIC**No Kidding: Dorm Décor Grows Up**

By **CHARLES PASSY**
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The college acceptance letters came months ago. The semester's tuition bill has been paid. The next big step: outfitting the dorm room.

Lately, retailers have turned tiny university rooms into big business. Target's Web site has an "Off to College" section, while PBteen, an offshoot of Pottery Barn, recently unveiled a line called "Dorm Central." Sales of dorm-room bedding, furnishings and accessories are estimated to total \$3.8 billion this year, up 47% over 2004, according to the National Retail Federation. First-year students are expected to spend the most, at an average \$1,113 for all college-related purchases.

When it comes to bedding, it isn't always easy to find sheets that fit the extra-long twin mattresses many colleges use. So we visited a variety of merchants that cater to the college crowd and shopped for the essentials: a sheet set and comforter in that hard-to-find size. In each case, we went with items recommended by sales staff over the phone or spotlighted on the retailer's Web site. Many of the selections are geared to either boys or girls, and to keep things even, we stuck with the latter. Finally, we headed to Florida Atlantic University's Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College in Jupiter, Fla., where a team of residential assistants -- juniors and seniors who serve as dorm supervisors -- volunteered their opinions.

The students agreed the sets should be comfortable, as well as look grown-up and contemporary. The Basic Value Package, for \$78 from Campus Linens, lagged behind on both. "Very scratchy," said Angela Carter. (We didn't wash any of the sheets before testing; they may soften with time.) And the lavender and ivory colors we ordered were too grandmotherly, said Kyle Ashby. (Seven other choices are available.) The set did come with a washable pillow, which was a nice extra.

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Too Colorful

The Zoe Bed in a Bag, for \$65 from Dorm101, came with the basics plus a sham and dust ruffle. In this case, the set, in green, blue, yellow and pink, proved too busy and colorful. The reversible comforter had a mod floral print on one side and a bright, striped pattern on the other. The sheets had stripes on one half and a geometric pattern on the other. That made for a lot of styling options -- but Dani Boutte didn't like any of them, and the fabrics were deemed "scratchy." To the catalog's credit, it offers a variety of other bedding options, including some jersey-knit sheets that our panelists said are becoming increasingly popular on campus these days.



Shira Kronzon

(Clockwise from top left): Dormbuys.com, Walmart, Campus Linens, Dormbuys, PBteen.

Some panelists also had issues with Wal-Mart's "No Boundaries" \$40 floral appliqué reversible comforter and sham set, with a coordinating \$20 sheet set. "Looks like a little kid's bed," said Stephanie Sabshin. But others liked the comforter's black, white and pink flowery pattern, calling it feminine and fun. (The reverse side is solid magenta.) And the group agreed that the sheets were relatively soft, and the comforter earned kudos for its squishiness. The package wins Best Value. Wal-Mart also offers ensembles built around other themes, including "Prep Cool."

For Best Overall, it was a close race between the ensembles from PBteen (for \$227 total) and Dormbuys.com (for \$271 total). Both were praised for their luxurious feel and not-the-least-bit-childlike appearance. The PBteen grouping -- a colorful, Southwestern-inspired duvet cover, insert and green sheet set -- was called a little too "energetic." Otherwise, the catalog offers a decent variety of modern options, with duvet cover styles like "Urban" and "Tie-Dye" and sheet sets in four other solid colors. However, Dormbuys.com had the widest range of products -- with more than 60 choices for sheet sets alone, factoring in all the color possibilities -- and we found customer service very knowledgeable. Our phone rep put together a duvet cover in ecru, a down comforter and a Wamsutta sheet set in light green, all of which won high marks for their classic sensibility. The set was so cozy that one tester said she was tempted to "fall into it and go to sleep right away." We just hope she wakes up in time for class.

* * *

Dormbuys.com

Duvet Cover T400, \$129.99

Alexandra Jordan White Goose Down Comforter, \$118.88

Wamsutta Sheet Set, \$21.99

866-502-3676

QUALITY: Best Overall. It may be a pricey ensemble for a college kid, but its classic look and luxurious feel scored high. Cotton sheets have a 220 thread count.

SHIPPING COST/TIME: We paid \$20.25 for delivery within seven business days. Arrived on time, in separate shipments.

RETURN POLICY: Within 30 days. Contact for return authorization. You pay return shipping if catalog isn't at fault.

PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE: Sales rep was tremendously helpful in guiding us through product lines. We ordered the cover in ecru, sheets in "leaf."

COMMENT: Catalog carries a wide variety of bedding and other dorm essentials, from laundry bags to desks. We counted more than 60 sheet sets alone.

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Wal-Mart

No Boundaries Floral Applique Comforter Set, \$39.88;
200-Threadcount 100% Cotton Floral Sheet Set, \$19.98

800-966-6546

walmart.com

QUALITY: Best Value. The look may not work for everyone -- some panelists felt it was more appropriate for a grade-school girl -- but the sheets and comforter were soft.

SHIPPING COST/TIME: Delivery cost \$7.92, within two weeks. It arrived on time.

RETURN POLICY: Return within 90 days to Wal-Mart store or by mail. If by mail, you pay return postage.

PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE: Online ordering was easy since we already had a Wal-Mart account.

COMMENT: Sheet set is currently out of stock in twin XL size, but Wal-Mart carries similar sheets in other colors (including solid pink) and patterns, plus other lines geared to college crowd.

* * *

PBteen

Pura Vida Duvet Cover, \$99

Quallowarm Duvet Insert, \$79

PBteen Classic Sheet Set, \$49

866-472-4001

pbteen.com

QUALITY: Set had a luxurious feel, and was a close contender for Best Overall. The duvet cover we ordered is now out of stock, but other contemporary styles are available.

SHIPPING COST/TIME: We paid \$22.70 for on-time delivery, within five business days.

RETURN POLICY: Return within 30 days if unhappy. You pay return shipping.

PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE: Phone rep could have been a bit more knowledgeable about product line, but still helped us in the selection process.

COMMENT: We ordered sheets in green. PBteen's "Dorm Central" line goes well beyond bedding. The "must haves" include a Supercool Fridge for \$199 and Sport Homework Holder for \$19.

* * *

Dorm101

6 Piece Bed in a Bag Set, \$64.95

877-597-2230

dorm101.com

QUALITY: A little too colorful. Set has a reversible comforter and sheets in green, blue, yellow and pink. Testers decreed it over-the-top.

SHIPPING COST/TIME: Shipping was \$9, and arrived in six business days.

RETURN POLICY: Return within 30 days in original condition. Company pays for return shipping.

PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE: We picked the "Zoe" pattern, which a phone rep said was the most popular for girls.

COMMENT: Site has nine Bed in a Bag patterns. A spokesman says many college students opt for colorful patterns, but solids are available.

* * *

Campus Linens

Basic Value Package, \$77.95

800-620-3148

campuslinens.com

QUALITY: The lavender and ivory colors we ordered weren't exactly fashionable; sheets were deemed scratchy. A pillow is included.

SHIPPING COST/TIME: Shipping was free with purchase. Order arrived in 10 days, as promised.

RETURN POLICY: Returns accepted with "no questions asked." You pay return shipping.

PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE: Courteous sales representative noted that twin XL bedding would also work on a standard twin bed.

COMMENT: A spokesman says catalog focuses on "more of a traditional look" in colors, and that it has premium packages with better sheets.

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